Starry Nights over Dragonfly Lake

ALISON SHERLOCK

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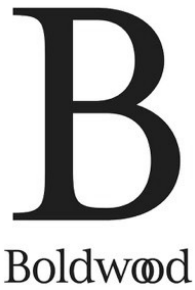

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1

‘If we can send one man to the moon, why can’t we send them all?’ grumbled Beth Jones by way of greeting as she opened up the car door.

She climbed out into the car park at Maple Tree Lodge and was immediately enveloped in a massive bear hug from one of her best friends, Lily Wilson. Despite the late hour, Lily had been standing patiently outside the hotel waiting for her arrival.

Beth immediately felt better and let herself relax into her friend’s embrace, blinking away the tears that pricked her eyes.

Lily gave her a squeeze before stepping back. ‘You drove all the way here from London wearing those?’ she asked, wide-eyed as she looked Beth up and down.

Beth glanced down at her favourite nightwear, a pair of oversized men’s blue striped pyjamas.

‘Well, you could hardly expect me to stop before walking out on my cheating boyfriend to say, “Oh, by the way, I just need to get changed into my normal clothes before I flounce out of here in disgust,” could you?’ she replied, with a shrug.

‘Please tell me you didn’t need to stop for petrol on the way?’ asked Lily with a smile.

Despite feeling miserable, Beth giggled. ‘Luckily no.’

Having a full tank of fuel in her ancient Fiat 500 was about the only good thing to have happened to her that evening.

That and arriving at Maple Tree Lodge, her favourite place in the whole world. She looked across at the hotel and was shocked to see it in total darkness. She knew it was gone midnight and in the middle of the English countryside but there had always been soft lighting dotted all around the wood-clad building even in the darkest hours. On the nights when she had wandered outside alone to look at the stars, she had always been aware of the hotel behind her, like a warm, oak-framed hug.

'Where are all the lights?' she asked, realising the only thing illuminating both her and Lily was coming from inside her Fiat.

Lily rolled her eyes. 'Another power cut,' she said, with a grimace. 'We've had high winds all afternoon and then just after nine o'clock tonight, wham. Everything goes out again. It probably won't come on now until the morning.'

Being in the Cotswolds, the electricity to all the villages in the area was powered by overhead cables, always susceptible to any storms. Beth shuddered as a chilly October wind swept across Dragonfly Lake next to the car park and wondered whether she could quickly locate a jumper from her bag. At least her Uggs had been in the hallway of her now ex-boyfriend's flat and she had been able to slip them on quickly enough as she had left. Her overnight bag was packed in the back of the car but it was late and anyway, the comfiest bed she had ever known was waiting for her upstairs so she would be warm soon enough.

'I hope your mobile phone is charged,' carried on Lily. 'Although I've got a power bank you can borrow.'

Beth grimaced. 'Don't want any calls anyway. Put it on mute as Jeremy kept trying to get hold of me.' She groaned, feeling the pain of his betrayal wash over her once more. 'Why on earth he thinks I'm going to talk to him when I literally just overheard him declaring his love to another woman on the phone is beyond me. I mean, I'm super bright! I can figure out a cheating lowlife pretty quickly.'

She frowned to herself. Of course, it would have been helpful had she worked out that he was a cheating lowlife *before* she got involved with him, she added to herself. Four months of dating, of getting her hopes up that she had finally found 'the one', and once more, all her hopes and dreams had been dashed.

She looked at Lily, one of her three best friends. Lily, Hannah and Ella had all warned her to be careful about Jeremy and the many disastrous

boyfriends before him. They kept trying to tell her that perhaps she was too trusting, too eager to fall in love each time. But she was an eternal optimist where men were concerned. She believed in romance, happy ever afters and the whole dream. She had to. After the worst start in life, her romantic dream had been the one thing keeping her going, her belief that there was a soulmate somewhere out there for her with whom to build a happy family of her very own, something she had never known.

Abandoned at birth, Beth had been moved from foster home to children's home and then back again over and over throughout her childhood. She had always hoped for someone to take her in permanently, to be welcomed into the heart of a family like the Jacksons, who owned Maple Tree Lodge. They were warm and loving, her surrogate family since she had met Hannah Jackson all those years ago, and she adored them.

'Tell me, how is everyone?' she asked Lily, as she walked around the car to open the boot to retrieve her bag.

'Ben's stressed with all the power cuts and we're both dreading any negative reviews from the guests who were moaning about it as things are still so tight,' said Lily, leaning against the car. 'Hannah and Alex are so loved up that I'd like to say it's positively sickening but Ben and I are probably just as bad.'

Beth watched as Lily's face took on a goofy grin. She was thrilled for two of her best friends to have found such happiness. Lily had fallen in love with Ben Jackson when she had arrived to work on the hotel's interior design a year ago. Then his sister Hannah had unexpectedly begun a relationship with one of Ben's best friends, Alex, just a few months ago and seemed equally blissful.

It had been watching two of her best friends looking so utterly happy and in love that had spurred Beth on to giving Jeremy every conceivable benefit of the doubt about having a relationship with her older work colleague who had been in the middle of divorcing his second wife. As usual, she had put all her faith into the wrong man. When was she ever going to learn?

'I'm such an idiot,' she muttered, picking up her large overnight bag.

'Dr Elizabeth Jones, you are in no way an idiot,' Lily told her, shaking her head. 'You have a PhD in astronomy as well as having the biggest brain I've ever encountered. Plus the biggest heart as well. Stop beating yourself up.'

Dr Jones. Beth wasn't sure that she would ever get used to that moniker but it still made her smile. It had been worth every exhausting hour of work to get there.

The reason why nobody had ever wanted to adopt Beth was that she had been a sickly child. The heart condition that she had been born with had meant frequent visits to the hospital and it apparently had been more than anyone wanted to ever take on permanently. Each of her foster families had been kind and caring enough towards her but every time it was just a little too much to hope that anyone would want to adopt her and give her the much longed-for family that she dreamt about.

One night in her early teens, whilst staying in hospital and feeling particularly lonely, Beth had looked out of the window and seen the stars twinkling in the sky. Always a bright child who had excelled in maths and science, she became curious about how they had been created in the first place. And that began a lifelong passion for astronomy. It had been one of the brightest moments in a somewhat bleak childhood.

After that, the constellations, planets and their romantic stories had kept her going at the worst of times. Just after her final school exams, Beth had finally been mature enough to endure a major heart operation. After a successful recovery, she had finally been able to leave behind her frequent hospital visits and look forward to the future.

Having passed all her A levels with top marks, Beth had moved to London after receiving acceptance into the Royal Observatory in Greenwich to volunteer as a helper. Unable to afford the cost of attending an expensive university, she had funded herself to study for her degree at home whilst taking on any and every job that she could to make ends meet, including waitressing, cleaning and menial office work.

As well as being able to work in the Royal Observatory part time, London had produced one other major plus. Only able to afford a room in a shared house in a less than attractive area of the capital city, her initial reservations about the accommodation had been quickly overcome when she had met her three other housemates.

Lily had been a junior assistant in an interior design firm, Hannah had been working as a pastry chef in a restaurant in the West End and Ella was a social media assistant in Canary Wharf. The four women had quickly bonded and their lifelong friendships had begun. It was one of the happiest

times that Beth had ever known, secure with her best friends' love and support that had continued ever since.

After two years, Beth had impressed a professor at Greenwich so much with her voluntary work that she offered Beth the opportunity to accompany her on a two-year sabbatical at the South African Astronomical Observatory as an assistant. Under her tutelage and encouragement, Beth had blossomed, although she had begun to realise that the bias against her for not having a degree from one of the most noteworthy universities was beginning to hold her back in the field of her chosen career.

Even when she completed her astronomy degree and got top marks, still no doors were open to her for a full-time job. So she continued to volunteer wherever she could, earning her living by continuing to take on as many jobs as she could. She travelled the world, working at many of the amazing laboratory stations for a pittance whilst studying in her spare time for her PhD as well.

Since gaining her PhD five years ago, Beth had still struggled to find a job as a professional astronomer. But work in that field was tightly contested and even with her qualifications, many doors were still closed to her due to the fact that she didn't have any proper full-time work or research experience. So she continued to work in jobs away from the scientific industry.

Four months ago, she had accepted a contract as a contributing writer for a column in an astronomy magazine. The pay wasn't much but she felt that she was finally using all the many years of study and she actually enjoyed thinking up new topics each month. Alongside a temporary waitressing job, it had just covered her rent each month.

Even after all these years, Beth continued to feel that she had never quite achieved the potential that she had been promised in the early stages of her studies. But at least she had never lost her love for the stars either.

She closed the boot of her car before glancing up at the starry sky, her celestial comfort blanket. Maple Tree Lodge was located in Cranley, a quaint village in the heart of the Cotswolds. Without any ambient light coming from the hotel, the dark sky was a mass of twinkling lights. She quickly spotted the plough, her favourite from her childhood. But even that didn't give her much comfort that evening.

'Now I've probably lost my column on top of everything else,' moaned Beth, feeling miserable once more. 'It's bad enough that I lost my

waitressing job this week because the restaurant shut down.'

'Hang on, why should you lose your job at the magazine?' asked Lily.

'I was understandably a bit upset and threw quite a few insults at Jeremy before walking out. And my ex-boyfriend hates any kind of criticism.' Beth let her shoulders sag. 'I should have never got involved with my boss.'

Jeremy was the editor for *Stargazing* magazine and there had been an immediate attraction between them at her first interview. He was a professor of physics who had discovered a black hole twenty years ago and still kept an aura of fame about him. Dazzled by his intelligence and notoriety in their field, Beth had quickly fallen for him whilst they had enjoyed a few dinners discussing her column.

In truth, her column was still a little restricting as Jeremy decided the topic each month. But it didn't take much effort on Beth's part so she had been left with enough free time to create her own astronomy blog. 'Starry Nights' didn't have much of a following but at least she was free to choose what she wrote about.

'Nice of you not to say I told you so,' she added to Lily, with a sigh.

Lily shrugged her shoulders. 'Hey, what are best friends for? Besides, I'm pretty sure Ella will do that for me anyway.'

Where Lily and Hannah were both happy in their romantic relationships, Ella had remained resolutely single, still searching for the perfect partner who had style, money and, most important of all, was equal to her acerbic wit. Ella had yet to find such a man, if he even existed. In the meantime, she was equally critical about Beth's choice of boyfriends.

'Come on, let's get you inside,' said Lily, with a shiver. 'It's cold out here tonight.'

'I'm sorry that I'm arriving here so late,' said Beth. 'Especially when you must be so busy,' she added, knowing that it was a Saturday night and the hotel was likely to be full of guests.

Maple Tree Lodge had twenty bedrooms with en suite bathrooms. Lily and her boyfriend Ben ran the hotel, along with Ben's family, the Jacksons. The Jacksons were like a second family to Beth. In fact, because she had never had a family of her own, they were the only family that she had, along with her best friends.

And thank goodness they owned a hotel, thought Beth. She hadn't been able to face the miserable studio flat that she was currently renting. On a

meagre income, it had spectacularly bad damp which was beginning to make her feel ill and she was desperate to move out of there as soon as she could.

She had arranged to spend the whole weekend at Jeremy's modern and damp-free flat. The monochromatic apartment wasn't quite her style but she had secretly begun to hope that he would invite her to stay on permanently at some time in the future. That perhaps he was the one to give her the happy life she had dreamed about for so long.

What a disaster, she thought. But at least she was with her friends. And besides, where else was the perfect place to be comforted? Maple Tree Lodge, of course, with its cheery fireplaces, oak beams and sumptuous soft furnishings. As soon as she had walked out on Jeremy, it had been a knee-jerk reaction to head to her favourite place in the world and she didn't regret the long drive to get there for a second.

'There are no spare guest bedrooms available unfortunately,' Lily told her as they began to walk across the car park. 'Or rather fortunately, for us. It's the first weekend of the night lights festival so we're completely sold out.'

'That's fantastic news,' Beth told her. 'Oh, I'm sorry to have missed the first light festival. It's so pretty!'

She knew that since Ben and Lily had begun the renovations the hotel's future had been less than certain. Slowly, over the course of the past twelve months, however, the outlook had begun to look much brighter.

Dotty, Ben and Hannah's grandmother, had had the inspired idea to have a floating light festival on Dragonfly Lake which the hotel was situated next to. It had been a huge success the previous winter and the family had been keen to carry on with the monthly show as soon as the darker evenings of autumn had arrived.

'Thankfully we had finished and packed away before the power cut,' carried on Lily. 'By the way, Hannah and Alex have moved back into her old room because there's a leak that needs fixing in their apartment so you'll be in the last of the spare bedrooms in the family wing. The first one on the right-hand side.'

As well as twenty guest bedrooms, the hotel had a private family wing of rooms, one for each member of the family.

'They went to bed a little while ago, before you messaged me that you were coming here,' carried on Lily. 'As has everyone else, so you'll have to

catch up with them all in the morning.'

'Can't wait,' replied Beth, suppressing a yawn and suddenly feeling exhausted from the rollercoaster of emotions she had been through that evening. 'I just need a bed for the night. Thank you, as always, for being there for me.'

Lily smiled at her. 'There's always a place for you here, you know that.'

Beth followed Lily inside. The hotel was quiet for once, and in darkness as well. Only the torches on their mobiles lit up the double-height entrance hall.

'If we'd known earlier, I'd have made sure that the room was clean. We've changed the sheets in any case since you were last here,' whispered Lily, keeping her voice low in deference to the sleeping guests upstairs. 'Do you want a drink to take up with you?'

Beth shook her head in the light of the torch. 'I've got my water bottle with me.'

'I've got to check that everything's locked up and all the candles are extinguished before I head up,' said Lily. 'Will you be okay finding your own way? Or do you want to wait for me?'

'I'll be fine,' Beth reassured her. 'It's my second home, remember?'

'Don't forget Tiny will be sleeping in the room next door with Hannah and Alex,' said Lily.

Beth smiled. 'I'll be extra quiet,' she told her friend.

Tiny was Alex's enormous dog. He was a gentle giant as he was a Newfoundland, but if he barked, the whole hotel would be woken up.

They hugged and wished each other a good night. Beth used the torch on her phone to light her way up the grand oak staircase before turning right and heading down the East Wing towards the family quarter.

She pushed her way quietly through the heavy oak door at the end of the corridor and into the family quarter. All was quiet there too and she immediately turned into the first door on the right. She opened up the door as quietly as she could, so as not to rouse Tiny. She crept inside the bedroom and let the door close behind her with an almost silent click. She switched off the torch on her phone and, sighing with relief, let her bag drop on the floor, feeling extremely weary. She couldn't even be bothered to unpack in the darkness.

So she shrugged off her Uggs and began to reach out towards the large and comfortable double bed that she knew must be nearby, desperate now to

go to sleep, exhausted by the emotional break-up and long drive.

However, as she made her way in the darkness, she tripped over one of her Uggs and fell thankfully onto the bed.

Beth's initial gratitude that the soft duvet had broken her fall immediately evaporated, however, as she was thrown onto her back and pinned down by a large weight. She was hit by the sudden and horrifying realisation that there was someone in the bed with her.

She was just about to scream when the lights flickered on and Beth was left blinking in the harsh glare of the bedside lamp, staring up at the handsome man who was lying on top of her.

2

Noah Jackson had always been a light sleeper.

A childhood filled with uncertainty had meant that he was always ready to defend himself at the first opportunity. So, even though he had been asleep, his first reaction on sensing somebody on the same bed as him forced Noah into immediate action.

He had sprung across the bed to pin the stranger down with the weight of his body. He was already reaching for his mobile to see the danger he was dealing with, when the lamp on the table next to the bed suddenly flickered back on. Presumably the earlier power cut had been fixed.

Expecting to see anything from a burglar to someone far worse, he had been shocked to discover that the person lying underneath him was an attractive woman of a similar age, staring up at him with wide brown eyes.

But that didn't mean he would let his defences down.

'Who are you?' he hissed.

Her big eyes blinked a couple of times before she replied, 'I asked you first.'

He was a little stunned but found himself unexpectedly bemused. 'I don't think you did actually,' he replied.

'Well, in any case, I know karate,' she told him, sticking her chin out a little.

'Do you?' he asked, finally letting go of the woman and sitting up next to her on the bed.

All of his instincts let him know that this dark-haired stranger wasn't a threat. It was only when she sat up as well that he realised that she was wearing a pair of baggy striped pyjamas.

'Well, I don't actually know karate but I can speak a smattering of Japanese.' The woman frowned to herself. 'You know, it's infuriating. I learnt self-defence here last summer. I had all the techniques ready to go, just in case, but right at this moment I can't think of a single one. Great class, by the way. Should you ever feel that you need it.'

Noah raised one eyebrow at her, surprised that she thought he of all people needed a self-defence class. His whole childhood had been a lesson in self-defence.

He watched as she glanced down to his bare chest and arms. He knew that he was physically strong, thanks to all the carpentry work. You didn't carry large planks of wood every day without building up core strength. He also found himself somewhat grateful that he had chosen to at least wear boxer shorts to bed, given his unexpected visitor.

'I suppose you don't need to think about self-defence with muscles like that,' carried on the woman, staring at him. 'It's most annoying actually. I've tried to get stronger biceps but they just don't seem to want to help a girl out.' She rolled up one baggy arm of her pyjama top to study her upper arm. 'Apparently the muscles in the human body contract when they receive signals from motor neurons, which are triggered from a part of the cell called the sarcoplasmic reticulum. I think I've got that right.' A crease furrowed her forehead as she frowned to herself. 'I wonder how I can get my motor neurons to work better for me. Such a shame because tonight I could really have done with punching somebody.' She looked across at him, as if suddenly remembering that he was sitting next to her on the bed. 'Not that I'm a particularly violent person, I want you to know. Don't worry. Oh and I wasn't talking about punching you, by the way. Someone else entirely.'

Noah wondered if he was still asleep, although the sight of the smooth, creamy skin on her arm made him consider that it might be a particularly enjoyable dream, in any case.

'Who are you?' he asked again, in a bewildered tone.

'Oh! Yes, I suppose introductions are in order.' She gave him a large smile and held out her hand for him to take. 'I'm Beth Jones.'

‘Noah Jackson,’ he replied, taking her hand and giving it a firm shake. ‘And do you always make a habit of climbing into bed with strange men in the middle of the night?’

‘Ha!’ She laughed but he could see that it was without humour. ‘My dating life has been full of strange men! But no, this is a first for me. I don’t sleepwalk, in any case. What are you doing here anyway? I was told this room was empty.’

‘I was trying to sleep,’ he told her.

‘Me too,’ she replied, yawning. ‘I’m exhausted. What a night! So are you a guest of the hotel? Because this is the private family quarters and I think you might be in the wrong room. I’m a friend of the family, you see.’

‘I was invited to stay in this room by Walter Jackson,’ Noah told her. ‘He owns Maple Tree Lodge and is my uncle.’

Great-uncle actually, he added to himself, although he wasn’t going to give too much detail to a complete stranger. She might be beautiful, chatty and friendly but that didn’t mean that he had to trust her. He didn’t trust anyone.

‘Oh! You’re Walter’s nephew?’ said Beth, her eyes bright and sparkling. ‘He’s just wonderful, isn’t he? So Dotty is your aunt? Wow. That’s great. You know, it’s funny but I don’t think Ben’s ever mentioned having a cousin. Lucky you to have such an amazing family!’

She sounded almost wistful, he thought.

Noah had never considered himself lucky where his family were concerned. His conception, as his mother had been fond of telling him a number of times, had been the result of bad judgement and too much alcohol. His parents had married when she had discovered she was pregnant but it had never been a happy union.

Neither parent had given their son much time or love throughout his childhood. They both felt trapped into a life together that they didn’t want, with a child they hadn’t planned for. His mother had finally given up trying to find her maternal instinct when he had turned five. She had walked out on them both one evening, taking a couple of suitcases with her, and Noah had never heard from her since.

At least his dad had tried to take care of him to some extent. When he remembered that he had a son, that was. Most of the time, they travelled around from town to town, his dad making friends in the many pubs that he frequented, often coming back to whatever place they called home in a

drunken mess. Jobs were only ever temporary, as was Noah's education, such was the number of times they changed addresses. His dad had expensive tastes in socialising which never matched up to the small amount of money he had in his wallet. When he owed too much money to too many people and fights began to break out, they upped sticks and moved on once more.

When he was old enough, Noah began to take care of himself, if only as a matter of survival when he became too hungry because his dad had forgotten to feed him again. From the age of eight, he had fed himself, done his own laundry and even taken care of his dad when he had been in too drunk a state to look after himself properly.

The neglect had left a lasting legacy on Noah, making him fiercely independent. He had to have been, otherwise he wouldn't have survived his childhood. Even now, he felt he only just got out unscathed.

Without any qualifications, thanks to intermittent attendance at school, he had had to rely on hard graft to earn a living. Thankfully, he had had one piece of good luck in his life so far. One day soon after he had turned sixteen, and desperate to escape the unhappy life he had been sharing with his father in Sheffield at that time, Noah had had enough. He had stolen just enough money out of his dad's wallet to buy a one-way coach ticket as far as he could travel. He got out at Penzance, Cornwall, at the very opposite end of the country, and took a deep breath of the fresh salty air, as if it would cleanse him of all the bad memories before then. After walking around the local area for a couple of days, trying to find any kind of employment, he had ended up in a small boatyard one afternoon. One of the handful of men who worked there had eventually ended up taking Noah under his wing and begun to show him the craft of boatmaking and restoring. It was the lucky break that Noah had been dreaming about and from that moment on, he was hooked.

He learnt as much as he could in those early years but was equally amazed and pleased that he appeared to have a gift for both carpentry and boatmaking. Over time, he gradually got a reputation for excellent craftsmanship. There was nothing that he liked more than repairing a fine wooden boat or yacht and seeing it head back out onto the water when it was finished.

His reputation continued to grow throughout his twenties and soon Noah began to work his way around the country, repairing whichever boats

he chose. The majority of his work was on either wooden yachts or classic vintage boats whose owners had been recommended Noah's fine craftsmanship. He loved his work and moving around meant that he didn't get close to anyone, just how he liked it.

After Noah had run away, he had only seen his dad a handful of times. His dad had never harboured any resentment towards his son that he had suddenly left home. Noah had always felt that his dad had been almost grateful to be finally relieved of the responsibility. They didn't celebrate birthdays or Christmas together. They didn't have that kind of relationship. His dad had continued on the same trajectory as he had always done, never settling anywhere and continuing to make and lose friends as well as money over and over.

So Noah had been surprised to receive a call from his dad two months previously, although shocked to hear that his father was now seriously ill. Noah had rushed up to Manchester to spend those last few days with his dad in hospital before he had finally succumbed to liver failure. Numb with grief, Noah hadn't expected anyone to show up for the funeral. After all, his father had made few friends over the years and there was hardly any family to inform either. But he had let his Uncle Walter know what had happened to his nephew and Noah had been surprised that both his Uncle Walter and Aunt Dorothy had come to the funeral. After all, they hadn't been close to his father or himself either.

Noah had only met his great-uncle and -aunt a handful of times growing up. Normally only when his dad had needed to borrow money whenever things had got too tight. They would stay a night or two in Cranley before swiftly moving on once the loan had been received. Noah remembered Maple Tree Lodge as being a warm and happy family home, something that he knew nothing about.

After the funeral, Noah had talked briefly to his uncle and aunt and had found their kindness touching, at a time when he had felt even more alone than ever.

Walter had told him that there was something for him at the lodge. 'Something that's yours by right,' he had said.

Noah had tried to put it out of his mind. Family was for other people, not him. And yet, the thought that he had something of his father's to inherit was too alluring for him to stay away.

So he had finally turned up late that evening at Walter's small cottage in the grounds of the hotel. There had been a power cut, Walter had explained, but there was always a spare room in the family quarters of the hotel. He could stay there and be shown his legacy in the morning.

Not wanting to get involved with any small talk, he had asked for privacy and Walter had given it to him, avoiding the rest of the family who had been gathered in the kitchen, and leading him through what appeared to be a very nicely appointed hotel. Thick carpets underfoot, soft mattresses, flowers and fresh-smelling candles. It smelt like money and luxury, both of which he knew nothing about.

'The Jacksons aren't my real family, of course,' carried on Beth. 'But I like to think that they've adopted me. Aren't they wonderful? So supportive.' She yawned. 'Look, I know it's all a bit awkward but everyone else has gone to sleep and I'm shattered. Plus I don't want to wake up the large but terribly friendly dog who's in the room next door. Apparently there are no other rooms available tonight so this is literally the only option. Do you mind terribly if I just sleep on the floor in here tonight? I'm not a stalker or anything but I'm just so tired.'

'You want to sleep on the floor?' he asked, staring at her. She was quite unlike any person he had ever met.

'I've done it loads of times and at least this time it's not the cold hard ground outside but a lovely thick carpet,' she told him, pulling out her hair from the two braids she had been wearing, and he was temporarily distracted by the luscious dark locks spilling over her shoulders. 'Unless your girlfriend is likely to get jealous,' she added, frowning. 'I'd hate to ruin somebody else's relationship. It would be too awful.'

'Actually I've just broken up with someone,' he found himself saying.

'I'm sorry,' she told him, sounding as if she genuinely meant it.

'I'm not,' he replied, truthfully.

Clara had been fun company for the couple of months that he had stayed in his last job in Brighton. But as usual, he never let anyone see the real him. Relationships were passionate, fun and fleeting, not serious and certainly not for trusting anyone with serious soul searching. That would never happen.

'You're not sorry?' Beth was staring at him in shock. 'Most people are normally pretty upset after a relationship breaks up.'

'Not me,' he told her, with a shrug.

‘That’s amazing,’ said Beth, sinking back against the pillows, still looking at him. ‘It takes me ages to get over someone.’

‘You break up with lots of boyfriends?’ he couldn’t stop himself asking.

She grimaced. ‘More often than you’d think.’

‘Perhaps it’s them and not you,’ he told her.

After all, despite her chatty nature, she appeared to be fun and he couldn’t deny how pretty she was.

‘That’s what my friends keep telling me,’ she said, nodding ruefully to herself. ‘And yet, here I am, heartbroken over yet another lying, cheating idiot this evening. I need to break the cycle of falling in love over and over.’ She sighed heavily.

‘That’s where you’ve been going wrong,’ he told her. ‘I don’t believe in love.’

‘You don’t?’ she spluttered as she sat up. ‘Seriously?’

He waited for her to tell him that he was wrong but instead her face lit up into a smile. ‘Wow! That’s brilliant! You are my new relationship hero!’

Noah had never been anyone’s hero before now and didn’t quite know how to respond.

Thankfully Beth carried on chatting. ‘Remind me to take some notes from you in the morning when I’m more awake. I need that attitude in my life right now.’ She looked around the room before her gaze settled on the sofa by the large picture window. ‘Thank goodness! I’d forgotten that there was a sofa in these bedrooms. I’ll sleep on that.’

She stood up and walked over to the brown leather sofa which had a couple of soft throws over each arm. He noticed that the bottoms of her baggy pyjama trousers were rolled up a couple of times, despite her long legs.

Feeling a little guilty, Noah found himself saying, ‘You can take the bed if you want.’

‘Oh, no!’ she said, sinking onto the sofa and putting her feet up on the arm rest. ‘This was your bedroom first. I just feel bad for disrupting your night’s sleep. I promise you won’t hear a wink out of me for the rest of the night. And I don’t snore apparently either.’

‘Okay,’ said Noah, running a hand through his hair, somewhat perplexed by the late-night conversation he had just been a part of.

‘I really am very tired,’ said Beth. ‘Do you mind switching out the light now?’

‘Of course,’ he replied, lying down on the bed and leaning over to find the light switch.

The bedroom was plunged into darkness but as his eyes adjusted, he remembered that he hadn’t drawn the curtains. Outside, the full moon had moved across the sky and was shining down onto the lake and lighting up the picture window next to where the sofa lay.

He still felt somewhat guilty about Beth sleeping on the sofa, despite her being fair that it had been his room to start with. He sat up. Maybe she felt nervous about sleeping with a strange man in her room. Perhaps he should have just gone downstairs and slept in the lounge instead.

Either way, he felt bad about the situation. But as he opened his mouth to insist that she take the bed, he realised that Beth had fallen fast asleep already.

3

Beth woke up with a crick in her neck, finding herself in a ray of sun peeping through the window and straight into her eyes.

She blinked in the bright light before staring up at the ceiling, trying to remember where she was. Oak beams. Wide picture window next to her, with a glorious view of Dragonfly Lake glittering under an October blue sky. She smiled to herself. She was at Maple Tree Lodge. She was home.

She sprang off the sofa and was about to whoop with delight when she noticed the handsome man still asleep in the bed and stopped short with a silent gasp.

The night before came back to her at breakneck speed. Rushing away from horrible Jeremy, heartbroken and only thinking of getting back to her beloved home from home. Stumbling across Noah in the middle of the night, in the middle of a power cut. There had obviously been some kind of mix-up with the bedrooms. Not that she minded, the sofa had been comfortable enough.

What she did mind was that she was still in her pyjamas and desperate to see the family downstairs.

So she picked up her bag as silently as she could and crept into the bathroom to get changed. Five minutes later and she was dressed. She checked her phone but there were no messages from Jeremy. No apologies, no voicemail begging her to go back. She sighed and shook her head in sad dismay at her reflection before turning away.

Finding Noah still asleep when she came out of the bathroom, she padded silently across the thick carpet to the bedroom door. She reached out to the door handle, checking back at the bed to make sure she wasn't disturbing him.

She allowed herself a slow leisurely check of his handsome face, relaxed in sleep. He was around her age, in his early thirties, with dark hair, a five o'clock shadow across his chin and that bare muscular torso that she had already seen the night before.

She stood there admiring him for a moment, a smile beginning to play on her lips before she abruptly shook her head at herself. What was she thinking of? She had literally just been cheated on by Jeremy! It was definitely time to stay single and let her romantic dreams lie dormant for a while.

With a determined nod, she left the bedroom and headed downstairs.

Everything looked and felt better in the daylight, she realised. The double height of the oak-beamed entrance hall shone in the morning sunshine and she was almost tempted to hum to herself as she headed past the reception desk and into the family kitchen.

At once, she was enveloped in the aroma of home cooking and the sound of the Jackson family milling around, getting the breakfast service ready for their guests and chatting away to each other.

However, as soon as they spotted her, a cry went up around the large oak table where everyone had gathered and various members of the family rushed across to greet her.

Her best friend Hannah was first, her long blonde hair flying behind her as she raced up to Beth.

'Lily's just told us that you arrived last night!' she said, drawing her best friend into a hug. 'I hate the reason why you're here but love that you are.'

Sweet Hannah, thought Beth. As usual, she smelt of the delicious cakes and pastries that she made for her café in the old boathouse on the lake.

Next was Alex, Hannah's boyfriend. An ex-athlete, he was a gentle giant and when he greeted her with a hug, she barely came up to his shoulders.

'Sorry about your relationship,' he told her, stepping back and almost standing on Tiny, his enormous Newfoundland dog, in the process.

Tiny didn't appear to mind, merely wagging his tail at all the excitement in the kitchen.

Beth shrugged away the pain in her heart and reached down to stroke Tiny. 'Better off without him, to be honest,' she replied. Although the worry about how she was going to pay her rent going forward if she had lost her job was beginning to weigh heavily on her. 'Anyway, I'm just glad to be here,' she added, as she straightened up.

'And we're glad to have you,' said Faye, Hannah and Ben's mother, coming forward to embrace her.

She was the kind of mother that Beth had always dreamt of having. Supportive, loving, always available with a shoulder to cry on alongside home cooking to nourish and make you feel better.

After Faye, Frankie stepped forward. She was Faye's acerbic best friend who had come to live with the family after her marriage broke down. She wasn't known for having a soft and forgiving take on relationships so Beth braced herself for the inevitable.

'Listen,' said Frankie, after she'd hugged Beth. 'Men cheat because their brains are in their pants. And pants aren't known for logical thinking. So, how about I put a shot of vodka in your orange juice to keep the pain away?'

There was a chorus of disapproval to which Frankie made a face at them. 'It's for the vitamin C! And it's very important to keep it topped up with winter coming.'

'Thanks but I'll stick with the coffee,' Beth told her.

'Spoilsport,' said Frankie, with a wink.

Next to greet her was Ben, Hannah's brother and manager of the hotel.

'Hey, good to see you,' he said, giving her a wave. 'Can't believe you crept around in the darkness like that last night.'

'It was fine,' Beth told him. 'And the power cut's all fixed now, I guess?'

Ben nodded but didn't look particularly happy. 'Till the next time,' he muttered in reply.

'I keep telling him it's just electricity,' said Dotty, Ben and Hannah's grandmother, squeezing past him. 'Nothing important.'

Dotty was a diminutive powerhouse despite being nearly eighty and Beth crouched down to hug her.

'Lovely to see you,' said Beth.

‘You know, I’m pretty certain I had that exact same miniskirt in the 1960s,’ said Dotty, giving her an appreciative look.

Beth glanced down at the outfit that she had dressed in without much thought that morning. As usual, it was a vintage purchase from a charity shop.

Always struggling to find enough funds growing up, Beth had become used to buying her clothes second hand. As she had become an adult, she had found herself drawn to the vintage styles of the 1960s and 1970s. Sometimes she struck gold in the charity shops and found a real designer item where the quality far outshone the modern-day thinner materials. That day’s outfit was a case in point. She had been delighted to discover an original Mary Quant miniskirt in a charity shop in London many years previously. The red and black tartan coordinated beautifully with her thick black tights and red V-neck jumper.

‘Dotty, you can borrow my skirt any time,’ Beth told her.

‘Not sure she’s got the legs for it these days,’ said Walter, Dotty’s husband, shooting his wife a grin. ‘Hello, love,’ he added, giving Beth a small hug. Walter’s often gruff exterior masked a soft heart underneath.

‘Walter, lovely to see you,’ said Beth. ‘But I have to disagree with you for once. Dotty’s got fantastic legs.’

‘I know,’ said Walter, with a grin. ‘I just don’t want her getting a big head.’

‘Now, what’s all this about running out on your boyfriend?’ Ever straight to the point, Dotty led Beth over to the table.

It is handy to keep a spare title for a quiet moment.

Choose one from **Lokepub** and come back to it later.

‘Maybe she doesn’t want to talk about it, Grandma,’ said Hannah in a pointed tone.

‘Rubbish,’ said Dotty. ‘She’s family and we’re here to help.’

‘Here to stick our noses in, more like it,’ muttered Walter, sitting down at the head of the table.

‘I know what I’m talking about,’ said Dotty. ‘The poor girl’s obviously heartbroken.’

‘I’ll be okay,’ said Beth, putting on her bravest smile. ‘Oh, and talking of family, Walter. I’m afraid I gave your nephew a bit of a fright last night.’

‘Nephew?’ repeated Lily, staring at her with wide eyes. ‘What nephew? Who are you talking about?’

‘Ben and Hannah’s cousin,’ said Beth, turning to look around at everyone.

At the time, she had thought it was odd that Lily hadn’t mentioned him staying at the hotel, given how close they were as a family. But then again it had been a busy night for everyone, she had reminded herself.

‘Our cousin?’ said Ben, still looking perplexed. ‘You mean Noah?’

‘When did you meet Noah?’ asked Hannah, looking as confused as her brother.

‘I think somebody got their lines mixed up in all the confusion of the power cut last night,’ Beth told them. ‘We were both allocated the spare bedroom. You know, the first one on the right-hand side in the family quarter.’

‘Wait a minute,’ said Ben, dragging a hand through his hair. ‘Let me get this straight. Noah is here?’

He looked shocked and now Beth was confused.

‘You didn’t know?’ she asked.

‘No!’ spluttered Ben, looking angry. ‘How did he get here? Did he just break into our home?’

‘Why would he break in?’ Beth began to ask but Ben was looking around at his family for answers.

‘Of course he didn’t break into the place,’ said Walter, smacking his coffee mug down onto the table a little forcefully. ‘He was here at my request.’

‘Your request?’ said Hannah with wide eyes.

‘It’s still my hotel, isn’t it?’ asked Walter, with a glare.

‘Of course, Grandad,’ replied Ben quickly.

‘It’s everyone’s hotel and everyone’s *home*,’ said Faye, ever the peacemaker in the family.

‘So I can invite whoever I like to stay,’ said Walter, still looking riled. ‘Including my great-nephew.’

‘That’s not what I was getting at,’ Ben told him, shaking his head. ‘But I had no idea he was even here. When did he arrive?’

‘Yesterday evening,’ replied Walter. ‘It was late and I figured we still had that room spare. Didn’t know Beth was coming too.’

‘To be fair, it was a last-minute decision on my part,’ said Beth, anxious that nobody fell out over her bad break-up. ‘I didn’t mean to confuse matters.’

‘You didn’t,’ Lily told her, with a reassuring smile. ‘But wait a minute. If Noah slept in the spare bedroom, where did you sleep?’

‘In the same bedroom,’ Beth told her.

The shocked silence that followed was only punctuated by Walter as he dropped his toast back onto his plate with a soft thud.

‘You, er, the same room?’ he spluttered, staring at Beth in surprise before glancing at his wife. ‘Dotty, say something,’ he added in a stage whisper.

‘You go, girl!’ said Dotty, grinning at Beth.

Alex spluttered into his coffee before reaching out for a napkin to wipe his dripping chin. ‘Sorry,’ he added, shaking his head at Dotty whilst laughing.

‘It’s not like that,’ said Beth, who was also laughing. ‘It was obvious that there was some kind of mix-up with the rooms so I slept on the sofa. Honestly! What kind of a girl do you think I am?’

But as everyone else laughed, Ben was still frowning.

‘It’s not *you* that we don’t trust,’ muttered Ben.

‘Now don’t be like that,’ said Walter, his laughter fading as he looked at his grandson. ‘The lad had a rough start in life. I’m sure that’s all behind him now.’

‘Is it?’ Ben was still frowning. ‘You know that for definite, do you?’

‘I think I do actually,’ said Walter, his eyes flaring.

‘He seemed okay at the funeral last month,’ added Dotty. ‘But we only saw him briefly.’

‘What do you mean that you don’t trust him?’ asked Beth, looking between the two men. She felt bewildered by the tense atmosphere as the two men had grown so close since Ben had moved back there over a year ago.

‘What I mean is that you’ve no idea who you just shared a room with,’ Ben told her.

‘Why? Who is he?’ Beth was stunned, her mind now racing with awful possibilities.

Hannah looked at her best friend and grinned. ‘You’ve just spent the night with Noah, the biggest bad boy of them all.’

Beth gasped. She couldn’t believe it.

A sudden movement at the doorway made everyone turn their heads and Beth joined them to look at Noah, who had just stepped into the kitchen and had presumably heard every word.

4

‘The biggest bad boy of them all.’

Noah stood still as Hannah’s words rang in his ears. He’d heard worse, of course. Troublemaker. No good. Unwanted. No hope. Everyone had been giving him a label since he could remember.

He had spent his childhood and some of his adult life as well trying to prove everyone wrong and that he did have something to give this world. All these years on, however, he knew that he only needed to prove it to himself, no one else.

In the awkward silence that followed his cousin’s words, Noah hesitated by the kitchen entrance. It had been a bit of a rollercoaster time since he had arrived, what with his unexpected encounter with Beth the previous evening as well as her decision to sleep on the sofa regardless of them being total strangers.

He had woken up a short while ago upon hearing the bedroom door close with a click. Presumably that had been Beth leaving the room and he had got dressed and come downstairs, anxious to see whatever Walter had to show him and then leave as quickly as possible.

He hadn’t seen the majority of the Jackson family for many years. Since perhaps his mid-teens. They felt both familiar and yet strangers at the same time.

Finally breaking into the awkward silence, Faye, who had been standing nearby, rushed over to greet him.

‘Noah,’ she said, giving him a brief hug. ‘It’s so good to see you after such a long time. Would you like a coffee? Something to eat?’

‘Just a coffee, thanks,’ he replied, grateful for her diversion away from the stilted atmosphere in the large room.

Next up was Dotty, his great-aunt, her eyes twinkling as she looked up at him. ‘Noah, it’s great to see you again,’ she told him, before reaching up to give him a hug. ‘Do you know, you’re the spitting image of your grandfather this morning?’

‘Thank you,’ he replied, stepping back out of the embrace. Was that a compliment? He couldn’t tell. His grandad had been quite a cold person and they hadn’t had a particularly close relationship.

Ben got up from the table and walked across the room, stretching his hand out in welcome.

‘Hi. Good to see you,’ he said, with a nod, although Noah noted that the smile didn’t reach as far as his cousin’s eyes.

Noah took the proffered hand and shook it.

He knew Ben was the fortunate grandson. After the death of his father, Ben had apparently taken over the running of the hotel. It had been a while since they had last seen each other. They had been rough and tumble boys early on in life. Fighting and scrapping whenever they had met up. Truth be told, Noah had been jealous of everything Ben had. A warm and loving family. A permanent home. Unconditional love. Things that Noah had never had.

Standing nearby was Hannah, looking upset. She had been the quieter of his two cousins. Always a little shy, despite having grown up so much since they had last met. Now she was an attractive woman in her early thirties and yet she had tears glittering in her eyes as she looked at him.

‘Oh, Noah,’ she said, with a half a sob. ‘I’m so sorry that you heard me say such a terrible thing. How awful. And we haven’t seen each other for so long either. I didn’t mean it, of course.’

Noah felt sorry for her, such was the level of her upset. She was wringing her hands together, looking stressed. ‘It’s okay,’ he told her, with a soft smile. ‘To be honest, I’m not surprised you felt that way. After all, I did cut the hair off your Barbie.’

She sniffed and gave a little laugh, looking a little less strained. ‘I’d forgotten about that! You said it would grow back,’ she reminded him.

‘And did it?’ asked Noah gently.

Hannah shook her head. ‘No, but it did teach me not to ask any more boys if they wanted to play with my dolls.’

‘You talked to boys before you met me?’ asked a large man who had been standing next to Hannah in a protective manner, grinning down at her.

‘Not many,’ said Hannah with a smile. ‘Noah, this is my boyfriend, Alex.’

‘Hi,’ said Alex, holding out his hand for Noah to take.

It was a bone-crushing handshake and Noah hoped his fingers were still intact when they were released. It was a familiar reaction that he was used to. Most men seemed to perceive him as the enemy and he had no inclination to change their pre-conceived perception of him.

‘And this is Tiny,’ said Alex, nodding at the huge black dog who had just wandered over to see what the fuss was about.

‘Tiny?’ repeated Noah in surprise. The dog was absolutely enormous.

‘I know,’ grinned Alex. ‘But it wasn’t my idea, believe me.’

‘I’m Frankie,’ announced a woman in her late fifties stepping forward next to shake his hand. ‘Happy to hear that I’m not the only disreputable soul around here.’

‘Is that everyone?’ asked Dotty, looking around.

‘Not quite,’ said Lily in a pointed tone.

‘Last and by no means least, this is my girlfriend Lily,’ said Ben, putting his arm around Lily’s shoulders. ‘We run the hotel together.’

‘With a bit of help from the rest of us,’ added Hannah, with a grin.

They were a solid unit, thought Noah. Gentle jokes. Teasing. Comfortable. Love. A family. He had never felt more of an outsider.

Faye handed him a large mug of coffee. ‘Are you sure you don’t want anything to eat, Noah?’ she asked. ‘Hannah’s made breakfast muffins.’

‘My sister might be rubbish at who she chooses to play dolls with but she’s a great baker,’ said Ben with a sound of pride in his voice.

‘Thanks but I’m okay,’ replied Noah.

Finally, his eyes rested on his roommate the previous night. Out of her pyjamas and dressed in normal clothes, Beth still looked anything but average. Her long legs were emphasised by the short miniskirt she was wearing and he had to force himself not to stare as she got up from the table and headed across the kitchen towards him.

‘Good morning,’ she said with a smile. ‘Noah, could you please tell everyone that our room share was entirely sex-free.’

Noah had just begun to sip his coffee and choked a little on his drink at her words.

‘For some reason, they don’t believe me,’ she carried on.

Noah finally swallowed the scalding hot liquid and nodded. ‘It was just a mix-up with the rooms. Nothing else,’ he croaked, his throat still burning.

‘See?’ Beth did a palms up as she turned to face the family. ‘Mind you, I’m not sure whether I should be flattered or affronted that they felt that way.’ She turned to look at Noah with dark eyes. ‘What do you think?’

He was quickly learning that Beth seemed to voice everything that went into her head and was still struggling to keep up.

‘I think we just tell the truth and leave it at that,’ he told her, hoping that ended the awkward conversation.

‘I heartily agree,’ said Walter, standing up at the head of the table. ‘Well, if you’re all done embarrassing our guest, I’m going to take him outside and show him the lake.’

Noah felt grateful for his uncle’s intervention. It was a messy, chaotic kitchen full of different personalities of all ages and he had never felt more uncomfortable in the presence of so many people crammed into a family home.

He had lived modestly by himself for all of his adult life. For the past year, he had rented a static caravan on the outskirts of Brighton where he had been working at a boatyard on a substantial project. He preferred a quiet life with no awkward questions and nobody to bother him.

And yet, as he followed Walter out of the kitchen, he found himself slightly wistful at the happy family atmosphere. But despite what Walter had said at the funeral, the Jacksons weren’t his own family. Not really. And it would be better for all concerned that he left as soon as he could.

5

After Noah had left the kitchen with Walter, Beth sat back down at the large oak table in the family kitchen and couldn't stop herself from reaching forward to take a muffin from the pile on the plate in the middle of the table.

'Are these my favourite banana ones?' she asked Hannah, before taking a bite. The taste of nutmeg and ginger exploded in her mouth, alongside sweet banana pieces.

'They're my morning breakfast muffins, yes,' Hannah told her. 'Talking of which, I must get going in the boathouse. We open in two hours' time.'

Hannah ran a successful café in the old boathouse next to the lake where her delicious bakes were proving to be extremely popular to both hotel guests and local visitors.

'But first, you need to quickly tell us about last night,' added Hannah. 'I'm still so confused.'

Beth swallowed the remainder of her muffin before replying. 'That was amazing,' she said, licking her fingers.

'The muffin or the stud muffin?' murmured Lily, with a grin.

'Please!' said Ben, shaking his head and hurriedly picking up his mobile phone. 'I don't need to hear this about my cousin.'

The women all laughed whilst Ben and Alex swiftly left the room to deal with some unexpected accountancy emergency. Or so they said.

'Right, now it's just us girls, spill all the details,' said Hannah.

‘Dotty? Frankie? Shall we leave them to it?’ asked Faye in a pointed tone, standing at the top of the table.

‘Not on your life,’ said Dotty, pulling her chair a little closer to where Beth was sitting. ‘I still need to get my kicks regardless of my age.’

The other women laughed.

‘Details!’ repeated Hannah.

Beth rolled her eyes. ‘It’s really not a big drama,’ she told her captive audience. ‘I went to the spare bedroom that Lily told me was empty. Everything was still in darkness. And then I found Noah in bed.’

‘Found?’ asked Frankie, raising her eyebrows.

‘More like fell on top of him,’ confessed Beth, to everyone’s shocked laughter. ‘I know! Poor man!’

‘You must have given him such a fright,’ said Lily, laughing and shaking her head.

Beth thought back and remembered that Noah hadn’t seemed frightened at all. If anything, he had seemed extremely calm and in control. She found herself thinking that he must be very good in an emergency.

‘And then you slept on the sofa?’ asked Hannah.

Beth nodded. ‘It was only fair. He had the bed first. And I didn’t want to disturb anyone. And that was it.’

‘That’s it?’ Dotty leaned back in her chair with a heavy sigh. ‘So much for girly gossip.’

Beth shrugged her shoulders. ‘I’m afraid so. No drama. Just me tripping over my own feet and a mix-up with the rooms. Anyway, I’ve had enough of men for the time being.’

Hannah reached out to squeeze her shoulders. ‘Lily told me. I’m so sorry about Jeremy.’

‘I’m not,’ said Beth. ‘I’m so over men at this point. I’d rather live on the moon than go through another break-up.’

‘Men,’ muttered Frankie. ‘Can’t live with ’em. End of story. Right, I’d better get on reception in case any of our guests are leaving early this morning.’

After she had left, Lily turned to look at Beth. ‘So what happened exactly with Jeremy?’ she asked. ‘You were a bit vague when you messaged me last night.’

Beth sighed heavily. ‘Well, we were having a lovely weekend. Or so I thought. We’d decided to have a Saturday night in for once. Anyway, I

wanted a shower and to get into something more comfortable if we were going to snuggle on the sofa but I couldn't get his complicated modern shower thing to work so I just got changed into my pyjamas instead. Because I didn't take very long, when I came out of the bedroom, he was on the phone in his study talking to somebody and telling them how much he loved her.'

'Perhaps it was his mother,' said Dotty.

Beth shook her head. 'Not based on the kind of things I overheard him saying to her,' she said, with a grimace. 'What a louse.'

'A big louse,' said Lily, nodding her head in agreement.

Beth sighed. There had been differences between her and Jeremy. Quite large differences, in actual fact. But she had hoped that this time she had found her happy ever after. But once more, her choice of men had been poor. When would she ever learn?

Beth thought back to something that Hannah had said earlier. 'Hey, what was all that about Noah being the biggest bad boy of them all?' she asked.

She thought back to him standing in the doorway a short while ago and she had to admit that he did look a little rough around the edges. Dark hair, dark eyes and an almost permanent five o'clock shadow. He'd certainly filled out those jeans and sweatshirt pretty well though, she thought.

'I mean, he's a bit brooding, good-looking and all that,' she conceded. 'But is he really that bad?'

'Yes,' said Hannah nodding.

But almost immediately there came an added 'No!' from Faye and Dotty in unison.

They exchanged a knowing look across the table.

'What are you talking about?' asked Hannah, looking bewildered. 'Wasn't he always in trouble? Not going to school? Loads of girlfriends?'

Faye sighed softly as she sat down at the table. 'What you've got to remember is that not everybody was as lucky as you growing up.'

Beth took a silent intake of breath. It was true, she thought. Hannah had grown up in a warm, loving family whereas she had known nothing of that.

Lily immediately turned to look at her and reached out to hug her. 'We know,' she said, squeezing Beth's shoulders.

'But Noah had a family,' said Hannah, still looking confused. 'Not like poor Beth.'

‘Having a family doesn’t necessarily mean it’s a happy one,’ Dotty told her.

‘In what way?’ Beth couldn’t help but ask. As far as she was concerned, just having a family would be the best thing ever.

‘Noah’s father was Walter’s nephew,’ began Dotty. ‘Walter and his brother were never that close. They were chalk and cheese personality wise. Frank didn’t want all of this,’ she said, waving her arm around the kitchen. ‘He preferred the big cities and bright lights. Not the peace of the countryside. Plus the place was pretty small in those days before we added so much more to the hotel. In fact, it wasn’t even a hotel. Anyway, he married Margaret and they had just the one child, Chris. We used to meet up every year or so, normally in the summertime. They would come down for the weekend. But Chris grew up pretty wild. I don’t know why. Just one of those kind of people, I guess. Frank and Margaret stayed in their little place in Bristol near to their friends but Chris left home as soon as he could. Joined the army, went travelling. No job ever stuck though.’ Dotty reached forward to take a sip of coffee. ‘The next thing we heard in a letter from Frank was that Chris had left the army, turned up at their door unexpectedly with a pregnant girlfriend.’

‘Marie,’ said Faye, her lips pressed together in dislike.

Beth was shocked. Faye never seemed to think badly of anyone, such was her gentle disposition.

Dotty nodded. ‘Marie,’ she repeated, with a heavy sigh. ‘Did you meet her?’

‘Only at the wedding,’ replied Faye, with a grimace.

‘Lord, I’d forgotten about that,’ said Dotty, shaking her head.

‘Why, what was so bad about it?’ asked Hannah, wide-eyed.

‘Chris, the groom, had a black eye from getting in a fight the night before and Marie, the bride, all seven months pregnant of her, got absolutely blind drunk,’ Dotty told her, with a shudder. ‘It was a mess.’

‘I don’t think the marriage was much happier,’ added Faye.

‘Hard to tell when it only lasted four or so years,’ said Dotty. ‘Marie walked out on them after that. Husband and son both left behind. Nobody ever heard from her ever again, according to Frank. They tried to do what they could for their son and grandson but Frank had had his major stroke by then and his health wasn’t the best.’

‘And they never saw him that often anyway because Chris seemed to spend the rest of his life roaming around, from the infrequent updates we got from him,’ said Faye. ‘He came here occasionally.’

‘To borrow money which he never paid back,’ added Dotty.

‘But Tony always felt that his cousin could never be pinned down,’ continued Faye.

‘Noah, of course, came off the worse from it all,’ said Dotty, shaking her head. ‘Different homes and schools every year. He was such a sad little boy, trailing around after his dad. Not that Chris seemed to be father of the year either. The lad was often wearing clothes which were too small or even worn thin.’

‘We used to give him Ben’s clothes, do you remember?’ said Faye. ‘As well as feeding him up whenever he came.’

‘Left by his own mother and ignored by his father for the most part, it’s hardly surprising that Noah got himself into a bit of trouble,’ said Dotty.

‘It was a bit more than trouble,’ said Ben, coming back into the kitchen. ‘Wasn’t there something about stealing money?’

Dotty looked uncomfortable. ‘Chris mentioned it in passing. I don’t think it was a lot and it’s not like Chris ever gave him much pocket money, if anything.’

Ben pursed his lips together but stayed silent as he went over to pour himself a coffee.

‘We didn’t see Noah after he left school,’ carried on Dotty. ‘Barely saw Chris either. I think the both of them travelled around quite a bit. Anyway, we met up with Noah at Chris’s funeral a month ago. Walter said he’d invited him to stay last night but neither of us expected him to show up.’ Dotty shook her head. ‘We let Noah down. We should have forced Chris to let the boy stay here with us. Then he could have grown up in a stable environment rather than being dragged around by his father all around the country.’

‘I’ve always felt guilty about that,’ said Faye, looking upset.

‘Us too,’ said Dotty, nodding.

‘Poor Noah,’ said Hannah. ‘I just remembered overhearing Uncle Chris talking about what a disappointment he was.’

‘I was never sure about that,’ said Dotty. ‘Anyway, the man standing in this kitchen a little while ago is still family so we must give him the benefit of the doubt.’

‘If you’re sure,’ said Ben, frowning and not sounding convinced.

‘He’s *family*,’ repeated Dotty, looking stern.

Beth had listened to the conversation, fascinated by Noah’s upbringing. It had sounded pretty rough but at least he had a family, she thought. In that respect, perhaps he was looking for the happy ever after that she had always dreamed of as well.

6

Noah stepped out of the hotel front door with Walter, taking a refreshing breath of air once they were outside.

It had been an awkward reunion with the family in the kitchen and he was grateful to be out of the uneasy atmosphere.

He stopped to take in the view, realising that he had never appreciated the beauty of the place when he was younger. Of course, it had been dark when he had arrived the previous evening so he had yet to see it properly. Now, standing in the golden morning sunshine, he could see just how magnificent Maple Tree Lodge and its surroundings truly were.

'Dragonfly Lake,' said Walter, as they walked towards it. 'All fifty acres of it. Do you remember me teaching you to fish out there?'

Noah frowned and tried to remember but had to shake his head truthfully.

'Ah well, you were only young and we never got to see you that often,' said Walter, sadly. 'Did you ever learn to fish?'

'Afraid not,' said Noah, thinking back to the many flats and borrowed sofas in other people's living rooms that he had grown up in. Hardly time to sit and stare across a beautiful body of water when there were more important things to worry about like food and a roof over one's head. He would have liked to have learnt though, especially when the water was as clear as the lake in front of him.

He then looked beyond the lake at the deep forest that surrounded it.

‘The trees are yours as well, aren’t they?’ he asked, recalling something that his father had mentioned.

Walter nodded. ‘Everything you can see up to the hills is on our land. The lake and trees are all ours to take care of before the next generation takes over. That will be Ben now, of course.’

Tony, Walter’s only son, had died unexpectedly the previous year so of course Ben would inherit everything.

‘And Ben has taken over the management of the hotel?’ asked Noah, thinking once more how lucky Ben had been in life.

‘It was getting too much for me, to be honest,’ said Walter. ‘Can’t say I’m not grateful. And I keep my hand in, of course. Still like to potter about in my wood shop. This way.’

They walked along a path that hugged the side of the lake. Noah could see the path bend around the corner to where a large structure seemed to almost float at the edge of the water.

‘That’s the boathouse,’ said Walter, sounding proud. ‘Hannah’s done wonders there with her café. Done her the power of good too, a little success. She never had any confidence, if you remember.’

Noah recalled a shy young girl and felt bad once more about making her cry by cutting off her Barbie’s hair. He had just been so angry all of the time growing up. Life had been a constant battle, everything had to be fought for, food, favours, homes. Nothing had come easily to him. And then his dad had brought him to Maple Tree Lodge on a couple of occasions and everything there had seemed so easy and free. Life wasn’t fair, he knew that. But here in Cranley, the scales had felt ever more tipped against him.

‘She’s happy with young Alex now,’ carried on Walter. ‘Nice lad. Ben met him and their other best friend Jake at university. Alex was an athlete, you know. He runs the swimming club here. Tries to help out with any building work too but he doesn’t quite have the skills, I’m sorry to say.’ Walter pierced him with a look. ‘What about you? Seem to recall you liked carpentry?’

Noah nodded.

‘Any good?’ asked Walter.

Noah laughed. ‘Pretty good, according to everyone I work for.’

He was proud of his abilities. He could only be proud of himself. There was nobody else to do so for him.

‘What line of work did you end up in?’ asked Walter. ‘We didn’t have time to chat after the funeral recently.’

It is handy to keep a spare title for a quiet moment.

Choose one from **Lokepub** and come back to it later.

Noah had deliberately left after a brief conversation with his aunt and uncle. It had been then that Walter had indicated that there was something of his to claim at the lodge.

‘I repair and restore wooden boats,’ said Noah.

Walter stopped walking abruptly to stare across at him. ‘Is that so? What type?’

‘About half are sailboats, the others power, although I have had the odd commission for vintage canoes and rowboats as well.’

Walter continued to stare at him. Noah shuffled under the scrutiny and wondered what had made the elderly man to look at him in such surprise before they began to walk on once more. They turned off the track that had hugged the side of the lake and went into the denseness of the forest.

‘Then you might be interested in this,’ said Walter, stopping in front of a large, somewhat dilapidated barn that was almost obscured by trees.

He fiddled with the lock before finally unbolting the door and pulling it wide open. Noah followed Walter inside and saw what appeared to be a large vessel covered in a tarpaulin. The tarpaulin was dirty, strewn with leaves that had been swept in through the gaps in the slats of wood in the walls. It looked like it hadn’t been moved in years.

Noah looked at Walter with his eyebrows raised in question.

Walter gave him a knowing smile as he pulled at the corner of the tarpaulin and, with a dramatic flourish, whipped off the sheet to reveal the hull of a boat. In shock, Noah helped his uncle uncover the whole powerboat before stepping back to stare up at it.

It was in dreadful condition, thought Noah. But there was no doubting the heritage and beauty of the classic lines.

‘How old is it?’ he asked.

‘From the 1950s, I reckon,’ said Walter.

Noah shook his head. ‘It’s more in keeping with the yachts of the 1930s,’ he said, walking around it, dazzled by the shape. ‘Just look at that elegant profile and the flush deck. About ten metres long. It would have been a thing of beauty at one time. Where on earth did you get it?’

‘It was your grandad’s.’

Noah spun around, astonished. ‘This was Grandad’s?’ He looked once more at the boat and tried to reconcile the sleek watercraft with his sullen grandparents who had always been quite closed off and had never once left Bristol, as far as he knew.

‘Aye,’ said Walter, nodding. ‘They didn’t have the space over there to keep it and we’ve got acres of the stuff. My brother always told me he would come back for it. Never did, of course, despite me reminding him. And your dad didn’t have any interest in this kind of thing. You know how he was. So here it stayed.’

‘It’s beautiful,’ said Noah, reaching out to stroke the elegant shape of the hull. He could see how much work it would take to get it seaworthy once more but found himself yearning to see it back to its peak condition. ‘When are you intending to restore it?’ he asked.

To his surprise, Walter shook his head. ‘It’s not mine to restore, lad. It’s yours. This is your inheritance.’

Noah looked him, astonished. ‘My inheritance?’ he stammered.

He had never had anything to his name and now he had a beautiful vintage boat. He couldn’t believe it and turned to stare back at it in disbelief.

7

Noah stared at the boat for a while longer in silence.

‘What was Grandad doing with a boat?’ he finally said, still looking up at his legacy. An actual boat, here in a barn at Maple Tree Lodge. Had it been there all the time? Whenever he had visited on infrequent occasions? He still couldn’t believe it.

He stepped forward, unable to stop himself from reaching out to stroke the wood. It was smooth in places but completely rotten in others. It was a mess but the bones of the craft were good, he thought. Really good. It would be a stylish boat if it were ever to be renovated.

‘I remember your grandad showing up with it one day,’ said Walter. ‘We must have only been in our early twenties but I was already married to Dotty. The honeymoon period! Anyway, my brother rocked up with it on the back of trailer. Said it had been bought on a whim. Thought he would keep it at the boathouse. So we kept it there for a few years. He always referred to it as his boat so I wasn’t going to get rid of it. Always felt bad that I’d inherited the lodge from your great-grandad. I was the elder brother, you see. In any case, I’ve come to realise that he probably would have sold the place if our places had been switched. He wasn’t one for the countryside.’ Walter looked up at the boat once more. ‘I figured when they settled in Bristol that perhaps they might get a mooring at the large harbour there but it never happened. Perhaps it was your grandad’s stroke that put him off. Or maybe they worked out they that they were never really boat people in the first place.’

‘And Dad would have never wanted it,’ said Noah with a wry smile.

‘Course not,’ said Walter, shaking his head but also smiling. ‘Your dad always preferred his motorbikes and cars. Was never too keen on the water, either being in it or even on it, from what I remember.’

Noah had a flash of a memory, of running into the sea one day when they went out on a day trip. But his dad had steadfastly refused to go anywhere near the ocean.

‘Shame,’ said Walter, sounding wistful. ‘I’d have liked to have seen it out on the water some time.’

Noah nodded. ‘I’m not sure how much work it would take to do it up,’ he said. ‘We’d have to see about the engine but I think the structure isn’t too bad. I’ve seen worse despite the rotten timbers.’

‘And that’s what you do?’ asked Walter. ‘Repair boats like this?’

Noah nodded. ‘That’s right.’

‘And you do all the work?’ Walter looked impressed. ‘That must have taken a few years of studying to learn how to do that.’

‘Pretty much had to learn everything from scratch, including the engine side of things,’ replied Noah. ‘That was the trickiest part. But yeah, I love it.’

Walter nodded his approval. ‘I always hoped that you had carpentry in your bones,’ he said, tugging the tarpaulin back over the boat. ‘You don’t remember playing in my workshop, I don’t suppose. You were pretty young.’

Noah shook his head. ‘I don’t think so,’ he said.

‘Well, in any case, maybe there’s something else you’d like to see outside.’

Noah took one last wistful look at the boat before it was covered up once more.

They walked out of the barn and he watched as Walter locked the door once more. ‘It’s yours whenever you decide what you want to do with it,’ said Walter, with a nod.

Noah was grateful for the lack of pressure but still was confused as to what he could possibly gain from working on it. What use did he have for a boat of his own? And yet, it pulled at something deep inside him that he’d long forgotten about. Legacy. Heritage. Family. Things that he had always dismissed.

Still, his mind raced with possibilities. In his mind's eye, he could see it finished, sleek and polished, racing across the sea somewhere out on the coast with him at the helm. But it was an impossible dream, wasn't it?

He followed Walter and, to his surprise, they set off away from the hotel and around the further point of the lake.

They walked past the Boathouse Café where Walter told him of the success during the past summer. Noah was impressed by the set-up but more interested in the wood cladding and majestic rise of the building over the water.

'Did Ben work on it?' he couldn't stop himself from asking. What a marvellous summer that would have been, working on such a project by the water.

To his surprise, Walter shook his head. 'He lends a hand, of course. And he's all right with a hammer but it's not quite in his bones as much as the layout and structure of a place. Shame but I've come to appreciate his other talents.'

'Such as?' prompted Noah, wondering what his cousin's adult life had been like.

'He had a successful architect firm in London,' Walter told him, a proud note creeping into his voice. 'Gave up the whole shebang when we lost Tony and came back here. I'm so proud of him for that. My grandson put his very heart into Maple Tree Lodge and now look at it. It was in a pretty poor state over a year ago and now it's going to be standing for another hundred years at least.'

They stopped on a bridge to look across the length of the lake back at the hotel. From a distance, Noah couldn't help but admire the shape and build of the place.

It was a beautiful building. No wonder Ben had rushed back there to take over the running of the hotel.

Noah hadn't inherited anything from his dad. His father had spent every penny he had ever earned and the remaining personal items had been taken by his current girlfriend who had then disappeared shortly after his death. But that was just fine. Noah didn't want or need anything from his dad and knew that he had nothing of sentimental value anyway. But still, he missed the sense that his dad was out there somewhere, laughing that hearty laugh of his over a beer in a pub somewhere. He had told himself that he didn't care. But he did.

‘That veranda looks new,’ he said, commenting on the glass balcony that ran the width of the hotel.

‘It is,’ said Walter. ‘Ben had a bit of a battle with me on that one. I wanted things to remain the same but of course they can’t. Life has to move on, doesn’t it? And I have to confess that it looks pretty nice too.’ He looked at Noah. ‘Don’t tell him that he was right, though,’ he added with a chuckle.

‘Your secret’s safe with me,’ Noah told him.

They moved on along the stony path with Noah appreciating the autumnal beauty that surrounded him. It was peaceful there, he thought, with just the birdsong and the breeze rustling the leaves on the many trees. Across the water, ripples spread out as the wind swept across the body of water as well.

‘Talk of a bad storm coming in this week,’ said Walter, zipping up his coat a little bit higher. ‘Don’t need another power cut. Not when the hotel is just starting to get back on its feet. But we’ve got one eye on the future as well.’ He stopped to look at a clearing. ‘This was Ben’s idea as well and I reckon it could be a winner.’

Noah looked at the empty ground, which appeared to have been recently cleared of trees, if the large pile of newly sawn logs nearby was anything to go by.

‘What are you planning to put here?’ he asked, as they moved on and he could see three further clearings in the near distance.

‘You’ll see,’ said Walter, with a mysterious smile.

Finally, as the path turned a corner, Noah stopped to look at the wooden structure in front of him.

It was the open frame of a small, single-floor dwelling from the looks of it, made out of large lengths of oak. On top of the rectangle shape were some pointed roof struts.

‘They’re going to be our brand-new lodges,’ Walter told him. ‘We want to build four of them over here.’

‘I can only see three,’ said Noah, looking around.

‘One of them is more private, up and over there,’ replied Walter, pointing into the distance.

He brought out his phone and scrolled through the photos before holding out his mobile for Noah to take from him.

There were pictures of the architect's drawings but more interestingly as far as Noah was concerned were the coloured mock-ups of how the lodges would look when they were finally finished. With their logs making up the sides, they replicated the style and feel of the main hotel building.

'They'll look great,' he had to concede. 'They fit in well with the landscape.'

Walter nodded. 'That's the idea,' he replied. 'How did Lily say it?' He tapped in chin in thought. 'Some folks like a bit of privacy and they'll pay extra for the privilege, I think she said. They can still have their meals over in the hotel, and there's the bar there as well. But when they want some real privacy and peace, this is the place.'

Noah walked forward, heading in through the gap in between two posts and stepping inside the open structure.

'Plumbing's already been put in so that's a start,' said Walter, pointing to the pipes leading up from the floor in one corner. 'That was pretty expensive, by all accounts. Anyway, there'll be a small bathroom, bed, living area and a tiny kitchen too.'

Noah spun around to look down the small incline towards the lake. 'The view's amazing,' he said.

'We're going to put up a small veranda here with a couple of seats so people can enjoy the view, day or night,' Walter told him.

Noah wondered what it would be like to wake up every day with a view like that. For the peace and quiet which he certainly hadn't been experiencing in the caravan which had been next to a busy road.

'Who's doing the building work?' he asked.

'Me and Ben,' Walter told him with a grin. 'As well as Alex. Although they both work under my tutelage,' he said, laughing.

'I'm sure it'll be a real money spinner,' said Noah.

Walter's laughter faded a little. 'Let's hope so. Things are still pretty tight around here, even with all the recent renovations. After all, there's a lot of us to support here these days.'

Noah realised for the first time the responsibility that Ben must be under. Hospitality was a tough business, especially in the modern climate. In that respect, businesses had to keep moving forward. The lodges were an inspired idea and he was tempted to ask how much it would be to rent one for the weekend in the future.

It was strange that the hotel wasn't doing as well as he'd thought. Now that it was Sunday afternoon, perhaps all the weekenders were leaving and the place quietened down during the working week.

'Don't know much about the hotel industry,' he said.

'Neither did my son,' said Walter. 'Put himself under too much pressure but some folks just aren't the business type. Take your dad, for example. What did he end up doing for a job in any case? Last I heard he was running a bookies.'

Noah shook his head. 'The last place Dad needed to be was in a gambling environment,' he replied, with a grimace. 'Dad never really settled at any job.' Or any relationship either, he added to himself.

Walter nodded thoughtfully. 'That wild streak in him, I guess. Never known anyone as restless as him when he was growing up.'

'Except me, perhaps,' said Noah.

To his surprise though, Walter shook his head. 'That wasn't messing around though, was it? That was survival, I reckon.'

Noah gave a start at the old man's perception.

Survival was true, he thought. As soon as he had been old enough to take care of himself, he had done so. Because nobody else was going to step forward to do it anyway. Sometimes he had had to support his dad as well. But by the time he was sixteen, the sheen had worn off his dad's endless roundabout of girlfriends and businesses, neither the relationships nor the money lasted for any length of time. It was then that he had left his dad behind and escaped to the seaside.

Contact had always been intermittent but he normally heard from his dad every six months or so. Then he had received a sudden phone call out of the blue when his dad had become terminally ill. He had needed his son's help one last time, to be with him at the end. And Noah had done so willingly. He had felt a mug for doing so but like Walter said, it was a blood thing. Family. You had to do right by them because in the end you had to live with yourself later. His dad might have been deeply flawed but at his funeral, Noah had found himself thinking that he had no regrets regarding his own behaviour. He had been a good son. At least, that was what he was hoping had happened. And there was nobody to judge him now, in any case.

'Listen, I know you're planning on leaving today but at least stay for dinner tonight,' he heard Walter say.

It was more of a command than an offer, thought Noah. In his hesitation to reply, Walter spoke on.

‘It’s roast lamb, my favourite, and Faye does the best Yorkshire puddings.’ He gave Noah a small smile. ‘One more day spent with your family. What more scary a thing have you faced than this?’

Noah laughed at his uncle’s piercing perception, however uncomfortable the thought of a cosy family dinner made him feel. ‘Okay. You win. I’ll head off in the morning though.’

‘If you want.’

Noah glanced around the empty shell of the lodge once more. ‘I wouldn’t mind spending a weekend here myself when they’re done,’ he found himself saying, glancing once more at the view.

Walter looked at him. ‘You’re welcome any time,’ he replied. ‘And you’re family so it would be free.’

‘Thanks.’

Noah knew that he would never take him up on the offer, no matter how tempting.

He had always envied the Jackson family their closeness but family wasn’t for him. The past had proved that.

8

Despite it being an unplanned visit, Beth had enjoyed her day at Maple Tree Lodge, as always, and found herself reluctant to head back to London that evening.

'Why don't you stay here for a few more days?' Hannah told her. 'Don't go back to that grotty flat yet.'

Now that her waitressing job had finished, Beth realised that with her relationship with Jeremy at an end as well, she really was at a bit of a loose end. And Maple Tree Lodge was comfortable and cosy compared to the mould-riddled tiny flat she had been renting. So she accepted Hannah's invite to stay and, in lieu of thanks, Beth gave her a hand in the Boathouse Café, pleased to see how busy it was, especially on a Sunday. The place had become a place for local villagers to meet and so Beth was quickly enlisted to help out serving delicious lunches, pastries and drinks.

By the time dinner time came, and the café was finally closed for the evening, Beth headed back to the kitchen, grateful for the chance to sit down.

Despite her being under the impression that he had been due to leave that day, Noah had also stayed on for another night. Perhaps, wondered Beth, it was to do with what appeared to be a boat he had inherited.

Faye's roast dinner was as delicious as always, despite Noah being an awkward dinner companion. She wondered why he had bothered to stay, given his obvious reluctance to even talk to the family. He had answered any questions from the family in short answers, not giving too much away

about himself, she noticed. She tried to give him the benefit of the doubt but it was hard when he was making it so difficult for anyone to hold a conversation with him.

She thought back to the conversation with Dotty and Faye over breakfast. He'd obviously had a tough time early on in life but then again, who hadn't?

After a somewhat stilted family dinner, Beth wandered away whilst the family all began their evening chores around the hotel. She was reminded that it was Sunday night. Normally she would be waitressing at the restaurant, but that had just been shut down. Having not heard from Jeremy either, she was now having to face a future without any income. She needed to find a job and fast. But what? And where?

She had always stayed in London, near to the Royal Observatory, desperate to pick up any volunteering work. Also, there were enough places where she could waitress and yet she felt ready for a change. She was thirty-two now. When was her life going to begin?

As always whenever she felt low, she was drawn to the skies outside. It was her comfort blanket, much like the family inside the hotel. But the stars were her constant, even when she was away from her friends and the Jackson family.

She wandered through the lounge, empty now that the weekend guests had headed home. The roaring fire looked cosy and inviting but she shook her head, her need to see the stars too great. Later, she told herself. Besides, what use was a romantic, crackling fire with nobody to enjoy it with?

She thought briefly of Jeremy, sighing to herself. She missed him. Or did she, she wondered. He wasn't a particularly relaxing person to be around. Perhaps she just missed the idea of him. The idea of being somebody's happy ever after. Somebody's someone special. Something she wasn't sure she had ever been.

Deep in thought, she opened up the glass door to the veranda outside. Closing it behind her, she took a deep breath of the crisp, cold air. The nights were cooler now and she was glad she had slipped on her coat before heading outside.

The wind was picking up, she realised. The threat of a storm the following day was in the weather forecast but at least the skies were clear for now, any clouds blown away in the breeze.

She was about to look up at the stars when she had the sudden feeling she wasn't alone. Turning her head, she found Noah in the semi-darkness, leaning on the glass balustrade. He had been looking out at the lake, lit from the full moon above and its reflection glittering on the water ahead of them.

'Sorry,' she found herself saying. 'I didn't realise anyone was out here.'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'Free country,' he said, turning his head to look at her. 'More than enough room for both of us.'

She felt relieved that she hadn't interrupted some deep moment for him. Trying to give him the benefit of the doubt regarding his awkwardness at dinner, she wondered if he had perhaps felt overwhelmed by the Jackson family, who were a close-knit group when they were all together. She felt like that sometimes but only in a good way.

'Isn't it the most perfect night?' she said, turning to look up at the vast expanse of sky. Although some ambient light was drifting out from the hotel, it still didn't obscure the magnificent vista around them.

'It's a great view,' conceded Noah.

'Oh, well, yes, of course, Dragonfly Lake is so pretty, but I meant for stargazing,' Beth told him. 'You can join me if you'd like?'

The words were out of her mouth before she could stop herself. It was always the same way with her. She spoke too quickly, always anxious to offload whatever was on her mind and get it out into the open as soon as she could.

She cursed herself before bracing herself for Noah's inevitable sarcasm. Why on earth would he want to join her stargazing?

She steeled herself and peeped a look at him. But instead of looking derisive, he was merely staring at her with a blank expression.

'Don't I need a telescope for stargazing?' he asked.

She briskly shook her head. 'Not at all. Especially if you're a complete beginner which I'm assuming you are?' She didn't give him time to answer the question and carried on. 'I mean, if you immediately looked into a telescope on your first time, it would be like being a learner driver getting into a Formula One car. How would you know where to point it, even if you could set it up properly?'

'The car or the telescope?' he asked, the edges of his eyes crinkling up into a small smile.

'The telescope,' she muttered. 'Anyway, if it's your first time stargazing you should do what I do and KISS.'

His eyebrows shot up at her last word.

‘Not that kind,’ she told him, blushing and cursing her description. ‘Keep it simple, stupid. That’s what the KISS acronym means.’

‘I see.’

But now that the word kiss had been put out there, it hovered between them, the atmosphere heavy and laden with promise.

She cleared her throat, which was suddenly thick. ‘So if you want your first lesson, just look up.’

She realised she was being terribly bossy but was somewhat grateful to see him do as she had ordered.

‘There, you’re doing astronomy,’ she told him, with a smug smile.

He turned back to look at her briefly before staring back at the vast inky sky above them.

‘You just need to take your time,’ she said. ‘Really look at the stars. Keep looking at them and not anywhere else. We’ll give it a quarter of an hour or so and then carry on.’

So they stood there in the darkness, a hoot of an owl nearby. But apart from that, all was quiet except for the sound of the breeze. It wasn’t an awkward silence though, she thought. Just comfortable. Her eyes roamed the skies continuously, like old friends coming out to greet her.

After some length of time, Noah finally spoke.

‘Has the sky changed?’ he asked, without taking his eyes away from the sky. ‘I’m seeing different stars to the ones I saw at first.’

‘Nope,’ she replied. ‘Your eyes have adapted to the darkness so they can see more stars and their varying degrees of brightness. Keep looking. You should now be able to see how some of the stars are different colours. Do some appear yellow, orange or even red?’

He nodded. ‘Why are there different-coloured ones?’ he asked.

‘Because you’re looking at enormous balls of hot gas which are millions of miles away,’ she told him. ‘Some stars are quite cold, some burn really hot. Our own sun is a pretty large star but it’s about average in terms of size and heat. Anyway, the different colours are an indication of how hot a star is.’

‘So the redder ones are hotter than the others?’

‘Actually no, but that’s a common misconception.’ She shook her head. ‘Think about a flame. Maybe you’ve used a Bunsen burner? You know when the metal heats up, it goes from orange to red and then white to a

blue-white flame. So the red stars are actually way cooler than the blue. For example, they have a surface temperature of only a few thousand degrees Centigrade. Blue stars are ten thousand degrees or even higher.'

She abruptly stopped. What on earth was she thinking? 'I must be boring you,' she muttered. 'I'll shut up now.'

Finally he looked away from the sky and stared at her. 'Why would you think that?' he asked.

She looked away, a little embarrassed. 'I've been told that I ramble on for too long about all of this,' she said, waving her hand around in the air as she continued to stare down at her feet.

'Astronomy is your job from what I've been told,' she heard him say. 'And your passion, from the sounds of it.'

She gulped. It was true. She adored the stars but Jeremy had often reminded her, whenever she began to talk about it, that it didn't make for very scintillating conversation. Of course, it didn't help that his own expertise was far and above her own.

Finally, she raised her eyes to meet his.

'Yeah but not everyone is interested in the same things that I am,' she told him.

He studied her briefly before finally replying. 'Well, I found it interesting if that helps.'

She was grateful that he hadn't mocked her but was still a little embarrassed so carried on to say, 'Well, it's getting cold out here, isn't it? I think I'll head back inside.'

'I'll come too,' he replied and she was left wondering whether she had been boring him after all, and sincerely hoped not.

9

Noah had never met anyone like Beth before, he thought as he followed her inside from the chilly veranda. She continued to amaze him, not just with her chatty friendliness but now he could add an expert knowledge of astronomy to her many skills.

She didn't appear to have much self-esteem though, he considered, remembering how she had apologised for what she had assumed was boring. But he had always loved looking up at the stars; having often worked next to the sea he was used to endless dark skies at night so everything she had told him had been very interesting. She was, and he could think of no other word, fascinating. Whoever the man was that had broken her heart, he could think of no greater fool.

Still, he thought with a shiver, it had been a little cold out there. He had been anxious to seek some solitude after dinner but had forgotten to take his coat in his haste to get outside. The family had been very welcoming towards him but he just wasn't used to the attention of so many people and it made him uncomfortable.

From the peace and serenity of the outside world, as soon as they stepped in through the glass doors, Noah was immediately enveloped in a wall of cosy warmth and lively conversation.

'There you are, Noah!' called out Dotty, who was sitting on the sofa facing him. She appeared to be surrounded by a number of photo albums on the coffee table. 'I've just got these out. Come and have a look at our very own rogues' gallery!'

Noah smiled politely, although the last thing he wanted to do was sit amongst the group who had gathered around his aunt. His eyes flicked briefly to the door through which was the entrance hall and the stairs up and away from the family. He craved the privacy of the bedroom and yet he couldn't say no to Dotty who had been so kind to him so far.

So he took a deep breath and sat down on the vacant seat next to her on the sofa. Being around family was a new concept to him. Being around people was a new kind of feeling for him. But he couldn't deny the homeliness of the place, with the crackle of the large fireplace nearby and Tiny the dog sprawled on the rug nearby.

'There you go,' said Dotty, plonking an album down on his lap already open. 'What do you think about those little angels?'

Laughing, she pointed at the photograph in the top right-hand corner.

Noah gazed down and saw a picture of three small children, playing in some sand.

'Oh, my goodness!' said Hannah, who was sitting on the other side of Dotty and leant across to take a better look. 'Is that us? Me, Ben and Noah?'

'Look how cute your bunches are, Hannah,' said Lily, who was standing at the back of the sofa.

Hannah tugged at her long hair a little self-consciously.

'Very cute,' said Alex, reaching out to squeeze her shoulders.

Noah was quickly reminded how little self-confidence Hannah had in herself and felt glad that her boyfriend was obviously supportive of her shyness.

'Look at Ben!' carried on Lily, laughing. She looked across at the other sofa where Ben was sitting next to Walter. 'You have knobbly knees!'

'I do not!' said Ben, with a small smile. 'You can check later, if you like.'

'You all used to love playing on the beach out there,' said Faye who was sitting on the opposite sofa next to Ben. 'Do you remember, Dotty? We always had to dig out the buckets and spades whenever Noah came to visit with his dad.'

Noah looked down at the photograph once more, trying to remember the feeling that he had been as happy as he looked in the faded picture. But he couldn't recall any time spent playing on the sand by the lake at all. He frowned. Then again, he didn't have any photographs from his youth. His

dad had never been one to take any pictures and so all he had were his own faded memories.

'You were probably a bit too young to remember,' said Dotty, who had been studying his reaction and quickly turned the page. 'What about this?'

He looked at the next photograph and saw himself older, probably around the age of ten. He was at a bench, holding a chisel, bent over a piece of wood.

'You're a master craftsman, like your uncle over there,' said Dotty, smiling at her husband.

Walter was nodding in reply. 'And we both get that from your great-great-grandfather.'

Noah looked at him with a start. 'We do?'

He'd never thought about where he had inherited his talent from before then.

'He taught me how to work with the correct tools,' Walter told him. 'And I was glad to pass on my knowledge to you and Ben.'

Ben made a face. 'I've got the gear but no idea compared to your skills though, Grandad.'

Walter shook his head. 'Your work is just fine,' he replied. 'And there's only one rule, as you well know.'

'The only difference between something good and something great is attention to detail,' Ben told him.

Noah drew in a sharp breath. It was a phrase that he had repeated to himself so many times in his life and yet he had never known or remembered where the advice had come from. It turned out that he had been following Walter's guidance all these years without even realising it.

'I thought the rule around here was if you combine wine and dinner, you get winner,' said Frankie, with a grin.

Faye shook her head with a smile at her best friend.

Dotty picked up a nearby photo album which looked far older than the others on the coffee table.

She flicked through the pages until she stopped. 'That there is your great-great-grandfather,' she told him. 'Henry Jackson.'

Noah looked at the black and white photograph of a man standing next to what appeared to be Dragonfly Lake. He was a more slender build than Walter and yet there was definitely some resemblance there.

‘Is that Maple Tree Lodge?’ asked Hannah, pointing at the small wooden log structure behind the man in the photograph.

‘Yes,’ said Dotty, nodding.

‘The original one?’ asked Noah, looking up and around inside the far larger building he was sitting in.

‘Henry Jackson bought this land, including the lake, in 1918,’ Walter told him. ‘He built the lodge for his wife and two sons. Each generation since, all five of them, has added a little more and more until it became the size of the place it is now.’

‘Which part is the original building?’ Noah couldn’t help but ask.

‘The kitchen,’ Walter told him. ‘That was the one large room that they all lived in those early days.’

‘Which is why it’s still my favourite room,’ said Dotty, with a soft smile.

‘It’s always been the heart of this place,’ added Frankie.

‘Now it’s got twenty guest bedrooms with en suites, as well as the family quarters,’ added Ben. He smiled at his grandad. ‘We’ve done all right, haven’t we?’

‘Aye,’ replied Walter, nodding. ‘And now your lodges will add the next bit of history to our land. Henry Jackson would approve.’

Our land. History. Noah stayed silent as he felt apart from the rest of the family. There was a heritage there at the lodge, something he knew nothing about.

It would continue on after he left, safe in Ben and Hannah’s hands, but once more he had the feeling that whilst he shared a surname with the Jacksons, perhaps that was all it would ever be. But perhaps that was for the best. After all, he knew better than to let anyone in too close.

His childhood had proved that closeness only led to hurt. It was best to leave as soon as he could, wasn’t it?

10

Sleeping in a bed rather than on the sofa, Beth had a much better night's sleep and even slept in until mid-morning. With Noah using the empty room in the family quarters, Lily had given her one of the hotel guest bedrooms to use, now that so many were empty. It was the end of the weekend but also the storm warnings had put off quite a few customers. As she lay in bed, Beth could hear the rain and wind lashing against the window.

Monday morning. It was time to start looking for a new job. In fact, if she had lost the magazine column as well as her waitressing job, she needed two to make ends meet. Although the thought of having to leave Maple Tree Lodge depressed her. It felt like a bubble away from the harsh realities of the outside world.

The outside world which contained cheaters like Jeremy. She sighed to herself. Another broken relationship. She was stacking up quite a few. Perhaps when her life was settled she would ensure that she chose a more suitable partner next time. If there was to even be a next time, she reminded herself. Maybe she really was better off alone, she thought. But even that gave her no comfort. She had always dreamed of a happy ever after, of living a long and happy life with the man of her dreams. She loved romance and love and all the happiness that could bring. But at that moment, it all seemed even further out of reach for her.

After getting dressed in her favourite flared dungarees and a striped pink jumper, she trudged downstairs, dreading the moment when she would

have to leave later on. However, her depressed mood came to an abrupt halt when she discovered not only Lily and Hannah in the kitchen waiting for her, but Ella as well.

'What are you doing here?' shrieked Beth, rushing over to give Ella a hug.

'Got the first train out of Manchester this morning,' Ella told her, squeezing her tight before stepping back. 'I called in a sickie. I'm due a few days off. I've worked the past three weekends and was desperate to see you all.'

Where Beth's career had never really taken off, Ella's skills with marketing had been truly successful. So much so that she had recently become an account manager for a large social media firm. If that didn't give her enough to do, Ella was now also an influencer in her limited spare time. Her lifestyle blog, where she not only curated beautiful looks but also shared invaluable advice on marketing, was becoming successful in its own right and Ella had plans to take it onto the next level and finally become her own full-time boss.

'Poor you,' said Beth. 'You must be shattered.'

If she was, Ella didn't show it. As always, Ella was immaculately dressed, despite it being a non-work day, in a short grey knitted dress, as well as knee-length brown boots which matched the wide belt which cinched her small waist. With her subtle make-up and perfect hair, Ella was a total contrast to Beth's own vintage style. But as always, Beth was grateful to see one of her favourite people because Ella had a heart of gold.

'I needed to make sure you were okay,' Ella told Beth, giving her a onceover with her eyes. 'And are you?'

Beth sank down onto one of the chairs at the kitchen table. 'Yes and no,' she replied. 'I mean, another relationship is over and all that.' Beth rolled her eyes at herself. 'But I guess, more pressing at this moment in time is the matter of income. I need to move out of that horrible flat but if I've lost my magazine column on top of the restaurant shutting down, I'm going to run out of money fast.'

Ella shook her head before sitting down next to her. 'There is no reason why you should lose your magazine column just because he's a lying cheater. That's wrongful dismissal.'

'Absolutely,' said Hannah, nodding furiously, sitting on the opposite side of the table and surreptitiously breaking up a croissant to feed to Tiny

the dog who was sprawled under the table.

'Why should you get punished instead of him?' asked Lily, heading over to the coffee pot on the counter.

Beth shrugged her shoulders. 'I know,' she said, blowing out a sigh. 'But between the waitressing job finishing and my tenancy coming to an end, I need to sort my life out. It's all such a mess.'

'Okay,' said Ella, with a forceful nod. 'Don't bundle it all up together. The four of us can work it out. Right? First of all, where are you going to live?'

'And does it have to be another awful room in the middle of London?' asked Lily, screwing up her face in distaste as she handed Beth a mug of steaming hot coffee. 'Because we've seen where you've been living and I normally feel I have to bathe in sanitiser afterwards.'

Ella shuddered. 'Agreed.'

'My budget isn't exactly going to afford me the Ritz,' Beth reminded them.

'Who needs the Ritz?' asked Hannah. 'Anyway, talking of hotels, why don't you just stay here?'

Beth looked at her generous friend. 'Because I can't afford your room rate,' she told her. 'However tempting.'

Hannah shook her head. 'I'm not talking about as a hotel guest. I'm talking about you staying in the spare bedroom in the family quarters. After all, you're family.'

'That's a brilliant idea,' said Lily, nodding.

For a brief, glorious moment, Beth was tempted. To live at Maple Tree Lodge was a dream come true. But it wasn't a practical solution, however wonderful it sounded.

'I can't,' she told them.

Hannah's face dropped. 'Why not?' she asked. 'The room would be free.'

'Exactly.' Beth looked at her friend's kind face. 'It's not right. I can't just stay here indefinitely like some kind of freeloader.'

'Who said you'd be freeloading?' said Lily, laughing. 'We always need help around here with cleaning and tidying up the rooms.'

'And you can give me a hand in the Boathouse Café,' added Hannah.

'So you'd be paying for your keep in kind,' said Ella, with a nod. 'Right, that's bed and board sorted and you're staying here for the

foreseeable future until you're back on your feet again.'

'Now wait a minute,' began Beth, shaking her head. 'I haven't agreed that I'm going to stay here next.'

'Don't you want to stay here with us?' asked Hannah. 'Tiny still has real abandonment issues if you're thinking of leaving any time soon.'

The bump underneath the kitchen table as the enormous dog, hearing his name, stood up and hit his head made everyone smile, including Beth.

'You know the answer to that already,' replied Beth, reaching out to stroke Tiny's head as he appeared from under the table. 'But it still feels like I'm getting nowhere with my life.'

Lily held up her hand to quieten her. 'Life happens. Coffee helps,' she added, reaching out to pick up her mug of coffee. 'Now, let's get our hive mind on and work out what you can do for a job next.'

Ella nodded in agreement. 'One hundred per cent agree,' she said. 'You need to take control like I'm doing. As soon as I've reached 250,000 followers I'm branching out on my own and leaving my job because that's the next step in my plan.'

'And what is your plan?' asked Lily.

'World domination,' replied Ella, with a grin. 'I'm going to make it a beautiful, stylish place and ban Crocs forever.'

'I love my Crocs,' said Hannah.

Ella frowned at her. 'For the sake of our friendship, I'm going to forget you ever said that,' she told her, before turning to look at Beth. 'Right. It's time to earn a living from that big brain of yours.'

Beth sighed. 'I've tried, honestly I have, but nobody wants me or my PhD,' she said.

'Then they must be mad,' said Hannah, reaching out across the table to squeeze Beth's hand.

'I agree,' said Lily, before turning her head. 'Hang on. I think there's someone at reception. I'll be right back.'

As Lily left the kitchen, Beth leant down to stroke Tiny's fur as he slumped against her feet. However, she slowly became aware that Ella was scrutinising her in a measured way.

'What?' she asked. 'Have I got something on my face?'

Ella shook her head. 'No, I was just thinking how we can market you,' she replied. 'It's my job so let me run with this for a little while. You're

young, bright and when you're not dressed in those awful dungarees, you're smoking hot too.'

'They're vintage Levi's,' protested Beth.

Ella shuddered. 'You're not going to make me love them so let it go,' she said. 'We need a way to show people how bright you are so you can reveal that scary amount of knowledge you've got going on all the time.'

'Well, I tried that with my blog,' began Beth but she didn't get to finish.

'That's it!' declared Ella, her eyes gleaming. 'I forgot about your blog. What's it called again?'

'Starry Skies,' replied Beth, bringing out her phone to bring up the blog.

'Hmm, let's remake that into Beth's Starry Skies so that you're the focus,' said Ella, tapping her chin in thought. 'How many followers have you got?'

Beth grimaced. 'About twenty and I think four of those are my best friends,' she told her.

'Okay.' Ella nodded. 'Well, I can work on the algorithms so that you start to gain some traction out there.'

'That sounds great.' Beth nodded thoughtfully. 'I mean, it would be my dream to make a living from using my knowledge.'

'Show me what it looks like,' said Ella.

Beth handed over her mobile and Ella's excited face dropped a little.

'Okay, well, this isn't going to work,' she said. 'It needs to be dreamy and romantic, like you. It's pretty dull to look at. Where are the visuals? Those sparkly stars in the sky and all that.'

'I haven't really got any,' Beth told her. 'I just look at the stars, not take photos of them.'

'You know who could do that for you?' said Hannah, with a grin. 'Grandma.'

'That's a great idea,' replied Ella. 'Dotty takes amazing photos.'

Hannah's grandmother had been a photographer in her youth and continued to take landscape photographs of Maple Tree Lodge and its grounds which decorated the walls of the hotel.

'We'll get Grandma on the case,' said Hannah, clapping and causing Tiny's tail to thump on the floorboards at the excited voices.

'And once the blog looks good then your followers will come, I promise,' added Ella.

‘But I still don’t understand how I’m going to make a living from that,’ confessed Beth.

Ella rolled her eyes. ‘The trouble with keeping your eyes on the skies is that you don’t see all the potential here on planet Earth,’ she replied, with a grin. ‘Well, let me break it down for you…’

As Ella began to explain about earning money from a blog, Beth found herself filled with grateful relief to have such wonderful best friends. They were her life, her comfort blanket, her family and she loved them.

Unfortunately, her good mood didn’t last very long when Lily came into the kitchen frowning.

‘There’s a visitor for you at reception,’ she said, looking at Beth.

Beth was stunned. ‘For me? Here?’ she asked. ‘Who is it?’

Lily grimaced. ‘It’s Jeremy.’

11

Having slept in late, Noah stared out of the window from his bedroom across Dragonfly Lake, barely visible through the heavy rain.

He would miss the view when he left later, he had to concede. And perhaps the luxury of proper walls rather than the plastic ones on the caravan that were so noisy every time it rained. As well as the leaks and the condensation on a chilly morning.

Instead, solid and sturdy Maple Tree Lodge was holding fast against the wind and rain that was lashing the window at the moment. The predicted storm had arrived with a vengeance.

Perhaps it was a sign that it was time for him to leave. He turned to look at the room once more before picking up his rucksack and his phone which was on charge.

He had spent the previous day studying and researching the boat that he had inherited. It was a beauty, a classic 1930s powerboat 10 metres long with a small inside cabin that could double up as a bed for the night. Although completely unseaworthy at the moment, once it was fully restored with new, sleek mahogany, the boat would be elegant once more.

He had spent hours in bed the previous evening working out what he would need to repair it. It would take many hours of work. Did he have that time? Yes, if he cancelled his next project which was also going to be in Brighton. Did he have the space to work? Only if he hired himself his own boat dry dock somewhere. It was a conundrum but he was sorely tempted to take the winter off and work for himself, for once. No last-minute demands

from clients. He would be the client this time. He had some money put aside which would see him through the renovations if he didn't have any other income. He had always dreamt of security but he would never earn enough to buy any property and so the savings had remained in the bank for now.

He kept wondering and thinking over what came next for him. He had always been moving on but the decisions had normally been taken out of his hands. A contract would come through and he would move on to the next town, the next project. But he was tired of renting. He found himself longing for a bolt-hole of his own. Would he ever find somewhere to call home? Perhaps nowhere would ever feel like that.

He wondered if, perhaps, it was an age thing. He had been running and moving around for so long, for so many years, that perhaps at the age of thirty-four he was finally ready to settle down. Although he had no idea where and what that would be like.

He gave a longing look at the luxurious bed. Wherever he ended up, he would be buying something as comfortable as this. Although the oak four-poster wasn't quite his style, he loved the wood and artistry with which it had been made, he thought, reaching out to stroke the corner post of the bed. Walter had made this, of that he was sure. It touched him deep inside that they had that connection with the love of woodcraft.

Maple Tree Lodge as a whole was certainly well built. A solid structure, much like the Jackson family themselves. It was only his side of the family that had been made on less firm foundations, it appeared.

Even now as he headed downstairs, he could hear the chatter from the kitchen and, seeing Lily talking to a man at the reception desk, he automatically swerved to head outside instead.

So he went, unable to stop himself from seeing his boat one more time. *His* boat.

He couldn't help but smile to himself, even as he hunkered down under the hood of his winter coat and felt the strong winds whip around him. The storm was here already, not that he worried too much about that kind of thing. He had spent many nights sheltering from coastal storms. He was used to a little bad weather.

He made his way to the barn and went in, grateful to be out of the eye of the storm outside. He unzipped his coat and headed over to throw off the tarpaulin. He stood and stared at the boat for a while. It was resting on a

makeshift dry dock and he remembered the first time he had ever seen a boat sitting out of the water.

When he had arrived in Penzance, he had struggled to find himself any kind of job. A rough-looking teenager wasn't an ideal employment opportunity for most people, especially when he only had a bicycle to his name. After a couple of days of sleeping rough, he had ended up in a boatyard, drawn to the amazing sight of so many boats sitting out of the water waiting to be checked or repaired.

He walked forward, staring up at a boat near the open gates, fascinated that it was out of the water and revealing the most important part of itself, its very heart.

He could still remember the thrill and wonder, trying to work out how the massive hole that the vessel in front of him had could be mended.

He could also remember the shock of hearing the deep male voice behind him. 'What are you doing in here?'

Noah had spun around, instantly knowing that he had been trespassing. 'Nothing,' he said quickly to the middle-aged man who had a weathered face as if he had spent a lifetime on the ocean. 'I was just looking at it.'

The man had looked at him for a long while before asking whether he wanted a hot drink.

Noah had stared at him suspiciously. Nobody offered anything to him without a reason, he had found over his sixteen years. In the end, he nodded and let the man walk into a nearby cabin before he spun around and went to leave.

He had just been heading away when he saw the screwdriver set on a nearby workbench. His steps faltered. His bicycle needed repairing and he hadn't got any more money, having used it all for his coach ticket to Cornwall and some food. The bike was his only form of transport. Surely a couple of tools wouldn't make any difference to anyone, he wondered, despite the guilt deep inside. After all, the man appeared to have loads around, given the size of his workshop cabin nearby. In the end, Noah slipped a couple under his sweatshirt and quickly left before the man returned.

He managed to repair his bicycle later that afternoon. Still not finding any work or a place to sleep, he resigned himself to sleeping once more in one of the bus shelters that he'd seen next to the pier.

But despite the beauty of the evening sun setting over the sea, he couldn't settle. Not with the heavy weight of guilt hanging over him. He had become a thief. He tried to tell himself that he didn't care. That he didn't care what anyone thought of him. But the shame remained with him until he couldn't bear it any longer.

He went back to the boatyard, relieved to find the gates still open despite the late hour. However, his steps faltered when he saw the light on inside the cabin. Hoping he could get away without being noticed, he had just reached the bench next to the boat when a voice spoke.

'If you had asked me instead of stealing them, I would have lent the screwdrivers to you.'

He gulped and looked up at the same man who had offered him a drink earlier. He suddenly felt fearful. What would he do? Hurt him? Call the police? Run him out of town?

Noah hesitated, still feeling guilty about his theft. 'I only borrowed them,' he muttered, bringing them out of his pocket and putting the screwdrivers down on the bench. 'I haven't got any tools of my own.'

'It would have been polite to ask,' said the man, coming over and wiping his hands on a rag as he went.

'Sorry,' muttered Noah, feeling about two foot high. 'I needed to fix my bike.'

The man studied him for a while. 'Well, you can pay me back by lending me a hand. Help me carry this wood, would you?' He nodded at a nearby pile on the back of a trailer.

Noah looked at the man suspiciously. 'Why?' he asked.

'Why not? You're here, aren't you?' Then, to Noah's surprise, the man laughed. 'And because I hurt my shoulder kayaking yesterday, okay?' he carried on.

So Noah did as he was asked and carried the planks of wood across to the boat.

'Do you know what type of wood this is?' asked the man as he went back and forth.

Noah shook his head.

'It's larch,' he replied. 'Look, I'll show you how flexible it is. Best thing for boats.'

Noah followed the man into his workshop and lost track of time as the man chatted away about boat craft. He hadn't even realised that it had

become completely dark outside, apart from the large work lights that the man had switched on to see.

‘You got somewhere to sleep tonight?’ asked the man, whose name was Michael.

Noah shrugged his shoulders. He didn’t care about sleeping outside. The sound of the ocean and the salty air made him feel fresher, somehow. It was certainly preferable to the hot and sweaty city where he had been living.

‘Look, now that I’ve busted my shoulder, I’m going to need a hand over the next few days if you fancy helping me out,’ said Michael. ‘I’ll pay you.’

‘Why?’ asked Noah, still suspicious. Nothing had ever come easily to him without a hidden clause.

‘Listen, I reckon everybody needs a break once in a while,’ Michael told him.

For a brief moment, Noah had had to blink back the tears. The one thing he had never been given ever in his life had been a break. Thankfully he managed to suppress the turmoil inside, something he had got very good at during his childhood.

‘Why me?’ croaked Noah, the emotion still bubbling in his throat.

‘Why not?’ asked Michael, with a sad smile.

And that was how his love of boatmaking had begun. Over the next few days, Michael had begun to teach him the craft.

By the end of the week, Michael had drawn him to one side. ‘You’re a natural,’ he said, nodding his approval. ‘Never seen anyone with that amount of skill at your age.’

Noah had beamed with pride about himself, an entirely new emotion up until that point in his life.

It turned out that Michael’s apprentice had just left and he had been wanting more help around the boatyard. So it became a permanent arrangement. Now that he was finally earning money, Noah found himself some cheap lodgings and had stayed there for five years until Michael retired. He had pushed back against getting any academic qualifications. School had never been his favourite place. But he was lucky that his skills came so easily to him and after a couple of years, he could even teach Michael a thing or two with each new project.

By the time that Michael was ready to retire, Noah had become so good at his craft that Michael had offered to sell him the boatyard. But Noah had

resisted. It was time to move on, he thought, still not wanting to get too close to anyone.

They shook hands that final day and Noah was able to say thank you. It was too small a phrase for what Michael had given him. A trade. A craft. A future.

‘Get yourself a boat of your own one day,’ Michael had once told him. ‘It’s freedom.’

At the time and over the years since, Noah had dismissed the thought but now he was sorely tempted as he stood in the barn and looked up at his inheritance once more.

He brought out his phone and took yet more photos of the boat. Something to carry with him and also to remind him what he was leaving behind. The boat was in no shape to be towed at that moment. It would have to remain at Maple Tree Lodge for a while longer.

Hopefully it was only a brief farewell, thought Noah. He would be back, he promised himself before he locked up the barn. He just had no idea when or how.

12

Beth stared up at Lily in shock before leaping up from the kitchen table. ‘Jeremy’s here?’ she gasped. ‘At Maple Tree Lodge?’

Lily sighed. ‘Dr Jeremy Prescott was how he announced himself to me a few moments ago.’

Ella crossed her arms and scowled. She was up to date with all of Jeremy’s philandering ways and once scorned, Ella’s good nature was lost forever. ‘Tiny,’ she said, looking across at the very large dog who had stood up to stretch. ‘Bite.’

‘He won’t bite,’ said Hannah, reaching out to stroke Tiny’s huge but extremely soft head. ‘I mean, if you want to hurt Jeremy we could always make Tiny sit on him.’

Lily nodded. ‘Honestly, he’s quite a weight now. With at least 50kg sitting on you, expelling the air from your lungs, I reckon it could do some damage.’

‘If not, I know of plenty of other ways that we could harm him,’ said Ella, her eyes glittering.

‘You know you’re quite scary sometimes,’ Hannah told her.

Beth took a deep breath and tried to calm down her racing pulse. ‘It’s fine,’ she announced. ‘I’ve got this. I can deal with him.’

She couldn’t believe that Jeremy was actually there and could feel everyone’s gaze on her as she left. She didn’t want to see him, she realised. It was too soon after he had broken her trust and her heart.

In actual fact, she had begun to wonder whether she had really missed him these past twenty-four hours. Or was it just the idea of him that she had missed? Had she tried to make him into something that he wasn't? Was he as awful as her friends kept reminding her? She still wasn't sure. Even so, she took her hair out of her bunches and smoothed it out before she left the kitchen, wishing she was wearing her miniskirt and not her dungarees.

She went out into the reception and there he was. Her ex-boyfriend. Her cheating ex-boyfriend.

Jeremy's blond hair was damp from the rain outside, causing it to stick against his forehead in a not particularly flattering way. He was wearing a tweed jacket, shirt and smart trousers, along with brogue loafers. It all looked in stark contrast to everyone else's more casual dress. Not that he seemed to care. He appeared to be all effortless charm and ease that morning.

'Sweetheart,' he said, with his wide generous smile, and he opened his arms to greet her. 'How lovely to see you.'

As a couple of guests came out of the dining room, and not wanting to make a scene, she felt she could only stand there and accept the kiss that he gave her on her cheek. 'You're looking as gorgeous as always.'

'Hi,' she stammered, wondering what on earth this could be about.

'Good morning,' said the elderly couple as they headed across the hall towards the entrance to leave.

'Good morning,' replied Jeremy, looking totally at ease and not at all like the panicked man she had left behind only two days previously.

'Come with me,' said Beth quietly, taking his elbow and walking towards the lounge.

Finding a couple of guests already in there, putting on their coats and also getting ready to depart, she smiled and nodded her greeting and carried on towards the snug, which was thankfully empty at that time of the morning. Outside the window, the rain swept across the glass as the storm outside grew more intense. Beth's stomach felt equally squally at that moment.

She led Jeremy to the far side of the room, well out of earshot of any hotel guests, and immediately spun around to face him.

'What are you doing here?' she hissed, still keeping her voice low. 'And how did you find me?'

‘You’ve talked about this place often enough,’ he replied, maddeningly calm and seemingly in control of the conversation. ‘Thought it was time to check it out for myself.’

‘You shouldn’t be here,’ she told him.

‘It’s a hotel,’ he replied, laughing. ‘I was hoping you’d be here and I was due some leave. Shall I book a room for us?’

‘I have a room already and there is no us,’ she snapped. ‘Do you not remember our conversation on Saturday night?’

‘You mean that ridiculous speech of yours about how I was cheating on you?’ he asked. ‘I put it down to hormones, to be honest.’

Beth had to physically stop herself from growling at him. ‘It wasn’t hormones,’ she told him through clenched teeth. ‘I know what I heard.’

He laughed again. ‘Darling,’ he carried on, drawing her into his arms. ‘How could I possibly cheat on you? You’re utterly adorable.’ He gave her a tap on the nose with his finger, smiling down at her.

‘I heard you,’ she told him, rigid in his arms. ‘Talking to another woman.’

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‘An innocent mix-up,’ he said smoothly. ‘Something we shall laugh about in time, I’m sure. You left so quickly that I didn’t have a chance to defend myself and show you just how innocent I am. You really must control that quick temper of yours. You know, that may be part of the reason why your career has never flourished, I’m sorry to say.’

Beth took a sharp intake of breath. It was a sore point with her that despite all of her studying and hard work, she had never had a full-time job in astronomy. She felt she had so much to give and yet nobody appeared to want what she was offering.

Jeremy hadn’t sneered quite so much at the jobs she had needed to take to earn a living, such as administration and barista work, but he had baulked when she had told him about a part-time cleaning job which she had eventually declined.

Feeling a little perturbed, her hand automatically went up to the star pendant she always wore. At the end of their tenancy in the shared house in London, she had given Lily, Hannah and Ella the same pendants. Why? Because they were her personal stars. Her support crew. It was a lovely necklace but more important had been the promise when the gift was given that the four friends would always look out for each other wherever they were in the world.

She felt the pointed edges of the star and drew strength from her friends who she knew were still nearby in the kitchen, ready to support her no matter what.

She straightened up and looked Jeremy square in the eye. ‘I don’t believe you,’ she told him. ‘I know what I heard.’

‘The woman was just an old colleague, a bit pushy between you and me,’ said Jeremy, reaching out to rub Beth’s arm. ‘There’s really nothing for you to worry about. Now, shall we discuss next month’s column?’

Beth temporarily stopped worrying about Jeremy’s other woman and felt a rush of relief. ‘I’m still writing for the magazine?’ she asked.

Jeremy raised a sardonic eyebrow at her. ‘Yes. You know, I had a conversation with Mike, the Associate Editor, this morning and was surprised to learn that your little column is one of the most popular features in our magazine, according to feedback. Who’d have thought it?’

Beth was filled with something akin to pride. ‘It is? My column?’ she said.

He nodded. ‘I know. People have the most peculiar taste, don’t they? Anyway, we don’t want to upset the apple cart and all that, do we? So we can continue as we were, so to speak. And, by the way, I’d prefer it if you kept our relationship on the quiet as well. No need for any kind of scandal. Especially as I’m still married.’

Beth gave a start. ‘You told me you were getting a divorce,’ she snapped.

‘I am, darling. It’s just taking far longer than I thought it would with the wretched lawyers.’

She wondered what on earth she had seen in him. In truth, she had been flattered when Jeremy had asked her out. He was very famous in the world of astronomy and he still had a certain notoriety within their community. So she had never wanted to rock the boat when she had been with him. After

all, she had felt amazed that he had even noticed her, considering the vast differences in their intellectual prowess.

He gave her a slow look up and down. ‘I’m not sure I like those dungarees but at least they cover your legs for once. By the way, do you need to wear skirts that short when we next go out? You’re not going to a nightclub and that would help keep the gossip to a minimum.’

Beth’s temper flared inside of her once more. He had never liked her choice of clothes but she had always brushed off his criticism before now. After all, everyone was different, weren’t they? And yet, she had tempered her clothing whenever she saw him. Not wanting to set him off again in one of his bad moods.

‘Listen, I’ve battled flooded roads and high winds just to get here to show you how wrong you are about me.’ Jeremy reached out and drew her into his arms, not seeming to notice how stiff and unyielding she was. ‘So why don’t you come back with me, where you belong?’

Where you belong.

For a second she was tempted. The happy ever after she had always wanted dangled in front of her once more.

But the truth was that she had never felt like she belonged with Jeremy. Never felt like she belonged in his spacious, swanky flat either. He worked with many private companies whom he advised and who he had taken rather large payments for. It was all in stark contrast to Beth’s meagre salary and she had always felt like the poor cousin whenever they had gone out. Especially because he frowned upon her use of vintage clothes, much preferring anything modern with a label. Jeremy was all about the labels.

She glanced back at Jeremy as he waited expectantly for a reply. She just didn’t know what to believe.

‘I’m going to stay here,’ she told him.

‘Well then, I’ll book a room for the night,’ he replied with a smug smile.

Beth sighed heavily. He was deliberately misunderstanding her.

Finally, Jeremy’s patient veneer appeared to crack a little. ‘We’re wasting time,’ he snapped.

His good-looking face disappeared and she could see how much uglier he looked when he was miserable and scowling at her like he was at that moment. Why hadn’t she seen it before?

At once her mind was made up.

‘Thanks for the offer but I’ll pass,’ she told him. ‘I think it’s best that you leave now, Jeremy. Goodbye.’

She walked out of the snug with her head held high, despite her legs being ever so shaky as she went.

13

Noah returned from the barn to find a rather tense atmosphere in reception. Beth was standing to one side with Walter, opposite a man who he understood to be her ex-boyfriend.

Having already picked up on the fact that Beth was super intelligent, the fact that her choice of partner was a professor of physics shouldn't have come as a surprise.

As the strained introductions were made, Noah shook his hand and immediately knew the type of man Jeremy was. He had met a few like him before. Jeremy was the type of guy to size you up, as if instantly deciding whether you could be of use to him and his massive ego. If you weren't, then you merely received a smile that didn't reach his eyes before he went on to see if he could use the next person instead.

Anyway, however awful the guy, it was none of his business. Although that didn't stop him from flicking a glance at Beth to make sure she was all right. She gave him a slight nod as if to indicate that she could deal with her frightful ex.

Happy that he didn't need to step in as her defence, Noah knew that it was time for him to leave. He went behind the reception desk to pick up his rucksack.

Walter's eyes flickered down to the bag briefly before returning to his face.

'You're not going anywhere at the moment,' said Walter, coming to stand in front of him. 'Storm's come in now.'

Noah knew that his uncle wanted him to stay on for a while longer. It was true that they had formed a tentative connection but he really did need to leave. Just like always. Before anyone had a chance to let him down again.

'I'll be fine,' he replied, shrugging on his coat. 'I can take care of myself out there.'

'Of course you can, lad,' Walter told him. 'But the storm's brought down a few of the older trees in the driveway so you can't even get your car out at the moment. The last guests only just made it out in time.'

It had been the last thing that Noah had been expecting.

'How are you with a chainsaw?' asked Walter.

'Better than most,' Noah told him.

'We'd best get to work then.'

With no offer forthcoming from Jeremy to give them a hand, Walter grabbed his own coat from behind the reception desk and they headed outside.

Immediately they were enveloped in strong gusts of wind that swept across the lake and through the trees, causing them to creak and sway.

As they began to walk across the car park, Ben hurried over to them.

'Grandad, go back inside,' he said. 'Storm's not over yet and it's too dangerous.'

'Stop fussing,' snapped Walter. 'I can help, can't I?'

Ben pressed his lips together but obviously knew better than to push his grandfather any further so the three men walked together towards the woods.

Noah was surprised at the mess that they found. There were a number of trees down everywhere, strewn across both the driveway and around the forest. Thankfully any cars in the car park had been missed, as well as the hotel.

But the entrance to the hotel driveway was blocked with a number of trees and so the first job was to start to clear them.

Noah cut up one large trunk which lay across the track. He and Ben rolled the tree trunk away with the idea that they would deal with it later.

With only one chainsaw between them, Ben used an axe to chop off some of the smaller branches whilst Noah cut up the larger tree trunks.

After a short time, Noah shot a look at Walter who was standing nearby. Ben had just taken the axe from him to chop up the larger pieces of timber.

Walter was frowning, looking as if he wanted the wrestle the axe back from his grandson. Noah had to admire his spirit. Perhaps he would be the same at Walter's age. Always fighting. Never surrendering to any kind of weakness. After all, that was how Noah had lived his life so far.

But as Noah picked up the chainsaw once more to start work on the next fallen tree, he heard Walter say, 'I'll take these to the log store.'

Walter leant down to pick up a number of smaller logs and began to walk away. But as he went, he didn't spot a branch lying across the path and Noah watched in horror as Walter's feet got tangled and he fell forward.

Noah dropped the chainsaw and rushed over to reach his uncle but he didn't make it in time, aghast to see the pensioner fall onto the ground with a loud cry.

Ben also saw the accident and ran over.

'Grandad!' said Ben, crouching down and looking ashen. 'Are you okay?'

'Do I look okay?' muttered Walter, lying face down on the ground.

But Noah could tell from the colour that had drained out of his face that something serious had happened.

'Hip? Arm?' he asked, getting to the crux of the matter.

'Shoulder, I think,' moaned Walter.

Ben and Noah exchanged a horrified look before they assessed the situation.

'Let's get you up gently,' said Noah. 'We'll have to turn you first, all right?'

Ben nodded his agreement and they both reached down to gently turn Walter over. Now that they could see his face, it was obvious how much pain he was in.

'Walter!' said Dotty, who had been in their little cottage nearby and had rushed out, despite the storm billowing all around them. She bent down to look at her husband. 'What have you done?'

'Bust my shoulder up good, I reckon,' muttered Walter.

'What about the rest of you? Heart? Blood pressure?' she asked.

'I'm not planning on running a marathon this afternoon,' said Walter.

Noah thought it was a good thing that he was able to joke, despite his grimaces of pain and pale face. But it was an important reminder that a simple fall could do worse damage than initially feared.

'Are you up to moving off this cold ground?' asked Ben.

Walter nodded. ‘Let’s do it,’ he said, clenching his teeth.

Ben and Noah reached forward to wrap their arms around Walter’s torso and on the count of three, gently raised him up to a standing position.

Walter’s cry as they moved him made Noah feel dreadful but Ben had been right to move him from the damp ground. Especially as the wind was still gusting all around them and it had begun to rain once more.

‘Can you walk?’ asked Ben.

‘Sure,’ said Walter.

But Ben and Noah continued to hold on to him all the way back to their cottage before he sank gratefully down on the armchair with a groan.

‘We’ve got to get you to hospital,’ said Ben, looking down at his grandad.

‘I agree,’ said Dotty, looking stressed. ‘But how? We can’t even get out down the driveway.’

‘I have an idea,’ said Ben.

He rang his friend, a local taxi driver called Del, who would meet them at the other end of the driveway and hopefully find a way through the local lanes to the nearby cottage hospital.

A short time later, a thin dark-haired man arrived at the front door to the cottage.

‘Mornin’, all,’ he said.

Before arriving, Noah had been told that Del was Frankie’s godson. He had been the local coach driver until that business had begun to dry up and he had turned his hand to becoming a taxi driver instead. Del was a nice guy, always trying to be helpful around the local villages and to his many friends.

‘How’s it going, Walter?’ he asked, with a concerned look.

‘Just perfect, Del, as you can see,’ muttered Walter.

‘Let’s get you to the hospital then,’ said Del, seemingly oblivious to the elderly man’s sarcasm. ‘The traffic’s a nightmare, from what I’ve heard on the radio.’

‘Then the sooner we get going the better,’ said Dotty. ‘I’m coming with you both.’

‘So am I,’ added Ben.

But Walter shook his head. ‘Your place is here,’ he told his grandson. ‘In charge.’

Ben looked upset but nodded. Noah wondered briefly how Ben felt about having the responsibility of both the family and hotel in his hands.

In a reverse of their earlier trip, Ben and Noah once more held Walter as they carefully and slowly walked him through the woods until finally they saw an electric car at the end of the driveway by the main gate.

'I reckon the road is clear to the hospital,' said Del, with a nod. 'And they've got that new X-ray machine too. Fancy thing, I've heard.'

'Excellent,' said Walter. 'I was thinking about a trip out today.'

He was being remarkably stoic but as Walter sat down with a groan in the passenger seat, he looked up at Noah.

'You'll be here when I get back?' he said, reaching up to take Noah's hand.

Noah hesitated before nodding. 'Of course,' he said.

For some reason he couldn't bear to upset Walter. His plan all along had been to leave that morning but it seemed that he couldn't leave Maple Tree Lodge yet.

14

It was a long day waiting for news about Walter's shoulder.

Beth felt heavy of heart knowing that Walter was in the local hospital waiting for the results of his X-ray. He had been a surrogate grandfather to her for so long and she hated to think of him in pain.

The Accident and Emergency room in the local hospital was apparently inundated with people suffering mishaps in the storm and so it was a long wait before they finally received any update.

'It's been confirmed. He's fractured his collarbone,' said Faye, looking up from her phone which had been on the coffee table in the lounge.

There was a chorus of sighs as everyone registered the bad news before sending on their positive well wishes. Beth wondered what on earth someone as lively as Walter, who could barely sit still at the best of times, was going to do with some enforced rest.

She, along with everyone else, had tried to keep busy throughout the day before Walter and Dotty could come home. So she and Ella had pored over her blog, updating the background and descriptions on it as best they could. Beth had to admit it looked much better.

But it was a struggle to keep positive, especially as the bad news kept on coming, it seemed.

'The good news is that all of last night's guests left just in time and got home safely,' said Lily, with a sigh as she came in from the reception later on.

'The bad news?' prompted Ella.

‘Pretty much everyone has cancelled their bookings for the next few nights due to the weather warnings,’ Lily told her, looking downcast.

‘Can’t blame them for that,’ said Frankie as she stoked up the fire to bring about some much-needed warmth to the room.

Beth watched as Ben went over to put his arm Lily’s shoulder before they walked away into the office beyond the reception. She knew that they were both worried about more cancellations when the business was already on such a tightrope.

Frankie looked up from her phone. ‘Del says he’s on his way back from the hospital with Walter and Dotty,’ she said.

‘That’s good,’ said Faye. ‘I’ll start dinner. I’m sure they’ll want something hot to eat when they get back.’

‘Maybe we should let Noah know,’ said Hannah, glancing outside where the rain was still lashing against the window.

‘I’ll do it,’ said Beth. ‘I need the fresh air anyway.’

Noah had stayed outside most of the day in the terrible weather, cutting up as many fallen trees as he could to clear the driveway. It meant that they hadn’t really seen him all day and who could blame him for staying away, thought Beth, as she retrieved her coat from the hatstand. On the sound of movement, she saw Jeremy coming down the stairs from his bedroom.

That was the worst news of all. Jeremy hadn’t been able to leave with the driveway blocked but seemed quite happy to remain at the hotel. At every opportunity throughout the day, he had cornered her, professing his love and saying that it had all been a terrible mistake, mostly of her making.

She was both trying not to listen to him and trying to believe him at the same time. She had always believed the good in people so perhaps she had been wrong all along.

He smiled at her as he came across the entrance hall.

‘If you’re looking for something to do, how about you help me with this speech I have to give at the observatory next week?’ he asked, holding out his phone.

She reluctantly went over and scanned through the text, trying not to grimace as she read. It was pretty dull stuff, she realised. The audience would be falling asleep in their chairs.

‘What do you think?’ asked Jeremy, looking primed for some flattery.

‘It’s great,’ she told him automatically. ‘But perhaps…’

His smile immediately dropped into a frown. ‘But what?’ he snapped.

‘Maybe you could add in a few lighter touches,’ she told him. ‘You mention the moon. You could add in a joke like, astronomers got tired of watching the Earth go round the sun all the time and called it a day, kind of thing.’

She smiled at him but he wasn’t returning it, still frowning.

‘I can’t crack jokes to a room full of physicists,’ he told her.

‘Why not?’ she asked. ‘Don’t any of them have a sense of humour?’

‘Because they’re serious people,’ he said. ‘And I have a reputation to uphold.’ He shook his head. ‘You see, this is why your career stalled,’ he carried on. ‘Not everything needs to be dumbed down all the time. You go for the lowest possible denominator every time.’ He gave her a sudden wide smile. ‘This is why you need to stick with me, sweetheart. So you can learn from me and grow as a person.’

‘I think I’m okay actually,’ she told him, feeling defensive, pulling her coat on and wrapping it around her.

‘Better than okay,’ he replied, bopping her on the nose with his finger. ‘You’re just charming. You just need to learn to behave a little better.’

She went to object to his review of her personality but he stopped her before she could say anything.

‘I’ve done a lot of thinking today. For both of us, thankfully.’ He gave a little laugh. ‘And I want us to be together. Long term, I mean.’

‘I’m not sure,’ she began to say, but he held up a finger against her lips to shush her.

‘I’m talking about forever,’ he said. ‘Make things permanent.’

Beth took in a large intake of breath. Forever? Was this a semi-proposal? ‘But you’re not even divorced yet.’

He frowned briefly before ignoring her question. ‘Don’t you think we make a great team?’ he carried on. ‘You can type up my speeches, make us a lovely home for me to come home to. Be on my arm at those fancy boring dinners I have to attend.’

Her romantic mind faltered. Was that what he expected her to do with her life? Be his secretary? Just a piece of arm candy at parties? What about all of her studying? All the sacrifices she had made to gain her qualifications? Was she just to let them all go?

She knew that she had never fully fulfilled her promise. She had failed. At everything, as it turned out.

So forever with Jeremy could be very tempting. In fact, it was what she had longed to hear him say for quite a few months. A forever home with maybe even a forever family. But all she could think of was that Jeremy was totally wrong for her. Wasn't he?

15

After Beth had come outside to inform him that Walter and Dotty were on their way from the hospital, Noah had stopped work on clearing up and went to get changed into dry clothes.

When he finally came downstairs and went into the kitchen, he was glad to see both his aunt and uncle were home at last.

'How are you?' he asked Walter, going straight over to where his uncle was sitting at the head of the table. Walter's face looked pale and he had his arm in a sling.

'I'll be fine. Don't you start fussing like everyone else.' He looked up at his nephew. 'Glad to see you still here though.'

'Noah's been hard at work all day clearing nearly all of those trees that came down,' Lily told him. 'And we're very grateful for that.'

'Good lad,' said Walter. 'Sorry I couldn't be around to help.'

'I think you've done enough today,' Dotty told her husband, looking weary and strained. She shot Noah a thankful smile. 'Glad you stuck around for us though.'

'Of course,' replied Noah.

Outside the storm was still continuing, the sound of rain lashing against the kitchen windows. Sitting at the table, Ben appeared very downbeat that evening and Noah wondered whether his grandad's accident had upset him more than he was letting on.

'The roads are blocked everywhere now,' said Dotty. 'And flooded too.'

'That's too bad,' muttered Hannah, with a grimace.

‘Why?’ asked Dotty.

Hannah sighed. ‘Jeremy’s still here,’ she whispered. ‘Wish he’d just leave, to be honest.’

‘Not sure anyone’s getting down those country lanes tonight,’ said Walter, as another gust of wind whipped against the windows.

Noah looked up as Beth appeared at the door with Jeremy close behind her.

He was still surprised by Beth’s choice to have a boyfriend like Jeremy. They didn’t seem exactly connected like the soulmates that she had told him she dreamed about. Of course, he could see why she appealed to Jeremy. She was beautiful, so of course he would make a beeline for her. But Jeremy was quite old-fashioned in both his way of speaking and his manner. Noah wondered if perhaps it was the man’s intelligence that had attracted her.

As dinner was prepared, with Ben still quiet and both Walter and Dotty looking weary, Jeremy seemed intent on adding to the lacklustre atmosphere.

Beth had tried her best to cheer everyone up but when she began to tell a tale about the stars, Jeremy yawned in the middle of her story and patted her hand in a condescending way. ‘I think you’re boring your friends, darling,’ he told her.

Beth frowned and instantly blushed. ‘Sorry,’ she muttered.

‘Actually, she wasn’t boring us at all,’ snapped Ella, glaring at Jeremy.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said Beth quickly. ‘I can’t remember the rest, anyway.’

Noah instantly saw the change in her. She’d completely changed from the normal chatty person he’d met only the day before. He thought of her eyes lighting up when teaching him the basics of astronomy on the veranda. She’d turned into a shadow of herself that evening.

Things became even more strained when the lights suddenly went out.

Noah heard Ben swear before apologising to his grandparents and mother.

‘That’s all we need,’ he grumbled. ‘Another power cut.’

Everyone drew out their mobiles to switch on their torches whilst Faye lit the candles in the middle of the table.

‘What’s happened?’ asked Jeremy, sounding panicked and looking around in an alarmed manner.

‘I thought you’d be used to the dark, being an astronomer,’ said Dotty, raising her eyebrows.

Jeremy shot her a glare before quickly disguising it.

‘Of course,’ he said, switching on a wide smile. ‘I’m just used to being in control of the lighting set-up, that’s all.’

Ella snorted but buried it in her wine glass before she drained it.

‘Perhaps we should light the candles in the lounge,’ said Faye, in a pointed tone.

‘I’ll do it,’ said Beth, standing up.

‘I’ll help you,’ added Jeremy quickly before they both left the kitchen.

Everyone appeared to sigh in relief and finally appeared more relaxed.

‘That man,’ muttered Ella, shaking her head.

‘What’s he doing here?’ said Lily, with a heavy sigh.

‘Trying to get back with Beth, presumably,’ said Hannah.

Noah had to agree. He had assumed that Beth and Jeremy’s relationship was over but it appeared not. Shame, he found himself thinking, remembering how Jeremy had talked over Beth at dinner.

‘Can’t we just make him leave?’ asked Ella.

‘It’s a bit dangerous outside with the storm, unfortunately,’ said Ben. ‘He could get hurt.’

‘That’s why I thought it was a good idea,’ said Ella, with a grin.

‘Listen, I can keep the stew warm on the gas hob for now,’ said Faye. ‘As the heating’s gone out, we could all warm up in the lounge whilst we wait for dinner.’

Everyone headed across the entrance hall towards the lounge which was now glowing with candlelight and the large fire in the hearth.

However, upon reaching the doorway, they all heard raised voices and stopped in their tracks.

‘Of course I’m right,’ Noah heard Jeremy saying.

‘No, you’re not,’ he heard Beth reply. ‘Our relationship is over, Jeremy.’

‘There’s no point giving me a reason and then not backing it up with proof, darling,’ replied Jeremy. ‘I can see why your research papers never made the grade.’

Noah heard Beth’s small gasp of dismay at the insult and felt something flare inside of him. He decided to interrupt their conversation before Beth became even more browbeaten.

He stalked into the lounge and saw Beth standing next to the fireplace, her face lit by the flames and nearby candles. She was looking pensive and strained, hugging her arms close around her.

'I mean,' carried on Jeremy, who hadn't seen Noah and was only looking at Beth, 'who's going to put up with you like I do?'

'Maybe I'm already seeing someone else,' she replied.

Jeremy merely laughed in disdain at her.

Noah took another step forward and Beth looked up upon hearing the movement. She looked at him for a second before her expression altered.

'You know what? I can tell you exactly who's putting up with me at the moment,' she said.

Noah realised her voice had completely changed. She sounded confident and almost a little husky.

Beth began to walk towards Noah with purpose and wearing a wide smile on her face. And there was something else glowing in her eyes, he noticed. Excitement.

She came to stand directly in front of him and suddenly reached up to fling her hands around his neck. Then Beth leant forward and pressed her body against his.

As she tilted her head up, Noah, who was standing motionless in shock, saw her mouth the words 'I'm sorry' silently to him before she pressed her lips against his.

He was astonished at her actions but automatically drew his arms around her, drawing her even closer to him. Sorry? He'd never known a sweeter kiss before.

He didn't know what was happening or why but for some reason he was entirely happy to play along with Beth's little charade.

16

Beth regretted her actions just as soon as her lips touched Noah's mouth.

What was she thinking? She had nothing to prove to Jeremy. He was the lowest of the low. A cheater. The worst.

As for Noah, what on earth would he think of her? Just going up and kissing him like that? He must think she was totally crazy, as well as being extremely offensive.

When the idea to tell Jeremy that she was already dating somebody else had appeared in her brain, she hadn't thought it through. But with Jeremy pushing her over and over, she had felt near to breaking point, unable to get rid of him.

And then handsome Noah had appeared at the door and she had hit upon what she had thought was a brilliant idea.

Now she just had to brace herself for him to back away and ask her what on earth she was thinking of by kissing him, as any normal, sane person would do.

And yet, as she began to pull back, she realised that his hands were now on her hips and he was drawing her closer. Much closer. The kiss deepened and all of her objections and racing thoughts melted away. It was an incredible kiss. She wasn't even sure she'd ever been kissed like that before with such intensity.

Finally Noah drew back his lips from hers, his dark eyes smiling down. He stared at her for a moment, his eyes unreadable. Then she saw a twinkle

in them as he drew his arms around her and leant his head down to hers again.

The second kiss was even more unexpected. Soft. Persistent. Incredible.

Finally, he drew back slightly from her face.

'You were warned that I had a bad reputation,' he murmured against her lips, the words soft enough that only she could hear them. 'Reformed, obviously.'

'Obviously,' she murmured, somewhat dazed and breathless.

She tried to think of something else to say as he looked down at her. But not a single thought came into her usually chatty brain. The kiss had been wonderful, amazing. She was completely and utterly stunned and was somewhat grateful that Noah was still holding onto her as she was certain that otherwise she would have just sunk onto the floor.

She looked over his shoulder at her friends and the Jackson family who were equally shocked into silence as they stared at them from the doorway.

Somebody who wasn't speechless was Jeremy, however.

'W-w-what?' she heard him splutter. 'What is this?'

'Isn't it obvious?' asked Noah. But he was still looking down at Beth and she back up at him.

'We're dating,' she said, finally getting her mouth to work. 'It was an instant attraction kind of thing.'

Noah's eyes were dark as they twinkled down at her in humour.

Jeremy cleared his throat. 'Well, you certainly moved on fast.'

Finally, Beth broke the look with Noah and turned around to stare at her ex-boyfriend. 'Not as fast as you,' she told him. 'At least our relationship was finished before I started another one.'

'I've told you before…' began Jeremy.

But he wasn't given a chance to finish whatever excuse he had been planning to come out with. Beth decided to take control once and for all and took Noah's hand to lead him away.

'I'll catch up with you later,' she called back to Jeremy. 'Or not. It depends how busy I am.'

She managed to leave the room with her head held high, clinging desperately onto Noah's hand until they were safely inside the Snug and she could close the door behind them.

Finally out of view of Jeremy, she abruptly dropped his hand and spun around to face Noah.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she immediately said, keeping her voice low. ‘I suppose you’re wondering what this is all about.’

‘You mean your plan to enrage your ex-boyfriend by pretending that we’re together?’ he said, leaning against the snooker table with a smile playing on his lips.

‘Oh, well, yeah, you’ve pretty much guessed it correctly,’ she replied, giving him a sheepish look.

‘Wasn’t that hard to figure out, to be honest,’ he told her. ‘And I’m happy to help.’

‘You are?’ She looked at him. ‘So you’re a good guy wrapped in a bad boy coating.’

He laughed, his face even more handsome when it was relaxed and smiling.

‘So what happens now?’ he asked.

She gave a start. ‘Now? Well, he leaves and that’s the end of that.’

‘But from what I understand, he can’t leave tonight. All the roads are blocked.’

Beth was aghast, as she realised her fundamental error with her impetuousness. ‘No!’ she spluttered. ‘I completely forgot!’

Noah nodded. ‘It’s going to be at least morning before the roads are cleared,’ he carried on.

‘So Jeremy’s stuck here all night?’ Beth’s mind was racing. ‘But that would mean…’ Her voice trailed off as she stared at Noah.

He raised his eyebrows at her in question although she could tell from his expression that he pretty much knew what she was implying in any case.

‘I hadn’t thought this through,’ she said, dragging a hand through her hair. ‘I just went with my gut instinct. I just wanted to show him that I’m a catch. That he shouldn’t expect me just to pick up the pieces and rush back into his arms.’

‘I agree with you on that point,’ he told her.

‘You do?’ she asked, surprised.

‘So I guess we’d better keep up the ruse for a while longer, hadn’t we?’ Noah straightened up and uncrossed his arms.

‘Okay,’ she nodded, still in somewhat of a daze. ‘I suppose so.’

As he walked past her, Noah stopped, a smile playing on his lips that he brought ever so close to hers once more. ‘At least you know the sofa in my room is comfortable,’ he whispered, before giving her a wink.

Beth waited until he had left the room before she slowly sagged into a nearby leather armchair and let out a long breath. At least it was only for one night, she thought. But what on earth had she just started?

17

Noah was still smiling to himself as he walked across the entrance hall and into the kitchen.

After all, it wasn't every day that a gorgeous girl came up and just kissed him, was it? And, he had to admit, he had been enjoying Beth's company up until that point. She was infectious with her happy positive spirit and so, if she wanted to use him to get back at her horrible ex-boyfriend, then he had absolutely no problem with that whatsoever!

He spotted Frankie, who had just switched on a camping light on the reception desk and was looking at him with raised eyebrows. 'Well, they did tell me that you were a bad boy,' she said. 'Must say, your reputation precedes you.'

Noah's smile grew wider. 'It wasn't like that,' he told her.

'Uh-huh,' said Frankie, sounding as if she didn't believe a word he was saying as he followed her into the kitchen.

Despite the low lighting from the candles with the power cut still going on, Noah realised that the cosy atmosphere had been replaced by a definite stilted one instead. Even Walter was looking at him with a frown.

Noah was about to explain himself but before he could start to speak, Dotty beat him to it. 'You're a fast worker,' she said, raising her eyebrows at him. But the usual twinkle in her eye was missing.

'About that,' he began.

However, Ben interrupted him before he could explain. 'Listen, you're both single so it's not our business,' he said. 'But just be careful, yeah?

Beth falls in love all the time and I'd hate to see her get hurt.'

'She's starry-eyed,' added Frankie. 'Literally, in her case.'

'She's just got a soft heart,' said Faye. 'She sees hope in every relationship, a happy ever after in every man she's ever gone out with.'

'But this isn't what you're all thinking,' said Noah, finally able to interrupt the one-way traffic defending Beth. 'She kissed me to stop her ex-boyfriend from hassling her. It was all her idea.'

'Beth did that?' asked Faye, raising her eyebrows in surprise. 'My goodness.'

'Didn't think she was pushy like that,' added Frankie. 'I'm impressed.'

'Desperate to get rid of Jeremy once and for all,' said Dotty, nodding thoughtfully.

'So you two aren't going out or thinking of developing a relationship?' asked Walter.

Noah shook his head. 'It was all for show.'

Ben's shoulders relaxed. 'Well, thank goodness for that,' he said with a grin. 'Didn't want to get into an altercation with my own cousin.' He glanced at his phone suddenly and said, 'Great, this is from the electricity company. Excuse me.'

As Ben headed out of the kitchen, the family carried on expressing their relief that Noah and Beth weren't going out.

'I did think it was all a bit crazy,' Dotty was saying to Frankie. 'After all, they've only known each other for a day or so.'

'I married my first husband on the same basis and look how that turned out,' replied Frankie, with a grimace.

Noah was beginning to feel a little irritated. Is that all they thought of him? That he would be a bad influence on Beth? That he would hurt her? Did they not know him at all?

He had come into the kitchen feeling buoyed up and now he felt like a piece of dirt on the carpet. Unwanted, as per usual.

'I hope you like lamb stew,' Faye said suddenly, looking across the counter to him. 'I think it's just about done, everyone, if you all want to sit down.'

'Actually, I'm not feeling very hungry at the moment,' Noah found himself blurting out. 'I think I'll go and grab a shower. Excuse me.'

He walked out of the kitchen before anyone could say anything else to him. He knew he was being defensive, he knew that he had snapped a little

harshly at Faye and felt bad about that but after all, if they didn't trust him not to hurt Beth then didn't that reveal how they truly felt about him?

Before that conversation, yes, the family had been a little much but he had thought them supportive. But it was obvious that the 'black sheep of the family' description had stuck to him a long time ago.

There was a reason that he distrusted everyone and had never put down roots anywhere. Everyone always thought the worst of him, but for once, it upset him.

The sooner he left Maple Tree Lodge the better, he decided as he headed upstairs.

18

Beth was still sitting dazed in the armchair in the snug when her three best friends rushed into the room.

Lily glanced behind her before closing the door.

‘Well?’ she asked, coming to stand in front of Beth.

‘Well what?’ asked Beth weakly as she straightened up in the chair. Her lips still felt bruised from Noah’s passionate kiss.

‘What gives?’ snapped Ella, putting her hands on her hips. ‘Do you want to tell us why you suddenly snogged the black sheep of the family in front of everyone?’

‘In front of Jeremy as well,’ replied Beth, in a pointed tone.

But her friends didn’t seem to pick up on it.

‘Who cares about him?’ spluttered Lily. ‘When have you ever done anything like that in your life?’

Beth found herself smiling, suddenly finding humour in the ridiculous situation she had put herself and Noah in. ‘Never,’ she told them. ‘But I can be naughty when I want to be.’

Hannah burst out with shocked laughter and quickly put a hand over her mouth.

‘I’m not talking about eating leftover pizza in your pyjamas for breakfast,’ carried on Ella, frowning. ‘This is serious. He’s a bad boy.’

‘He kisses like one,’ Beth found herself saying, unable to stop herself from grinning.

Her friends looked at each other before staring back at their friend.

‘Who are you?’ asked Hannah, boggle-eyed at her. ‘What’s happening here?’

‘Come on,’ urged Lily, sitting down on the opposite armchair. ‘This is serious.’

Beth laughed. ‘It’s really not,’ she told them, looking from one worried friend to the next. ‘He’s done me a favour actually. If he had been a good guy then he would have bolted or said, “What are you doing?” or something. Instead he gave me a thoroughly amazing kiss, I might add.’

‘Great,’ sighed Ella. ‘So now you’re in love with him instead of Jeremy.’

‘No!’ Beth carried on, laughing. ‘We’re faking it.’

‘You’re what?’ they all chorused.

‘It’s a ruse to stop Jeremy from being a pain,’ Beth explained. ‘He’s been all over me since he arrived and I couldn’t take it any more. But I couldn’t get rid of him so I took matters into my own hands.’

Ella’s mouth fell open and, for once, even she was lost for words.

Finished reading for tonight?

Leave one more book waiting for you at **Lokepub**.

‘But you’ve been so upset over Jeremy,’ Lily reminded her. ‘So do you really think you got the wrong end of the stick? That he’s not a cheating lowlife?’

‘I absolutely think he’s a cheating lowlife,’ said Beth. ‘That’s why I kissed Noah. As a fake distraction to get him to go away.’

‘But that kiss didn’t look fake,’ Hannah told her, frowning.

‘I know, right?’ Beth grinned. ‘It was pretty good. But that doesn’t matter.’

‘It does in my little black book,’ muttered Ella.

‘Okay, so he’s a great kisser but now what?’ asked Lily.

‘We’re just going to carry on putting on an act for Jeremy whilst he’s stuck here, that’s all,’ said Beth.

‘That’s all?’ repeated Ella, wide-eyed.

Beth gave her a firm nod. ‘I’m not going to fall in love with the guy who’s pretending to be my rebound guy,’ she told them.

‘Are you sure?’ asked Lily, sounding unconvinced.

‘Definitely,’ said Beth with a firm nod. ‘And that’s the best thing of all. Noah is completely and utterly wrong for me. He doesn’t even believe in love, can you believe it? He’s the perfect fake rebound boyfriend. At least for the night.’

‘What if it’s for two nights?’ asked Hannah.

‘Even better,’ replied Beth with a grin.

‘Well,’ said Lily, sounding somewhat shocked. ‘I can’t wait to see how this turns out.’

‘With me being happily single and Jeremy leaving to return to London as soon as this storm passes,’ said Beth. ‘And good riddance, I want him out of my life. For good this time.’

‘I’m still not sure about this fake romance with Noah,’ Hannah told her, a frown creasing her forehead.

Ella nodded. ‘I agree,’ she said.

Beth couldn’t see why her friends were so worried. To her it appeared to be the perfect solution. And with Noah willing to play along, what could possibly go wrong?

19

Despite being buoyed up by her fake dating approach to keeping Jeremy at bay, Beth was still troubled by the strained atmosphere over dinner that evening.

Walter's accident had been a shock to everyone and had seemed to trigger a rather low mood amongst everyone. To add to the tension, Noah had turned down the offer of dinner from Faye, which had upset her, although she was trying not to show it, and he had returned to the kitchen to sit in sullen silence.

Noah's sudden bad mood didn't help her cause with Jeremy, in front of whom she was trying to pretend to have a passionate affair. Meanwhile Jeremy was winding everyone up, seemingly oblivious to the family's stresses and trying to regale them with stories from around the world. It was only Beth who realised that most of his stories were in fact ripped off from other people. In the past, she had thought of it as merely embellishing a story, perhaps through a lack of self-confidence. But the rose-tinted glasses from their relationship had well and truly dropped away from her face and she could see that they were just bald-faced lies.

In the end she couldn't take it any more and snapped at him, 'I think we've had enough stories for tonight.'

'Everyone's off their game tonight,' added Alex in a pointed tone. 'It's been a long day.'

As if to confirm his point, at that moment Tiny stood up and gave a long stretch and a yawn.

‘Of course,’ said Jeremy, breaking into a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. ‘Perhaps I should retire to my room.’

‘Goodnight,’ said Lily quickly.

Jeremy raised his eyebrows at her sharp tone but swiftly left the table. Once somebody had checked that he had actually gone upstairs to his room, everyone gave a sigh of relief.

‘Thank goodness he’s gone,’ snapped Ella. ‘Another five minutes and I was going to have to head to that knife block over there and grab a weapon.’

‘Before there’s any violence, I think we’ll head back,’ said Dotty, with a weary smile. ‘It’s been a long day.’

Everyone wished Walter and Dotty a good night before Hannah walked them back to their cottage.

‘Poor Walter,’ said Beth in the end to break the sudden silence after they had left. ‘Hopefully his collarbone will mend easily.’

‘Yeah.’ Ben blew out a long sigh. ‘Trouble is, without Grandad I don’t know how we’re going to get those lodges finished by the spring ready for renting out. It’s a disaster on every level, to be honest.’

‘I can help,’ said Alex, in earnest. ‘The water sports centre is much quieter now that autumn is here so I’m a free pair of hands.’ He smiled. ‘Despite having absolutely no talent whatsoever in that regard.’

Although they had all seen Alex’s handiwork when he had tried to help with one of the new benches, thought Beth. She could still hear the laughter now when he sat down to prove a point and the whole thing had promptly collapsed underneath him.

‘I’d teach you if only I wasn’t only marginally better,’ said Ben.

As Beth sat there, she realised how quiet Noah was. Perhaps he could help? After all, he was a boat maker apparently. Didn’t that warrant a fair degree of skill with carpentry?

But as she waited for Noah to offer his services, there was nothing but silence from him. Did he not want to help the family? Especially in their hour of need?

For the first time since meeting him, she felt that his good looks were marred by his sullenness and she felt instantly irritated by him. And she was going to have to share a room with him that night to carry on their pretence to keep Jeremy away from her! The day just kept getting worse and worse, she thought.

By the time everyone headed upstairs to bed, she was more cross than she realised, especially when the bedroom door slammed shut behind her.

Noah turned to face her, smiling for the first time that evening. ‘Are you trying to prove to your ex-boyfriend down the hall that we’re rushing into bed in a desperate hurry? Because you nearly broke the hinges on that door.’

She shrugged her shoulders, too angry to form a response.

Noah seemed oblivious though and carried on joking. ‘Well, darling, time for bed, I think.’

‘I’ll sleep on the sofa,’ she said, in a pointed tone.

‘I’m happy to share,’ he said, gesturing at the bed.

‘I’d rather share a bed with Tiny,’ she muttered.

He scratched his head, looking bemused. ‘What’s up with you all of a sudden?’

‘Nothing,’ she said, going into the bathroom and slamming the door shut behind her.

Why was she mad with him, she wondered? She instantly knew why. Because if she had a family like Noah did, she would do anything for them. His silence and way of holding them back from him just made her feel even more that life was extremely unfair.

By the time she had changed into her pyjamas and headed back into the bedroom, he was lying on top of the bed covers.

‘Are you sure you don’t want to join me?’ he asked, patting the sheet beside him with a grin.

‘Quite sure,’ she told him.

‘Okay. What’s up?’ he asked, sitting up and swinging his legs around so they were on the carpet. ‘Normally I can’t get you to shut up but tonight you’re all one- and two-word answers. It’s like you’ve had a total body swap.’ He sighed. ‘It’s the fake dating thing, isn’t it? Do you still have feelings for Jeremy?’

‘Of course not,’ she snapped.

Then a look of comprehension swept over his face. ‘Oh. I get it.’

‘Do you?’ she asked, wondering whether he did.

‘You did say you like to fall in love and it happens all the time. We should have been more careful.’ He grimaced. ‘Listen, it’s very flattering and all that because you’re a beautiful, intelligent woman but I don’t…’

Beth stared at Noah, aghast. ‘I don’t believe this!’ she hissed, putting her hands on her hips. ‘You’re worried that I’m developing feelings for you? Is that what you’ve deduced? Good grief! And, by the way, you couldn’t be further from the truth!’

‘Oh. Okay then,’ he muttered and for a brief moment she wondered if he was blushing.

But Beth couldn’t stop talking now. ‘Do you really think I could fall for you of all people?’ she carried on. ‘You’ve upset Faye who I’ve never heard anyone have a bad word about, by the way. And why would they? She’s wonderful and kind and gentle but oh no, you had to sit there like a sulky teenager all night instead of eating even a small portion of her delicious stew. Then when Ben was talking about how worried he was for the future of his home, of everyone’s home, you just sat there silent. You could help with those cabins and yet you gave no offer to help, nothing.’

‘It’s not my business,’ he told her, his eyes flaring.

‘It’s your family!’ she snapped back. ‘And still you don’t care.’ She laughed without humour. ‘No wonder you’re so perfect as a fake date. Do you know why? Because you’re the last person I would want to fall in love with. You’re cold and cynical, unwilling to think about anybody but yourself. You have such a narrow view of people. And just when the Jacksons need you more than ever, you can’t help them even though it’s blindingly obvious that you could.’

‘If they were my family, where were they when I was growing up?’ he said. ‘Where were they when I needed them?’

‘Have you asked them?’ she replied, although his question had taken the sting out of her anger. ‘Because by bottling everything up and pretending to be enigmatic, you just seem cold and unfeeling. Maybe you are anyway, I don’t know. But don’t worry about me jumping into the bed with you in the middle of the night because you’re so handsome and a great kisser. Do you really think I couldn’t keep my hands off you for a whole night?’

His eyes darkened for a moment and she recognised the look of pure lust in his eyes. There was a connection between them that she couldn’t deny and yet she could never fall for someone like that.

‘But like I said, I’d rather sleep on that uncomfortable sofa again than next to you.’

She stalked over to the sofa and flung herself on it, knowing that sleep would elude her for hours yet because she was still so upset.

20

Noah sat on the bed watching Beth as she pulled a blanket over her head, feeling stunned by her anger towards him.

He thought about what she had said to him. Yes, of course he kept everyone at a distance, including his extended family. But wasn't it completely obvious why that would be? They all knew his history, after all.

It was hard growing up knowing that your own mother didn't want you. Even his dad didn't always want him around either. So he kept everyone away before they inevitably let him down. Because that's what everyone did.

And yet, despite feeling trapped into staying at Maple Tree Lodge, he cared that he had upset Beth. And he felt rattled too. So rattled, in fact, that he couldn't sleep.

Her words came back to him. What was it she had called him? *You're unwilling to think about anyone and anything other than yourself*, she had said. Selfish. And other words.

He didn't like the thought of upsetting gentle Faye either. Perhaps that had been wrong of him.

The trouble was that nobody could understand what it had been like for him growing up. He had had to take care of himself and he had been doing it for so long that it had become second nature. He wasn't used to family dynamics and sharing his life with anyone.

He didn't answer to anyone, and that included Beth, and yet he continued to mull over her words. He lay there for a while, hearing her toss

and turn. In the end, he got up from the bed, slipped on a sweatshirt and went downstairs. He just needed to be anywhere other than near Beth's silent disdain for him.

He headed downstairs in the darkness. What he really wanted to do was leave and never come back, to run away as he had done from his dad all those years ago.

However, he had made a promise to Walter that he would stay until the storm had passed. The wind was dying down outside but he couldn't leave without saying goodbye to Walter and it was too early to rouse him. Too early to make his escape. He just needed to get through the sleepless night until it was time to say his goodbyes and leave Maple Tree Lodge.

Deep in thought, it wasn't until he was downstairs in the entrance hall that he saw a light glowing in the kitchen. He had intended to go into the lounge, hoping that the fire was still burning low, but instead he went towards the kitchen, thinking that somebody had left a candle alight and went in to blow it out.

Assuming the room was empty, he was surprised to find Ben sitting at the table, surrounded by candles and tubs of what appeared to be ice cream.

Noah thought that perhaps he should walk away and leave him in peace but Ben looked up and spotted him.

'You couldn't sleep either?' asked Ben.

Noah shook his head, thinking that his cousin looked in as much emotional turmoil as he felt.

'Come in,' said Ben, gesturing at the table. 'Grab a spoon and dig in. It's all defrosting anyway.'

Noah went across and sat on the opposite side of the table. The hour was late but he thought Ben looked particularly tired that evening, as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Noah grabbed the nearest tub of melting ice cream and took a few spoonfuls of delicious salted caramel. His stomach rumbled with the lack of dinner and he instantly regretted turning down Faye's offer. Another regret over many that he had with himself, he thought.

'I keep thinking about Grandad after his accident today,' said Ben, suddenly into the silence. 'He looked so frail lying there on the ground.'

'He'll mend,' replied Noah. 'He's pretty tough.'

Ben sighed. 'He's not as tough as he thinks he is,' he said.

'Are any of us?' Noah told him softly.

Ben nodded thoughtfully. ‘I know. It just reminds me of his age, although don’t tell him that. By the way, thanks for all your hard work today clearing the fallen trees. It’ll help get things up and running a lot quicker.’

‘No worries,’ replied Noah.

They ate in silence for a while until Ben spoke once more.

‘I hated to see all this go to waste.’ He gestured at the ice cream. ‘Not that it was going to get eaten anyway. We’ve had to ring round all the people due to stay this week. Who knows when the power’s going to go back on, so we can’t let them come here if it’s not safe.’

‘You can’t make do?’ asked Noah. ‘I mean, you are in the middle of the countryside. Surely this happens from time to time.’

Ben shook his head. ‘No heating. No lights. Can’t make it work unfortunately.’ He looked downcast and sighed to himself before he caught Noah’s eye. ‘By the way,’ he added, ‘I didn’t have time to say thanks for giving me a hand helping Grandad to the taxi yesterday. You were pretty handy in an emergency and I was grateful, to be honest.’

Noah gave a shrug. ‘I had enough experience whenever Dad was too drunk to get to bed,’ he replied.

Ben frowned. ‘Yeah. I see. By the way, I’m sorry I couldn’t make the funeral last month.’

Noah thought back. Apart from Walter and Dotty, it had been a small affair. His dad had upset so many people over the years. He had always been seen as good for a laugh but not so great at repaying debts and had fallen out of favour with many so-called friends over the years.

‘That’s okay,’ Noah told him. ‘And for what it’s worth, I’m sorry I didn’t make your dad’s funeral last year either.’

Ben took another spoonful of chocolate ice cream. ‘Every day has been a struggle since then, you know?’ he told him, his voice flat and sounding beaten. ‘I’ve been grieving as well as trying to keep this place afloat so everyone has a home. And I’m still not sure it’s been enough.’

‘The hotel’s in trouble?’ asked Noah.

Ben grimaced. ‘Yeah. I was in London, getting on with my life. I didn’t really think, or maybe I didn’t want to know, just how bad things were here. It was only after Dad died so quickly and I started to look through the accounts that I realised just what a state everything was in, especially our finances.’

‘That bad?’ Noah couldn’t stop himself from asking.

‘Awful,’ said Ben, with a heavy sigh. ‘Dad wasn’t a very good businessman, to be honest. He was a wonderful dad thankfully, but hopeless with finances. Anyway, the hotel had never been a great success but it turned out that in recent years, things had become so bad that he had to take on an extra mortgage. We were up to our eyes in debt. Well, when I say we, I mean Maple Tree Lodge. Only Dad knew. I think Grandad suspected how bad things were but we’ve never really discussed it. I know what kind of stress it put on Dad’s health so I can’t put that on Grandad as well.’

Noah didn’t say anything, trying to take it in that Maple Tree Lodge could be a burden as well as a blessing as a family home.

‘It’s partly my fault,’ carried on Ben, as if to himself. ‘I should have known how bad it was. We nearly lost the lot. Can you imagine me telling Grandma and Grandad that they’ve got to leave the only home they’ve ever had? That Mum would have to leave her home so soon after losing Dad? Let alone Hannah, who never wanted to leave and go anywhere anyway? And now we’ve even got Frankie living here, although she’s a great comfort to mum and a brilliant asset behind the bar.’ He shook his head. ‘Don’t get me wrong, it’s home and I love it. But it’s not exactly been a party.’

‘But you’ve got guests now,’ said Noah, thinking back to what Walter had told him. ‘The Boathouse Café does good business. And the light festival has been successful, hasn’t it?’

Ben nodded. ‘We just sail so close to the wind every month. And these power cuts put us back in the red every time because we have to cancel bookings.’

‘Can’t you do anything about the power supply?’ asked Noah.

Ben grimaced. ‘You should see the quote I’ve just got for a generator. I mean, it would be brilliant going forward, especially when it kicks in each time the power gets cut. But it’s so expensive that it would be all of our summer profits wiped out just like that.’ Ben blew out a long sigh. ‘Just when it felt as if we were finally getting ahead. Those lodges are going to be needed more than ever. It was all my idea, you see. Still trying to be the architect I was all those years. I thought I could contribute to the place, bring in something new and maybe even leave a little bit of a legacy here as well. My contribution, if you will. Something that might just be standing here long after I’m gone. And yeah, we thought they might bring in a tidy profit as well. Apparently these kind of places are very popular to hire.’

‘Sounds like a decent plan,’ said Noah.

‘It was,’ replied Ben. ‘But the idea was that Grandad and I did most of the work to keep the costs down. The wood is free, obviously. Just the furnishings and fixtures that would need paying for. Get it done this winter and then start getting our money back as soon as we could next spring. At least, that was the plan. Trouble is, I’m not the one with the skills. Yeah, I can wield an axe but it was Grandad’s knowledge that even got this place standing up. I don’t think I’ve even got the skills to complete the roof on that first lodge, let alone three more just like it.’

Noah sat in silence as he thought about Ben’s words. The weight of responsibility hung over Ben in a way that he had never considered. After all, Noah had only ever had his dad to take care of. Ben had his whole family, their home and their livelihood to worry about. It was a lot for one man to take on, he realised.

Ben appeared to try and brighten himself up. ‘Don’t mind me. I’m just wallowing in self-pity. And probably shock from too much sugar.’ He pushed the ice-cream tub away from him across the table. He looked across at Noah. ‘Anyway, about what I’ve just told you? I’d be grateful if you could keep it to yourself. I try and keep as much of the worry as I can away from the family. There’s been enough loss for them to deal with. The business side is my inheritance, my burden to share. My problem, not theirs or yours.’

Noah thought for a moment.

Family was an alien concept to him. And yet he felt for Ben. He had seen how close they all were. Then he thought of Walter’s words about family. His surname was Jackson, after all. Then he remembered Beth telling him that she thought he was cold and unemotional. It was how he had survived a childhood full of constant disappointment. But it had also made him lonely. Seeing the Jackson family so close to one another had only highlighted that.

Noah thought back to what Beth had also accused him of when she had been so cross upstairs earlier that night. She thought that he was selfish. But she also thought that the family needed him. Was it true? It certainly sounded as if Ben needed him and, in turn, the rest of the family as well.

‘What if I made it my problem?’ he found himself saying.

Ben looked at him, confused. ‘What are you talking about?’ he asked.

‘I’m talking about me giving you a hand around here,’ said Noah.

‘Well, any time you can give me before you leave tomorrow would be greatly appreciated,’ Ben told him.

‘And what if I don’t leave?’ carried on Noah.

Ben looked surprised. ‘I thought you had a job to go to.’

‘I forgot to tell you with everything else going on,’ Noah found himself saying. ‘My next job got cancelled. The boat isn’t ready yet for me to begin work.’

‘Uh-huh,’ said Ben, with a nod, still deep in thought.

It wasn’t an absolute lie, Noah told himself. His next project had been delayed by a week or so. But perhaps it was fortuitous in that respect. Perhaps he was needed elsewhere at that moment in time.

‘So if you want, I can stay on and help out with building the lodges,’ carried on Noah. ‘Get them finished over the winter. If you need a hand, that is.’

The penny seemed to finally drop as Ben looked at him and almost sagged in relief. ‘Are you sure?’ he asked, wide-eyed. ‘I mean, that would be incredible but I don’t want to force you to do anything you don’t want to, even if that includes staying. And I’m pretty sure Grandad wouldn’t either.’

‘I’m sure,’ Noah told him.

‘It’ll give you time to work on that boat as well,’ said Ben. But just as he was about to smile it turned into a frown. ‘I can’t afford to pay you, that’s the problem.’

Noah shook his head. ‘Don’t need paying. Just give me the free board and we’ll call it quits.’

Ben sank back in his chair. ‘That’s quite an offer. Are you sure?’ he asked.

Noah nodded. ‘Absolutely.’

‘Thanks. I mean really, thank you,’ said Ben, finally breaking into a smile. ‘Take all the ice cream. As much as you can eat.’

Noah laughed but again Ben’s smile faded.

‘You know, I saw you once take food from in here and stuff it in your pockets,’ he said, frowning. ‘It was a couple of bread rolls off the counter. I thought you were stealing from us and I hated you for that but I should have pitied you. I was young and thoughtless. It wasn’t right if you were going hungry.’

‘I don’t want anyone’s pity and never have,’ said Noah, feeling defensive.

Ben shook his head. ‘It was the wrong verb to use. Not pity. I should have offered help instead of judging you. I’m sorry.’

‘I probably wouldn’t have taken you up on the offer anyway,’ Noah told him. ‘I never was much good at accepting anyone’s help.’

Ben nodded. ‘I understand,’ he said. ‘But if there’s anything we can do now… I feel like we’re taking a lot from you and not giving anything back in return.’

‘You’re giving me bed, board and acceptance,’ replied Noah. ‘In my world, that’s pretty much everything.’

Ben looked startled. ‘Okay. Well, hey, what are families for?’

Noah shrugged his shoulders. ‘I wouldn’t know,’ he confessed.

Ben looked at him. ‘Hopefully you’ll find out if you’re able to stick around,’ he said.

‘I’d like that,’ Noah found himself replying.

‘Grandad will be pleased you’re staying as well,’ carried on Ben. ‘He’s got quite a soft spot for you.’

Noah nodded. ‘Feeling’s mutual,’ he said. Then he held out his hand across the table. ‘So it’s a deal?’

‘Deal, yeah, definitely,’ said Ben, looking delighted as he shook his hand. ‘And thank you.’

Noah’s flight mode had never felt stronger in that moment. The need to run, to not let anyone close to him was as strong as ever. And yet, as he sat at the table with Ben, he could feel himself beginning to relax, thinking that perhaps family wasn’t something to be feared after all.

21

Beth woke up with a crick in her neck from sleeping on the sofa and a bad mood that continued long past breakfast. Even the fact that the power had come back on and the roads were now cleared didn't cheer her up.

She hadn't seen Noah when she had woken up as he had already left the bedroom without her hearing him rise, but that was good because she was still cross with him letting down the family and didn't want to see him. Hopefully he would have left by the time she finished her shift waitressing in the Boathouse Café.

Thankfully it was busy in the café that morning and it wasn't until almost lunchtime that Hannah made her take a break.

Beth hunkered down with her pumpkin latte and cake in the corner, ignoring her phone and staring out of the large windows at the lake beyond.

'Is the cake that bad?' asked Hannah, appearing by the table. 'I could see you scowling all the way from the kitchen. It's a new recipe that I'm trying out. Apple harvest slice, I've called it.'

'Of course not,' replied Beth, looking down at the uneaten slice of cake on the plate. 'I'm sure it's delicious but I just can't seem to find my appetite today.'

'Is it love?' teased Hannah gently. 'Because I've never seen you this grumpy.'

'No,' said Beth. 'I thought fake dating was supposed to be fun. Like a rom-com or something. Not annoying and rage inducing.'

‘Well, perhaps it’s a good job I only put one shot of coffee in your latte then,’ said Hannah, glancing towards the door to the café which had just opened.

Beth followed her friend’s look and saw Noah walking towards her across the wooden floor. She was still irritated with him and it didn’t matter how handsome he looked in his jacket and jeans that day.

‘Try not to make a scene,’ murmured Hannah, with a wink. ‘We need all the customers we can get.’

She went across to ask Noah for his order and then wandered away before he reached the table.

‘There are plenty of other tables free,’ said Beth, deliberately turning away to look outside through the glass door and not at him.

‘You mean the ones outside in the freezing cold?’ she heard Noah reply before there was the sound of a chair scraping and he sat down opposite her.

She took a deep breath and glared at him in silent scorn.

‘Mind you, it’s not that much warmer in here,’ he said, with a fake shudder before laughing.

‘What’s so funny?’ she snapped, even more irritated by his good humour.

‘You’re cute when you’re angry.’

‘No, I’m not,’ she told him, scowling.

‘You’re not cute or you’re not angry?’ he asked, still grinning at her.

Beth concluded that he was utterly irritating and was about to give him a piece of her mind when they were interrupted.

‘Here you go,’ said Hannah, placing a coffee in front of Noah. ‘Are you sure you don’t want anything to eat? I think the very least we could do is give you some cake for what you’re doing for us.’

‘I’m sure, thanks,’ replied Noah. ‘Besides, I can always finish Beth’s as she appears to be off her food.’

Hannah grinned at him before she went away.

Beth was puzzled by her friend’s words. ‘What’s Hannah talking about?’ she couldn’t stop herself from asking. ‘What are you doing for the family other than leaving in their time of need?’

Noah took a sip of his coffee before leaning back in his chair. ‘Who says I’m leaving?’ he eventually replied.

Beth gave a start. ‘Everyone,’ she spluttered. ‘Last night.’

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘Things have changed.’

‘What things?’ she asked, perplexed.

‘Are you eating that?’ he said, nodding at the slice of cake.

‘Depends on your answer,’ she replied, reaching out to hold on tightly to the plate.

He smiled at her once more and she couldn’t stop herself from thinking how much lighter and more handsome he was when he was more cheerful. Perhaps because it had been such a rare occurrence up until that time.

‘Well, the breaking news is that I’m staying on over the winter to help Ben with building the lodges,’ he told her. ‘With Walter being injured, they need a carpenter so I’ve made myself available to give them a hand.’

Beth’s mouth dropped open. She couldn’t believe it. ‘Oh!’

‘Oh?’ Noah laughed. ‘That’s all the most talkative woman I’ve ever met has to say about my complete change of plans?’

Beth sagged back against her chair, her anger completely evaporating. ‘Well, now I feel bad because I gave you such a hard time last night,’ she told him.

He fixed her with a look. ‘Perhaps I deserved it,’ he said.

But she didn’t agree. She knew what a huge relief to the family it would be knowing that the lodges would still be able to be built and that their future plans for the security of Maple Tree Lodge would still be in place despite Walter’s accident.

‘Here,’ said Beth, sliding the plate across the table towards him. ‘Take it. Take all the cake you can find.’

‘A peace offering?’ he asked, raising his eyebrows. ‘From my beloved girlfriend? It must be love.’

She quickly checked around them but thankfully her ex-boyfriend was nowhere to be seen. ‘I don’t know why I’m looking,’ she said. ‘Jeremy finally left this morning and good riddance.’

Noah took a bite out of the cake and nodded his approval. ‘That’s delicious,’ he said. ‘Are you sure you don’t want to share it with me?’

She shook her head, still feeling awful about the hard time she had given him when he had actually given up his whole winter to help out the family.

He licked his fingers before fixing her with an intense look. ‘I honestly don’t understand what you were doing with an idiot like Jeremy in the first place,’ he said.

‘We met at work,’ she told him. ‘And he discovered a black hole, you know. That’s a big deal.’

‘So? That still doesn’t excuse how he treated you,’ he carried on. ‘And how much you changed whenever you were around him.’

‘No, I didn’t,’ she told him, shaking her head. ‘He didn’t like the way I dressed, that’s true enough, but I still carried on wearing whatever I like.’

Although as she said it, she knew that it was a lie. She had altered her clothes whenever they went out anywhere to stop him commenting about it.

‘I’m not talking about fashion,’ he replied. ‘I’m talking about the way you acted in front of him. At dinner, he constantly interrupted you. He looked down at you, belittled you and you appeared to put up with it right until the time you realised he was sleeping with someone else.’

‘Gee, thanks for the reminder,’ she muttered.

But was it true? What Noah was telling her? She knew deep down that it was.

‘Well, I was probably droning on,’ she told him, thinking back to Jeremy’s criticism of her. ‘Not everyone wants to hear whatever boring thing I have to say.’

‘You’re the least boring person I’ve ever met,’ he replied.

She blushed a little at his words and then wondered whether he meant it as a compliment.

‘I know how it looks,’ she told him with a sigh. ‘But Jeremy’s an emeritus professor. And I’ve only got a PhD.’

‘*Only* a PhD?’ Noah’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Wow, he did a job on you, that’s for sure. Only a complete lowlife would make someone as intelligent as you feel like a dunce.’

She hesitated to reply but for once, Noah was in a chatty mood.

‘You’re not the same person when you’re with him,’ he carried on. ‘It’s like you get a personality transplant and suddenly the chatty person full of life and facts surrenders all her decisions and lets him decide everything, even what she should say. It’s like you’re reining yourself in the whole time.’

Beth played with her coffee mug, avoiding Noah’s stare. He was right, of course. Deep down perhaps she had always known it.

‘Men are normally intimidated by my intelligence so I’ve always dumbed it down a bit whenever I’ve gone out on dates,’ she told him.

‘Why change yourself?’ he asked.

‘Because it makes them feel better, but yeah,’ she said, blowing out a sigh. ‘I hear you that it’s not a good thing. I suppose I just thought that I was lucky to have someone like Jeremy interested in, well, someone like me.’ She glanced down at the dress she was wearing, a 1960s mini in black and white checks. ‘I like pretty clothes. Always have done. But they’re not the expected look for a person like me.’

‘What is the expected look?’ he asked.

‘Probably more professional, given my field of study. But I’ve worn vintage clothes for as long as I can remember. Couldn’t afford anything other than charity shops growing up and I was always attracted to the sparkly, pretty stuff.’ Her smile faded. ‘Maybe that’s what I thought Jeremy was. The ultimate designer label for me to wear. Expect he wasn’t really my style. We had a shared interest in astronomy but that was it. I was flattered that he even noticed me.’

‘You’re beautiful and bright,’ said Noah. ‘He’d have been even more of an idiot if he hadn’t noticed you.’

She looked up at him with raised eyebrows.

‘Black sheep of the family still have eyes and ears,’ he told her.

She blushed. ‘I don’t think the family think of you that way any more.’

‘I don’t care what they or anyone else think of me,’ he replied quickly.

Too quickly, she thought. It was a lie, she realised. But perhaps, like her vintage clothing was her own armour, maybe that was Noah’s armour as well. To keep people at arms’ length.

But to her surprise, it made her want to be the exact opposite and to find out what lay beneath the rough exterior.

22

Despite his assurances to Ben that it wasn't a problem to be staying on the whole winter at Maple Tree Lodge, Noah still had a couple of personal reservations.

He had only ever built boats so he was hoping for Walter's expertise on shoring up an actual liveable structure like four lodges that needed to be sturdy and yet attractive enough to be rented out to paying customers. For that, he wanted to retrieve his own tools and had headed back to Brighton where he had just finished work restoring a 1950s yacht.

He looked around the static caravan that he had rented for the past five months. It had been fine enough for the summer months but now that it was the end of October, it felt cold and damp. He only had a couple of weeks' rent left before the caravan park closed for winter anyway, so he packed up his belongings into his pickup truck before leaving once more.

Not that he had a lot else other than his clothes. He had always travelled light throughout his life. He had lost too many toys growing up from moving around from place to place to care too much about possessions. So he had nothing personal to show for his life so far except his tools. He had worked hard for everything that he had bought himself and nurtured and cared for them as much as other people watched over precious antiques.

It had been a long day's drive so by the time he had returned to Cranley, he found only Walter and Faye sitting at the kitchen table. Everyone else had finished their dinner and had headed into the lounge.

‘I’ve saved you a dinner plate,’ said Faye, getting up from the long oak table and collecting it from the oven.

‘That’s very kind,’ replied Noah. ‘And by the way, I wanted to apologise about refusing dinner last night. It’s not a reflection on your food and I really did appreciate the offer.’

He knew that the price to pay for staying at the lodge was that he would have to put up with the family gatherings all winter. He could cope with it for a few short months surely, he told himself.

‘It’s absolutely fine,’ Faye told him, as she placed a plate groaning with pasta and meatballs in front of him. ‘We all need a break from the family sometimes. It can be a bit much when everyone’s talking at once.’

‘Why do you think we live in the cottage?’ added Walter, with a grin.

Noah smiled and was silently thankful that they seemed to understand.

‘This looks great,’ he said, picking up his knife and fork. ‘Thank you.’ Before starting to eat, he asked Walter, ‘How are you?’

‘Not so bad,’ replied Walter, shifting the sling across his arm and shoulder. ‘And feeling better with the news that you’re going to be helping Ben out with the lodges.’ He gave Noah a teary smile. ‘Must say, that’s the best start to my recuperation I could have asked for.’

Noah felt a little embarrassed at Walter’s gratitude and began eating. As anticipated, the food was delicious.

‘I’m sure you’ll be a huge help,’ said Faye, with a smile. ‘Especially given your expertise in carpentry.’

‘Not so sure about that,’ replied Noah, after swallowing. ‘I only really know about boats.’

‘Rubbish,’ Walter told him. ‘You know about wood. That’s the most important thing.’

‘It’s certainly a vital skill,’ added Faye, nodding.

‘Absolutely,’ said Walter, with a hearty nod. ‘It’s important to have that connection to the environment, being in touch with the natural world. Think of the trees that we’ve had to fell to make the lodges. When you’re felling a tree and then planting another, you can’t think about instant results. This is about the next generation. And then the one after that. By the time Ben and Lily’s children are old enough, those saplings will be towering up in the forest along with the rest of them.’

Noah stayed silent. He had never thought about having children of his own, too scarred by what he had seen through his own childhood. He had

always wondered how rubbish a parent he would make, given his own experiences.

'Maybe we'd better let Ben and Lily's relationship just take its time,' murmured Faye.

'I won't go on about it,' said Walter, rolling his eyes. 'What I was trying to say is that working with wood is about appreciating the past as well as the future. About what my family have built.' He looked at Noah. '*Our* family, I mean to say.'

Noah's food lodged in his throat before he could swallow. His family? It was still a new concept to him.

Walter nodded. 'Our ancestors built this lodge. Your great-great-grandfather discovered it and hid out here after the horrors of World War I. Nowhere better to come and find peace, by my reckoning. If that's what you're looking for.'

Noah carried on eating but could feel Walter's pointed stare on the top of his head.

'It is lovely and peaceful here,' said Faye. 'That was my first impression, especially having grown up in a town. I'd never seen so many trees in one place in my life.'

'The forest is incredible,' said Noah.

'It is,' replied Walter. 'But where you see just trees, I see a big elm near the water where my parents hung a swing for me and my brother to use when we were little. It's about history, you see? How the seasons roll on, ever onwards. Wood never dies, as you know. A tree will die back in the autumn after putting on its glorious show. But then, after it's taken a nap over winter, it comes back to life. Through the seasons, it keeps giving back.' He gave Noah a piercing look. 'It gives hope that nothing is ever lost forever.'

They exchanged a look before Noah gave him a nod in reply and finished his plate.

'That was delicious, thank you,' he told Faye.

'Thank goodness the power is back on,' said Faye, with a soft smile. 'Although we'll need to replenish the food in the freezers.'

'Not much point if we get another power cut,' Walter told her.

'Maybe you're right,' said Faye, nodding thoughtfully. 'At least until the new generator arrives.'

'Ben ordered it already?' asked Noah, in surprise.

Faye nodded. ‘Just this morning. He’s so excited. That generator is going to make all the difference in the world. No more cancelling bookings for the guests.’ She smiled at Noah. ‘I think it’s given him, and all of us, to be honest, a real boost that you’re going to be helping out this winter.’

As Walter nodded his agreement, Noah felt the pressure of the hotel’s future success and could feel the stress it must cause Ben on a daily basis.

But then he thought about Walter’s speech about the family legacy and history. His own family history. And perhaps in his own small way, he could make his own contribution to Maple Tree Lodge and its future as well.

23

Beth hugged one of Frankie's delicious cocktails to her chest as she stared dreamily at the fire crackling away in the large hearth of the lounge.

It was the literal calm after the storm and with all the guests having cancelled beforehand, Maple Tree Lodge suddenly felt like their very own playground, complete with huge comfortable sofas which she and her best friends were snuggled into.

Nearby, she could hear Ben and his friends laughing as they played a game of snooker in the Snug, the hotel bar. What a difference a day makes, thought Beth. Jeremy had left, Noah was staying and the atmosphere was markedly different to the day before. Even Walter seemed buoyed up, despite his injury.

'Ben's bouncing off the walls with excitement at ordering the generator,' said Lily, before taking a sip of her own drink. 'It's going to make all the difference in the world to the business. Mmm. This cocktail is delicious. Frankie has outdone herself this time.'

'What is it called again?' asked Hannah.

'The Witch's Brew,' Ella told them, looking at the purple liquid in her glass. 'Blackberry liqueur, home-made apparently.'

'It'll be perfect for after the Halloween-themed outside swim this Friday,' said Hannah, licking her lips.

Ella shuddered. 'Are you still going ahead with that? You must be mad. It'll be freezing in the lake.'

‘Alex has made all the necessary safety checks,’ replied Hannah, with a small frown. ‘It should be okay, shouldn’t it?’

‘Thank goodness I’m leaving tomorrow and have the perfect excuse not to go in the water,’ Ella told her. ‘Although I shall be reluctant to give up my beautiful hotel room as usual.’

With Beth and Noah using the spare bedrooms in the private family quarters, Ella had been staying in one of the many empty guest rooms instead.

‘It’ll be fine,’ Lily told Hannah. ‘Besides, everyone can warm up in the new sauna on the beach.’

After a successful summer for the water sports centre, and with the regular swimmers keen to keep using Dragonfly Lake for their health even over winter, Alex had invested their profits in a small portable sauna which had been wheeled onto the beach by the lake.

‘Have you used it yet?’ asked Hannah. ‘It’s amazing. Makes you feel all glowy after the cold water.’

‘I’d rather have a hot bath in private,’ muttered Ella.

‘Now that Alex and I have moved back into our apartment, maybe we can use it just the two of us in the evening when nobody’s around,’ said Hannah, blushing despite her cheeky grin. ‘It could be very romantic.’

‘Only if Tiny doesn’t decide to join you,’ Ella told her, glancing down at the huge dog sprawled in front of the fireplace.

Hannah looked across the coffee table at Beth who was sitting opposite her. ‘You okay? You’re awfully quiet tonight.’

Beth looked at her friend and sighed. ‘I was just thinking,’ she began, before her voice trailed off. She was embarrassed to even entertain her current thoughts without expressing them out loud.

‘Is this about the blog?’ asked Ella. ‘Because I think it’s starting to look amazing. Especially with Dotty’s photographs.’

‘I love that one she took with the moon last night,’ said Lily, nodding.

Beth and Ella had worked hard on the look of the blog that week and Beth had to concede that with the addition of Dotty’s shots of the night sky, it was beginning to look far more professional.

‘And I’m going to mention it on my own blog this weekend so get ready for an influx of visitors,’ carried on Ella. ‘And now that we’ve got the affiliate marketing set up for those telescopes and other stuff I don’t

understand, those clicks are going to start to make you serious money each month.'

'Great,' said Beth, nodding.

But her heart and head weren't in her blog that evening, despite it being important to her income going forward.

Finally, Ella rolled her eyes before giving her a nudge with her elbow. 'Come on. What gives with you tonight? Are you in love with your fake boyfriend already?' she asked, with a wide grin.

Beth gave a start. 'Noah? No. I mean, he was perfect for a pretend boyfriend but…' Her voice trailed off. She hadn't been able to stop thinking about what Noah had said to her that morning. 'Do you think I dumb myself down for people?'

'What are you talking about?' asked Lily, looking bewildered. 'You're the brightest person I know.'

'Yeah, you're a geek,' added Ella, nodding. 'I mean, I don't understand half of the gobbledygook you say when you come up with all that scientific stuff, to be honest. So if you're dumbing down then I must be really stupid. By the way, nobody agree with me on that point, okay?'

'Okay,' agreed Hannah before looking at Beth. 'What are you talking about?'

'I mean, do I change when I'm with my boyfriends?' asked Beth.

Ella inclined her head and stared at her for a minute. 'Maybe a little,' she said. 'You're not quite your usual chatty self around them.'

'That's right,' said Hannah, nodding thoughtfully. 'I've just realised that you're not yourself. You go quiet when you're with them. Although that could have been because nobody could get a word in with Jeremy, from what I saw.'

Beth sighed and leant back against the sofa cushions. 'So Noah was right,' she said.

'He pointed that out to you?' Lily raised her eyebrows in surprise. 'Maybe he's not so bad after all.'

'He's absolutely not that bad if he's helping to build the lodges for us,' said Hannah. 'Not that I think he ever was, according to Grandad.'

'So what's going on?' asked Lily, looking at Beth.

'It was just something that Noah pointed out,' Beth told her. 'He said that I let Jeremy take over what I was saying as well as what I was wearing.' She sighed. 'And I guess he was right.'

‘Which is why Jeremy is a louse and we hate him,’ said Ella.

Lily nodded. ‘He was always a bit too full of himself.’

‘He made me feel small,’ said Hannah, looking downcast.

Lily grabbed her hand. ‘Which you’re absolutely not,’ she said, giving her friend’s hand a squeeze. ‘You’re wonderful and the most brilliant baker. Which is why the café is such a success.’

Hannah looked across at Beth. ‘And you’re successful too,’ she said quickly, ever fair.

Beth shook her head. ‘You’re sweet but even I can tell that’s an outrageous lie.’ But as her friends began to protest, she held up her hand to quieten them. ‘That’s okay. I know that I haven’t really got a career in astronomy.’

‘Well, you’ve been a huge help around the café these past couple of days,’ Lily told her. ‘And it’s really busy at the weekends so we always need a hand.’

But for once, Beth didn’t feel any better. The hotel was Lily’s dream job, not hers.

‘But what else?’ asked Beth, with a shrug. ‘The column pays minimum wage so it’s not enough. And yes, I appreciate the blog is up and running thanks to Ella’s hard work but I’m not sure that’s enough either.’

She looked up as Noah suddenly passed by the sofas and everyone greeted him. It seemed as if he had quickly become a part of the rhythm and pattern of life in Maple Tree Lodge, she thought.

‘Hey,’ he said, by way of greeting.

‘How was your journey to Brighton?’ asked Hannah. ‘Did you manage to get everything in your truck?’

He nodded. ‘All good, thanks.’

He would have carried on walking when Ella called out to him.

‘Hey, Noah,’ she said. ‘You seem to be full of ideas for our Beth here. Try this one on for size. What can she do job-wise using her vast and somewhat freaky knowledge of space and the universe?’

‘But would also keep her nearby because we love having her here,’ added Hannah in a soft tone.

Despite her embarrassment at Noah’s bemused expression, Beth shot a smile at her friend in grateful thanks.

‘Well, here’s an idea,’ said Noah. ‘What about showing the hotel guests the stars?’

‘You mean like one of those stargazing guides?’ asked Lily.

Noah nodded in response.

‘Ooh, that’s a great idea,’ said Hannah, looking delighted.

‘I agree,’ added Ella, also fired up with enthusiasm. ‘We can charge people and you take a hefty percentage as you’re the guide. So it’s another way of making money.’

‘Well, the hotel will already be full next weekend with guests after the Halloween swim on Friday night,’ added Lily, clapping her hands. ‘So what about Saturday night, okay?’

Beth blanched. ‘I can’t do that,’ she told everyone, shaking her head. It was a terrible idea.

‘Why not?’ asked Noah, raising his eyebrows at her. ‘You showed me the stars the other evening. What’s the difference?’

‘You weren’t a stranger,’ she reminded him. ‘We’d already spent the night together, remember?’ She faked a laugh and tried to ignore how brittle it sounded with her tension at his awful idea.

Noah didn’t laugh but merely kept looking at her. ‘How can I forget?’ he murmured.

Her friends suppressed their giggles.

Then he carried on. ‘But I also remember the passion you had in your voice when you told me about the planets. It was really interesting.’

Beth made a face in reply, still uncertain.

‘What harm can it do?’ he asked.

She rolled her eyes. ‘Puncture my already low self-confidence? Make me feel even worse about myself?’ she muttered.

Ella elbowed her in the ribs. ‘Hey! Jeremy’s not here. And he was wrong to make you feel that way.’

‘I absolutely agree,’ said Noah. ‘So what do you say?’

He and her three best friends all looked at her until Beth shuffled on the sofa, uncomfortable in their gaze.

‘Well?’ asked Ella.

‘Just remember that we’ve got your back,’ Hannah told her.

‘And your sides and front too,’ added Lily.

It was a familiar mantra between the four of them and helped ease some of Beth’s nerves. Could she really do this? But with her friends’ support and even Noah’s approval, she felt she had no choice but to nod her head in agreement, wondering what on earth she had let herself in for.

24

Noah felt quite pleased that Beth had agreed to his idea about running a stargazing session the following weekend. Surely someone with that amount of passion and knowledge alongside her talkative nature, had to be a natural teacher?

But he left her alone with her friends so they could ease her obvious nerves and headed into the snug to get himself a well-earned beer. It had been a long day driving to Brighton and back, he realised, suddenly feeling tired.

Ben spotted him as soon as he walked into the snug and beckoned him over to the snooker table.

'Hey, you okay?' he asked. 'That was a long drive in a day.'

Noah nodded. 'Yeah, thankfully the traffic was okay.'

'Here, take my beer,' said Ben, handing over his bottle. 'I haven't touched it yet. I'll get another.'

'That won't help you win!' called out a man who was standing next to Alex by the snooker table.

Alex smiled at Noah. 'This is Jake,' he said. 'Our far noisier other best friend.'

Noah had heard that Jake had been due to arrive that evening for an overnight stay. With so many hotel rooms still empty after the storm, there were plenty spare to choose from.

Jake grinned and held out his hand to shake Noah's. 'Hi,' he said, as they shook hands. 'Good to finally put a face to the name after all I've

heard about you.'

Noah wondered what had been said about him already. He could normally guess the description given about him to anyone from his past.

Alex's smile immediately went rigid with politeness. 'What he means is that Ben has told us all about you staying to help build the lodges,' he said quickly. 'Everyone is hugely relieved.'

'Yeah, that's a good thing that you're doing for the family,' added Jake. 'Although of course, technically you're family so you're doing it for yourself, I guess.'

Alex rolled his eyes. 'Here,' he said, placing a nearby bottle of beer into his friend's hands. 'Take this and fill your mouth where your foot might otherwise go.'

Noah smiled.

'Thankfully he's a chef so he's better with food than good manners,' said Alex. 'And he's also the resident bachelor around here, supposedly able to woo most women at twenty paces.'

'Not all women,' said Jake as Ella walked into the room with an empty glass. 'Ella!' he called out. 'Not surprised you've downed that cocktail so easily. Witch's Brew? Suits you down to the ground.'

Ella glared at Jake. 'Don't make me flip my witch switch,' she snapped and carried on walking towards the bar where Frankie was experimenting with lots of different-coloured drinks.

'She loves me,' declared Jake, laughing.

Alex caught Noah's confused expression.

'She really doesn't,' he told Noah. 'Ella and Jake have one of those relationships based on pure hate. For some reason, they rub each other up the wrong way every time they meet.'

'That's because she's crazy about me,' announced Jake loudly. 'She doth protest too much otherwise.'

Ella picked up her drink from the bar but stopped walking on her way back towards the lounge to glare at Jake.

'I would totally agree with you but then we'd both be wrong,' she told him.

'Let's be clear, it's not just me you hate but every male, is that right?' he retorted.

'Surely not Tiny,' said Alex. 'Who could hate Tiny?'

‘Dogs are always welcome,’ Ella told him. ‘It’s men that are merely tolerated.’

Obviously desperate to bring about some kind of peace between them, Alex then asked Ella, ‘Are you going to come for the Halloween night swim next weekend?’

Ella shuddered. ‘Not on your life,’ she replied. ‘Besides, I have to work.’

‘She’s like the Wicked Witch of the West,’ announced Jake. ‘She can’t go near water for fear of melting.’

‘I’d wade through that lake if it meant getting away from you,’ snapped Ella.

With one last glare at Jake, she strode out of the room.

Noah thought that Ella was a handful but from what he had seen, she was also a good and supportive friend so he wondered if perhaps it was just Jake who wound her up.

‘And this is why we’re keeping those two apart this evening,’ said Ben, returning to the table. ‘Before anyone ends up in the water unexpectedly.’

‘Yeah and I haven’t got my lifeguard suit with me,’ said Alex, with a grin.

‘So what’s this about a Halloween-themed night swim?’ said Noah.

Alex nodded. ‘Next Friday night. We’ve got a ton of people coming,’ he said, his eyes gleaming with enthusiasm. ‘You’re welcome to join in.’

‘Or you could just remain on dry, warm land like a normal person,’ drawled Jake.

‘I might be busy helping prepare Beth for her stargazing lecture,’ said Noah, thinking quickly of an excuse not to swim in the freezing-cold water that weekend. ‘Especially as it was all my idea.’

All three men turned to look at him.

‘Beth’s what?’ spluttered Alex.

‘She’s just agreed to run a small course on Saturday night teaching some of your hotel guests about the stars,’ Noah told Ben.

Ben’s face lit up. ‘That’s great,’ he said. ‘Was it Lily’s idea? She’s normally spot on with things like that.’

‘Actually I think I take the blame for that particular idea,’ Noah told him.

Ben’s grin grew wider. ‘Brilliant,’ he said. ‘If you keep going with the business ideas then we’ll be in the black by the end of the winter!’

Noah didn't want to explain to his cousin that he had actually suggested it for Beth's good rather than the hotel's. But if both benefitted then perhaps that would be a double win.

'Hey! I know a guy who's got loads of space stuff I can get hold of,' said a man sitting nearby on a bar stool.

Noah recognised him as Frankie's godson Del who had driven Walter to the hospital in his taxi during the storm.

Despite his kind offer, Noah was surprised to hear the other men immediately groan.

He looked at Ben with raised eyebrows.

'Whenever Del decides to help us, we all suffer,' Ben told him, with a weary smile.

'Which is why he has the nickname Dodgy Del,' added Jake.

'It's not that he's not generous,' said Alex. 'It just that it always ends in disaster for whoever he tries to help.'

'Hey!' protested Del. 'Don't be like that.'

'Might I remind you of the wetsuits you tried to sell me,' Alex told him. 'When I tried one out, it immediately filled with water and I nearly drowned in the lake.'

'Honest mistake,' said Del, quickly. 'That was a supplier issue. Listen, let me talk to my mate. He's into all that space NASA stuff.'

Del picked up his phone and wandered away, seemingly oblivious to the men's groans.

'Let's just hope that's the end of Del's involvement around here for the time being,' said Ben, before looking at Noah. 'Right. Do you want to join us for the next game? I've been losing badly up to now and could use all the help I can get.'

'Sure,' said Noah. 'Just to warn you, I'm pretty good thanks to spending too many hours in the pub with Dad growing up.'

'Excellent,' replied Ben, with a grin. 'Family vs mates it is,' he told his best friends.

'Bring it on, Jacksons,' said Jake, chalking up his snooker cue.

It had been a long time since Noah had been part of a team. But as he played and won the next game of snooker with Ben, to his surprise he found himself enjoying it.

And he began to wonder whether perhaps staying at Maple Tree Lodge that winter might not be quite as bad as he had initially feared.

25

With the stargazing evening arranged quite hastily, her friends persuaded Beth to give up the last few weeks of tenancy in her ghastly flat and move into Maple Tree Lodge for a while.

‘We’ve got both spare rooms in the family quarters available,’ Lily told her. ‘You can have one and Noah has the other.’

Beth loved the idea of staying longer than the usual weekends at her favourite place in the world but she still felt uneasy about not paying her way whilst staying there.

‘Look at it this way,’ said Ella, as they drove back into London the following morning. ‘The stargazing night will generate footfall to the hotel which is all good. You’re still helping out Lily with cleaning the guest rooms as well as giving Hannah a hand in the café. In the meantime, my Saturday night post is always my most viewed. I’m going to mention your Starry Nights blog so you’ll be drowning in clicks after that.’

Ella was a social media whiz who was also fast becoming a popular influencer online.

Despite her best friend’s skills, Beth remained nervous about her future. ‘Perhaps I could get another job up here,’ she said, as they pulled up outside the run-down block of flats where she had been living for the past five months.

Ella turned to her and made a face. ‘Working for strangers for an absolute pittance?’ she said, giving her a stern look. ‘And then trying to find

somewhere to live in an expensive city? Was that why you studied so hard all those years?'

Beth sighed. 'It's just not been as I had dreamt it would be,' she said.

'It never is,' drawled Ella, who had quite a cynical view on life unless it was supporting her friends, in which case she was absolute in her positivity. 'But listen, give the stargazing guide thing a go. What have you got to lose?'

'I think that's what Noah was trying to tell me as well,' replied Beth.

Ella raised her eyebrows. 'Well, if two vastly different people are telling you the same thing then perhaps there might be something in it, don't you think?'

They made quick work of packing up Beth's rented room. She had no furniture to her name, just clothes, equipment and many, many books.

Ella grumbled about her sore arms as they went up and down the stairs many times but finally Beth's Fiat was packed to the ceiling with all that she owned.

'I wish you were coming back with me,' said Beth, as she stepped forward to hug Ella.

'Me too,' Ella told her. 'But I needed to go into the London office before heading home so thanks for the lift. Saves me one long train journey in any case. Besides, Lily and Hannah have promised me frequent updates on your glowing success on Saturday night.'

Beth blanched. 'Let's hope it is a success,' she muttered.

'You'll be fine,' replied Ella, taking her by the shoulders and giving her a stern look. 'If most people have got as minimal knowledge of the stars as I have then anything you tell them will be of huge interest. Oh, and wear one of your miniskirts as well.'

'Why?' asked Beth.

'Just in case there's any male guests,' Ella told her with a grin. 'Couldn't do any harm, would it?'

Beth laughed as they parted company. But her good mood faded as her doubts remained. Over the long drive back to the Cotswolds, she built herself up into such a fret about how she wasn't at all capable of running a stargazing evening that by the time she parked her car she was all ready to tell Lily that she had changed her mind.

But just as she had got out of the car, she saw Noah heading towards her across the car park.

‘Saw you pull up and thought you might need a hand,’ he said, going around to open up the car boot.

‘Thanks,’ she told him. ‘Listen, I’ve been thinking, and you’re wrong.’

‘Okay,’ he replied, picking up a box with ease before giving her a look.

‘Don’t you want to know what I’m talking about?’ she asked, pulling a small suitcase out of the boot.

‘Of course,’ he said, as they walked towards the hotel. ‘But, as usual, I feel certain that you’re going to tell me anyway.’

‘Oh. Well, I’m talkative,’ she told him. ‘Always have been.’

‘That is in no way a surprise to me,’ he replied, pausing to shift the box in his hands. ‘What’s in here, by the way? Blocks of concrete? Heavy machinery?’

She looked down at the box in his hands and thought for a moment. ‘That’s where my telescopes are, I think.’

‘Telescopes plural?’ he asked, as they went through the front doors of the hotel. ‘How many do you have?’

‘I have five,’ she told him.

‘Five telescopes!’ he replied. ‘Isn’t that a little excessive?’

‘Not at all,’ she said. ‘They each have a specific purpose. My favourite is my Dobsonian one. I saved up for years for that one. The others all do different apertures as well.’

‘Okay,’ he told her as they went across the entrance hall to climb the stairs. ‘I get why you need telescopes and technology but what about this book on the top here?’

She glanced across and saw a leather-bound book with the words *Star Atlas* imprinted on the front.

‘I kind of figured that you’d know where all the stars are, having a PhD and all,’ he carried on.

‘Of course, but I’ve had this since I was sixteen. It was the first book I ever bought about astronomy,’ she told him. ‘I mean, there’s planetarium apps too which you can use. You just hold your phone up to the sky and the screen shows the night sky labelled with all the different constellations, stars and planets. But I’m an old-fashioned nerd.’

He nodded. ‘I bet you were great at school exams,’ he said.

‘I loved all the lessons at school,’ she told him. ‘Especially the sciences. Except biology. Dissecting that frog made me queasy.’

They walked along the upstairs corridor towards the family quarters. ‘Shouldn’t you be working at NASA or something?’ he asked.

Beth giggled. ‘That would be totally amazing, wouldn’t it?’

‘So we might see you go into space at some point?’ he said, with a grin.

She grimaced. ‘Love to but can’t.’ Then she laughed. ‘I get sick on the London Tube so I think it’s unlikely. Besides, my career didn’t really pan out like I’d hoped so I’m not sure I’ll be an astronaut at any point.’

He opened up the door to the guest bedroom she would be staying in and put down the box on the bed.

Beth pulled up the suitcase to place it next to the wardrobe and wandered across to pick up the *Star Atlas* from the top of the box.

‘Maybe I should have just left it as a hobby,’ she said to herself as she stared down at the book. ‘Maybe that would have been for the best.’

‘And give up on your dreams?’ said Noah, coming to stand next to her. ‘Never.’

She looked up at him. ‘What if I fail again? Next Saturday, I mean. What if I’m not any good at being a stargazing guide?’

He stared down at her for a moment. ‘Why don’t I join the group as well? Then you can say whatever you want to just me. Forget about everyone else, however many people will be there. Just teach me, like you did the other night.’

Beth felt a lump in her throat. ‘You’d do that for me?’ she asked.

He nodded. ‘As long as I don’t drop any heavy telescopes on my feet helping you carry all this lot in,’ he told her, with a wink.

As she followed him out of the bedroom, Beth smiled to herself. Feeling buoyed up by his support, she truly hoped that she could do this.

Besides, wouldn’t it be amazing to put all her hard-earned knowledge to good use? Just for once? She would find out on Saturday night, she thought.

26

Not knowing quite what to expect, Noah had been impressed with the professionalism with which the Halloween night swim on the lake had been organised by Alex.

There was a separate car park already established for the water sports centre and it was full by the time Noah left the barn workshop, having started to assess what his boat restoration would entail.

Normally used to working in peace by himself, he found himself unexpectedly drawn to the music and conversation near the boathouse and so finished his assessment earlier than expected and wandered towards where there appeared to be an outside party occurring.

There were many people in swimming costumes and wetsuits which had been adorned with various Halloween-themed T-shirts. Some swimmers wore luminous hats. Others had really gone to town on customising their swim hats with devil's horns, witches' hats and Noah even spotted a couple of fake pumpkins on top of people's heads.

Tiny the dog, who was apparently an honorary lifeguard for the water sports centre, was also wearing a costume, albeit a superhero cape. Having heard how good he was at swimming, Noah had to concede it was a suitable costume for him.

There was lively music playing from a couple of speakers outside the Boathouse Café, which looked equally busy, with people in costumes milling around on the veranda drinking and posing for photographs. Noah had already seen the impressively decorated cakes that Hannah had made

with a Halloween theme, along with the many pumpkins that Faye and Lily had carved out earlier that day.

On a late October evening, the air was cold and quite a few people were dashing in and out of the portable sauna that was set up on the main sandy beach alongside the lake. Others were huddled around the various firepits that had been built to keep everyone warm.

Not knowing anyone, Noah was about to turn away when he spotted Beth sitting on a deck chair by herself on the beach. His eye had been caught by the reflective glimmer of the bright silver jumpsuit she was wearing and he smiled to himself as he drew nearer.

'You look like an alien,' he told her by way of greeting.

She looked up and grinned. 'Actually I'm an astronaut,' she told him, pointing out the NASA pin that looked like it had been hastily coloured and pinned on. 'Lily loaned me the jumpsuit. I think it must be from her Ibiza party days.'

He looked at the thin material. 'Aren't you cold?' he asked.

'Thermal underwear,' she told him, the thought of which temporarily made Noah's brain disconnect. 'When you're out all the time on cold nights, you kind of get used to it.' She held up a steaming travel mug. 'Although Frankie's hot buttered rum is helping. Must be the cinnamon,' she added, with a grin.

He sat down on the empty deck chair next to her. 'You're not tempted to go in for a swim tonight?'

She shook her head. 'I've been helping Hannah in the boathouse, although it's finally begun to calm down a bit in there.'

'You've got baking skills as well as astronomy?' he teased.

'Oh, no!' she laughed. 'Just many years' experience of waitressing.'

He looked at her with interest. 'I guess that was to fund your studies.'

She nodded. 'You name it, I've pretty much done it to earn some money over the years.'

Beth then chatted through the numerous low-paid jobs that had paid for both her degree and PhD. He learnt that she hadn't had enough money to attend university but had studied alongside two part-time jobs. He considered himself a hard worker but Beth made even him feel like a slacker.

What impressed him the most was the matter-of-fact way that she described how difficult things had been for her and how hard she had had to

work for everything.

‘That’s why my telescopes are so precious,’ she finished by telling him. ‘I’ve never had much spare money, if any, to be honest, so they’re even more special because it took me so long to save up for them.’

Beth had had nothing handed to her, he realised. She had worked hard for everything she had ever wanted, such as her PhD and even her telescopes. She had had to graft and save for it all. He admired her.

He found himself wanting to know more about her and why life seemed to have been so hard for her up to that point.

But he realised that she was looking up at the sky, smiling at the stars twinkling above them. ‘The dark skies are amazing here. Absolutely perfect, especially when you can see the constellations so clearly. They’re like a giant dot-to-dot puzzle, aren’t they? You know that was the first thing that attracted me to them. I’ve always liked puzzles.’

He joined her in staring up and saw at least one set of stars that he recognised. ‘Well, I know the Big Dipper,’ he said, suddenly finding that he wanted to impress her with even a small amount of knowledge.

She looked across at him. ‘The plough? It’s one of the famous ones but it’s not actually a constellation, I’m afraid.’ She gave him a pity smile. ‘Sorry about that.’

‘So what is it?’ he asked.

‘Just part of Ursa Major, the great bear.’ She pointed up at sky. ‘Can you spot the much fainter stars around the plough? If you join them all up, you can see the outline of a bear’s legs and head.’

Noah stared at the sky until he could see what Beth was trying to show him.

‘That’s amazing,’ he told her. ‘I’ve never seen that before.’

She shrugged. ‘It’s easy if you know where to look,’ she replied.

‘You write yourself off quite often,’ he said.

‘Besides, it depends on the time of year and where you are in the world as to what you can see,’ she carried on, appearing to ignore his comment.

‘Did you hear me?’ he said. ‘You put yourself down, maybe even more than your awful ex-boyfriend did.’

She frowned. ‘Not everyone is interested in stuff that I am,’ she muttered.

‘So?’ he told her. ‘That’s not a reason to hide what you are. You’re super intelligent. Maybe he was just threatened because you’re probably

brighter than he is.'

Beth broke into a grin. 'I did have to show him how to programme the satnav on his car.'

Noah grinned. 'Told you so.'

'There's also still a huge inequality in science,' she carried on. 'It's starting to change but there's still not enough women in that field.'

Certainly not women who looked like her, thought Noah, glancing at the tight silver jumpsuit which showed off her curves and long legs.

A group of swimmers huddled up to join them at the firepit and Noah found himself hoping that he would find the time to learn more about Beth whilst they were both at Maple Tree Lodge.

27

Beth spent the whole of Saturday poring over her notes for the stargazing night. She knew that for it to be a total success, it was a question of getting the right balance between imparting wisdom and knowledge versus complete boredom.

Convinced that everyone was going to think it was a total snoozefest, by late afternoon she could feel her nerves rattling and wandered into the snug to get away from the hotel guests, all of whom kept telling her how excited they were about the upcoming evening.

'What am I going to do?' she asked, slipping onto a bar stool and watching as Frankie prepared the bar for what was hopefully going to be a busy evening.

'About what?' asked Frankie, who was busy cutting up fruit for all the drinks she would be serving later.

'When I make everyone so bored later,' said Beth with a heavy sigh.

Frankie fixed her with a brief but stern look. 'That's not going to happen. But if it does, then I'll make them all an extra-strong cocktail and they'll instantly forget everything that came before that,' she replied.

'Does that work for my bookkeeping as well?' asked Ben, coming into the snug with Lily close behind him.

'There you are,' said Lily to Beth. 'Where have you been hiding all day?'

'Preparing my speech,' said Beth, with a grimace.

'What's with the face?' asked Lily, looking concerned.

‘She thinks she’s going to bore everyone to death,’ Frankie told her. ‘Here, do you want one?’

She held out a mug full of steaming hot liquid for Beth to take.

Beth shook her head. ‘I don’t want any tea, thanks,’ she replied.

‘Oh, it’s not tea,’ said Frankie. ‘It’s an Irish coffee. Think of it as an emotional support beverage.’

Beth continued to shake her head.

‘Listen, it doesn’t matter if you’re nervous,’ Lily told her. ‘Everything’s going to be absolutely fine. Trust me.’

Ben took a sharp intake of breath. ‘You may have spoken too soon,’ he said, out of the corner of his mouth as he stared at the doorway.

Beth turned to see Dodgy Del walking towards them, pulling a trolley full of boxes behind him.

‘Told you I’d come good,’ he announced, with a wide smile.

‘With what?’ asked Lily, bewildered.

‘With all the space stuff for tonight,’ replied Del, stopping to unfold the top of a box. ‘Here you go! I reckon they’re going to sell like hot cakes.’

Ben peered into the box and brought out what appeared to be a small telescope on a short tripod stand.

Intrigued, Beth slid off her stool and went to inspect it. She took it from Ben’s hands and studied it closely. It certainly wasn’t a brand she had ever heard of which concerned her. Worse was when she peered into the lens and immediately drew back in alarm.

‘There’s no way you’re going to see any stars with this magnification,’ she said. ‘It’s too weak and doesn’t appear to be set up properly. Are there any instruction leaflets?’

Del shook his head. ‘They just came like this,’ he said, with a shrug.

Ben had taken a tripod out of the box and when he stood it on the snooker table, it immediately fell over. He looked at Del with raised eyebrows.

‘Okay, so the telescopes are a bust,’ said Del quickly. ‘What about these?’

He opened the next box with a flourish and brought out a handful of different-coloured spectacles.

‘They’re eclipse glasses,’ said Beth, taking a set from him.

‘Yeah,’ said Del, nodding enthusiastically. ‘So your audience can view the moon.’

‘But there isn’t an eclipse tonight,’ Beth told him.

‘And these are actually regular sunglasses with the word eclipse stuck on the side,’ said Lily, holding one up.

Del sighed. ‘I was trying to help,’ he said.

‘As cheaply as possible as per usual,’ murmured Ben.

‘I suppose you don’t want the posters either,’ muttered Del, his shoulders sagging.

‘Posters?’ asked Beth, now feeling even worse than before.

Ben unrolled a couple of posters from a tube. ‘This is for *Star Wars*,’ he said.

‘It’s set in space, isn’t it?’ replied Del.

‘Don’t tell me, they’re all for space movies?’ said Ben, unravelling the next one which was for *Muppets from Space*.

‘Everyone loves the Muppets,’ muttered Del.

Beth shook her head and wondered whether she could feel much worse.

But then Lily began to unroll a much larger poster. In fact, it turned out to be a full-length cut-out of an astronaut. She then quickly rifled through the posters and drew out another one.

‘Oh yeah,’ said Del, looking at them. ‘I think they were for a school project. I put them in at the last minute.’

Beth looked at Lily and expected her to look despairingly back at her. How could this possibly help her talk later? But instead, her best friend was grinning.

‘I have the most brilliant idea,’ she said. ‘Del, you’re a genius!’

‘I am?’ asked Del, goggled-eyed.

‘He is?’ Even Ben looked shocked.

‘Absolutely,’ said Lily, clapping her hands. ‘This is going to be such fun!’

Still not understanding, Beth exchanged a confused look with Ben.

‘Houston, we have a problem,’ said Ben, with a shrug.

Beth was still looking at her friend, wondering why Lily was laughing, when she felt something warm being placed into her hand.

She looked down and saw that Frankie had just given her a mug.

‘Thought you might need this after all,’ said Frankie, nodding at the Irish coffee.

Beth was inclined to agree with her and wondered whether the evening was doomed before it had even begun.

28

Two hours later, Beth hovered nervously in the lounge, peering through the glass doors to the large group of people gathered outside on the veranda ready for their evening of stargazing.

It was a far bigger audience than she had anticipated. She had never talked to so many people at one time and her stomach churned with nerves.

She glanced at the clock on the fireplace mantelpiece once more and realised that she needed to get started.

As she walked towards the doors on shaky legs, at least one thing made her smile. Lily's idea with the astronaut cut-outs had been a huge hit, especially once the helmet visors had been removed. Everyone who had arrived at the hotel had all had their photo taken behind the cut-outs, their faces peeping through the helmets as if they were actual astronauts. Lily had also added a small sign on the front of the astronaut suits saying 'Maple Tree Lodge Star Tours' which was the best marketing idea that Ella had ever heard of, when Beth had read her text a short time ago.

She took a deep breath as she switched out the lights in the lounge, still nervous about the size of the crowd. Could she really hold this many people's attention at one time?

There was only one way to find out, she supposed, and pushed the doors open.

'Good evening,' she called out.

It was a bit of a squeeze out on the veranda but because it ran the length of the hotel everybody had a clear view across the water, as well as of the

dark skies above. She had asked Ben to switch off the veranda lights to help with the viewing, which he had done, and she was grateful for the clear night.

She cleared her throat and, for a moment, lost her nerve. As she glanced both ways along the veranda, she suddenly spotted Noah slipping out of the glass doors to stand nearby.

They locked eyes and he gave her a nod, as if reminding her of his words. 'Just talk as if you're only speaking to me.'

So she took a deep breath and began to speak.

'Hi. My name is Dr Beth Jones and I'm an astronomer. But this evening isn't about trying to dazzle you with physics or scientific information. It's about showing you the wonder of the universe that we live in.' She smiled as she began to relax into her rehearsed speech. 'When people in the ancient world observed the sky, they noticed wandering lights that behaved differently from the stars,' she announced. 'These objects in the sky traced steady paths across the heavens. Over time, each one received the name of a Roman god and that naming tradition formed the identity of the planets even into the modern era. In our solar system, there are eight planets. Each of these planets has been named after a Roman god or goddess. Who can name them?'

She was pleased when the correct answers were shouted back to her, and nodded.

'That's great,' she carried on. 'Roman astronomers, who observed the five visible planets with the naked eye, had identified each one by its movement and appearance before assigning each one with a god whose power matched what people believed the planet's movement signified. Saturn, which was visible only at great distance and moved slowly, became connected with the ancient god of agriculture and time.'

She looked around at the people on the balcony. 'Saturn is in opposition tonight. It's one of the highlights of the observing year so you've timed this just right. At the moment it should be lying about 30 degrees in altitude so we should be able to observe it. Has everyone got their binoculars or a telescope? I've got a couple that can be borrowed.'

The people all brought their binoculars and telescopes up to their faces and, with Beth's guidance, were soon able to spot Saturn in the night sky.

Once she was happy that everyone had had their turn observing Saturn, Beth moved on.

‘Next is Jupiter which was always brighter and much larger than the other planets. And because of its size, the Romans gave it the name of the king of the gods.’

She gave everyone the altitude in which to see the planet which was on show that evening.

‘I love this beautiful ringed planet,’ said Beth, once everyone was looking in the right direction. ‘Who can spot its trademark creamy hue?’

There were murmurs of appreciation along the balcony so she carried on.

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‘And what’s Saturn’s giant moon called?’ she asked.

‘Titan,’ came the shout from further down the veranda.

‘Well done!’ she said, nodding her approval. ‘Titan is in transit this month, working its way across the globe. Can you see it? Even with binoculars you should be able to spot it. And its rings as well.’

After the planet spotting, she moved on to the constellations as well as the moon itself, full and bright in the sky that night.

After ninety minutes had flown past, she asked if anyone had any questions.

‘What about Mars?’ a man asked. ‘Can we ever see that?’

‘You’ll have to get up early to spot it at the moment,’ she told him. ‘Probably from about 4 a.m. is the best time to see it. It doesn’t start rising until 1 a.m. so if you’re an insomniac you’re in for a treat! Oh, and next month it’s in close conjunction with Jupiter so keep an eye out.’

Beth heard a movement nearby and turned her head to see Lily slipping out through the glass doors to join them.

‘What about meteor showers?’ asked someone else.

‘We’ve missed the Orionid meteor shower this year, I’m afraid,’ she replied. ‘That peaked ten days ago. Did you know that it’s due to debris left by Halley’s comet streaking across the sky? Isn’t that wonderful? However, you’ve still got time to see the Leonids. That’s next month and one of the

most prolific annual meteor showers over a couple of nights. It's got fantastically fast and bright meteors which can be seen with the naked eye.'

There was a murmur of approval around the veranda.

'And will you be able to talk us through that next month?' asked a lady standing nearby.

Beth was temporarily lost for words. She hadn't really thought beyond that evening or considered anyone would want to hear from her again.

'Absolutely,' said Lily in a brisk tone accompanied by a bright smile. 'We'll have all the details on our website but yes, we will be running special stargazing meteor events for those nights.'

Everyone looked pleased and as Lily invited them all into the bar to warm up, Beth was pleased that everyone thanking her was also saying that they had enjoyed themselves and would be back to see the meteor showers.

Once they were finally alone on the balcony, Beth looked at Noah before sagging against the balustrade.

But still she couldn't stop herself from smiling. She had enjoyed sharing her passion for the stars, something which she had never experienced face to face before that evening. She knew that her magazine column and blog had great feedback and yet to pass on that knowledge in front of a crowd of interested faces was something entirely new. She loved interacting with people and it had been a great experience.

'Well, this is all your fault,' she told him.

'It usually is,' he replied. 'Looks like you might have that new job you've been searching for.'

'Maybe I have. I suppose I'd better buy you a drink to say thank you,' she replied, holding the door open for him.

As she followed Noah inside, Beth took one last look at the night sky and couldn't stop herself from smiling with pride at a successful evening, as well as excitement too at what the future might hold for her.

29

The first fortnight of November brought endless days of grey skies and rain.

‘At least it’s not cold yet,’ Ben said to Noah as they both grappled with a large oak window frame, trying to put it in place from inside the lodge.

Despite the bad weather, Noah had liked working on the lodges so far. He was using completely different skills to his boatmaking but it was enjoyable.

Together, he and Ben had built and erected the frames for each of the four lodges. Cutting and then placing the heavy timber logs horizontally around the frames to form the outside of each lodge had been exhausting and physically demanding work, even when Alex had been called in for extra muscle.

But it was worth the aches and pains each night to see the lodges gradually rise up from their concrete platforms to become individual small buildings.

Now that each lodge had its main structure in place, they had decided to concentrate work on the first lodge, the one set back a little from the others further into the forest, although it still had that great view of the lake beyond.

Once the windows and front door were in place, it would only require the roof tiles to make the lodge weatherproof going into the winter months.

‘When do the roof tiles arrive?’ asked Walter, who was sitting nearby on a camping chair inside the lodge and watching the progress.

Although he professed to be in less pain, he still winced every once in a while when he was inclined to over-gesticulate even with his sling on and forget that he'd broken his collarbone in the first place.

'Friday,' Ben told him, as he passed a couple of long screws to Noah. 'The order got delayed again.'

'Told you not to order them fancy ones,' muttered Walter.

Noah and Ben exchanged a brief smile before carrying on fixing the frame.

'They're not fancy,' said Ben in a patient tone. 'They look like normal slate tiles but are in actual fact solar panels which will save our electricity bills from skyrocketing when they're rented out next year.'

'Hmmph,' said Walter under his breath.

Despite his gruffness, Noah was enjoying working under his tutelage. His own grandparents had been quite cold in nature and so he was enjoying having a mentor, especially one who knew so much about carpentry.

Noah and Ben finished securing the window frame and stepped back to admire their effort.

'Nice work,' said Walter, nodding his approval. 'Gotta say, you didn't inherit your woodworking skills from your father.'

'Definitely not,' replied Noah.

That was something else he was having to get used to. Talking about his father. But in a strange way, he found it soothing and helped him to grieve for his dad.

'Dad always did the bare minimum where manual work was concerned,' admitted Noah.

'Aye,' agreed Walter. 'But what he did, he did it with a smile.'

Noah smiled in return. 'He was a charmer. But he would have been no good with boatmaking.'

'I must come and see what progress you've made,' said Ben. 'How are you getting along?'

'There's a lot of rotten timbers which I'm slowly replacing,' replied Noah. 'But the frame is holding up well.' He shook his head in disbelief. 'You know, I still can't believe I have my very own boat. I've been saving up for a long time but never found anything I really wanted. It's perfect. Or it will be if I ever get it renovated.'

'You will,' said Walter. 'Your skills are excellent.'

‘I agree,’ said Ben, before laughing. ‘Glad one of us has inherited Grandad’s proficiency. I always felt a bit guilty about that.’

‘You’ve got other skills,’ Noah reminded him. ‘Like designing this.’

He looked around the inside of the building, admiring the look of the logs that felt both warm and solid. It was certainly going to have a lot of charm when it was finished.

Suddenly Beth appeared at the opening where the front door would be.

‘Hey,’ she said, by way of greeting.

‘Thought you were working on your magazine column today,’ Noah told her. ‘You finished already?’

She blew out a sigh. ‘Not even started, to be honest,’ she replied. ‘Can’t think of what to write this month so I’m using you as an avoidance tactic.’

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‘Lodge builder, fake boyfriend and work evasion,’ said Noah, with a grin. ‘My list of skills has certainly expanded since I arrived here.’

She giggled as she stepped inside. ‘I’ve also been told to remind you, Walter, that you have your physiotherapy appointment in an hour’s time,’ she said.

Walter rolled his eyes. ‘Waste of time that’ll be,’ he muttered.

‘But if I don’t take you then it’ll be my head that Grandma’s wrath will come down on,’ said Ben, with a grimace. ‘We’d better get going.’

He looked at the window frame once more.

‘It really frames that vista,’ said Walter, standing up and looking out.

Noah looked through the gap where the pane of glass would eventually be and had to agree. Ben had chosen as large a window as he could afford and the light was flooding into the lodge. It not only brightened up the interior but meant that the view down to Dragonfly Lake, as well as the surrounding forest and hills and sky, were also framed from every angle.

Beth walked around the inside of the cabin, empty apart from various sockets and pipes which were waiting for the second fixing of bathroom and kitchen facilities.

‘Where’s the bed going to go?’ she asked.

‘There,’ Ben told her, pointing to the far wall.

She went across and looked around, screwing her eyes up, in deep thought.

‘What is it?’ asked Ben. ‘What have we missed?’

‘Hang on,’ she told him, before lying down on the wooden floorboards.

‘Feeling tired, are we?’ asked Noah, with a grin.

Beth looked up to the apex of the roof which, although currently covered in green tarpaulin, would soon be tiled. Noah followed her gaze, thinking that the oak beams were a lovely feature.

Finally, Beth leapt up from the ground and brushed down her dusty flared jeans and coat.

‘This roof needs a skylight,’ she announced.

Noah and Ben exchanged a look. ‘Why?’ asked Ben.

‘For the stargazing, of course,’ she told them.

Ben shook his head. ‘I’m not sure,’ he said. ‘Glass is pretty expensive and we’ve already ordered the right amount of roof tiles.’

‘But it’ll be totally worth it for the romantic view,’ she countered. ‘It’ll light up the place for a while longer in the darker months and in the summer, just think of that glorious sunshine flooding in.’

Ben was at a loss for words and looked across at Walter. ‘What do you think, Grandad?’ he asked.

Walter stared up for a moment before nodding his head. ‘I think she’s onto something,’ he announced. ‘Not sure why we didn’t think of it before now.’

‘Because it means extra work and funds,’ replied Ben, grabbing his phone and scrolling through what appeared to be a shopping page of skylights before looking across at Noah. ‘What are your thoughts?’

Noah looked up at the roof and then through the window frame to the endless sky outside.

‘Why wouldn’t anyone want to see more of our beautiful surroundings?’ he finally said.

Ben nodded at his cousin. ‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Let’s go for it.’

‘And I reckon Lily would totally agree with me about this,’ Beth told him.

‘Why do you think I’ve just agreed to it?’ said Ben, with a grin.

‘Yay!’ Beth clapped her hands and walked over to Ben, laughing.

Noah was just about to join in when he found his laughter catching in his throat as he watched Beth give Ben a kiss on the cheek.

He knew it meant nothing. That Ben would never cheat on Lily and that it was just between friends.

So why did he mind so much that Beth was kissing someone else and not him?

30

Later on that day after dinner, Beth wandered outside to look at the stars but found them unexpectedly shrouded by a thin cloud.

She wrapped her coat around her tightly and walked along the path around the lake, just visible thanks to the external lights all around the hotel.

The boathouse was in darkness that evening, except the apartment above the café where Hannah and Alex lived with Tiny.

She smiled to herself, pleased that her friend was so happy in love, and wondered once more when she would ever know that easy bliss that seemed to appear when you met the love of your life. It certainly hadn't arrived with Jeremy and with hindsight, she could see just how wrong he had been for her. How most of her boyfriends had been wrong, in fact.

She shook her head, mostly at herself but also to clear her mind. She was supposed to be concentrating on her magazine article, not on her lack of love life. In fact, it was the longest that she had ever gone without going on a date or starting a tentative new romance. Did she miss it? That initial thrill? Perhaps. But she didn't miss the inevitable heartache that followed.

Deep in thought, her feet automatically gravitated towards the soft light in the woods coming from one of the barns, meaning that Noah was working on his boat as he often did in the evenings.

She opened up the large door and headed inside.

Noah was standing at the top of a small stepladder, pulling out some rotten wood from the hull of the boat. He turned his head to see who had

come in and smiled at her.

‘Still avoiding your magazine article?’ he asked.

She laughed, thinking that he knew her better than most people.

‘Absolutely,’ she said, walking across to look up into the hole in the boat. ‘Won’t this let a lot of water in?’

He looked flabbergasted at her naïvety until he realised she was joking.

‘I guess it might affect the buoyancy,’ he replied, turning to carry on ripping out the planks of wood.

‘Archimedes,’ said Beth, nodding as she thought back to her studies. ‘Any object submerged in a fluid experiences an upward buoyant force equal to the weight of the fluid displaced by the object.’

Noah grinned. ‘I was just about to say the very same thing,’ he told her.

Beth smiled at his self-deprecation. ‘Did you know, even Galileo didn’t believe that Archimedes shouted, “Eureka,” leapt out of his bath and ran through the streets naked when he discovered the principle of buoyancy.’

‘Too bad,’ said Noah. ‘It makes for a nice story.’

Beth shrugged her shoulders. ‘These days he’d just get arrested.’

She shivered in the cool temperature before noting Noah’s thick cable jumper, assuming with his boatmaking that he was used to working in all weathers and seasons.

Noah looked down at her. ‘So what are you stuck on with your article?’

Beth sighed and went across to pick up one of the screwdrivers that were scattered across a nearby bench. ‘What to write next,’ she told him. ‘It’s hard to educate people without sounding preachy and a bit of a nerd.’

‘I thought you were an actual nerd,’ he countered.

‘I make nerds look good,’ she said, shooting him a grin.

She felt somewhat glad that he didn’t contradict her and went back to tearing off the rotten pieces of wood.

‘Maybe you just need to start at the beginning,’ he told her. ‘Tell the people reading the magazine all about you. Like, where did your love of stars come from?’

‘Oh, that’s easy,’ she said, putting down the screwdriver.

‘From your parents?’ he asked, before she had a chance to carry on.

She looked at him, realising that despite beginning to know each other quite well, he knew absolutely nothing about her past.

‘I like to think so,’ she replied. ‘That’s what I’ve always imagined, in any case.’

Noah looked back at her. ‘You don’t know?’ he asked, frowning.

Beth shook her head. ‘No,’ she told him. ‘I never knew them, you see. I was left on the steps at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in London when I was only a few hours old.’

She said it as matter-of-factly as she could, despite the dull feeling in her heart as she said the words that she knew so well.

Noah had stilled, studying her with his dark eyes. ‘I had no idea,’ he told her. ‘That’s pretty tough to deal with.’

‘I like to pretend that my parents were two boffins who couldn’t cope with a baby.’ She gave him her best smile to mask her pain. ‘That’s where I got my name, from the same one as the hospital. Elizabeth. Although only the teachers used that and normally when I got into trouble at school.’

‘You were a troublemaker?’ he asked, his eyes gently teasing her, and she knew that he was trying to cheer her up.

She laughed. ‘Only for talking too much which I’m sure doesn’t shock you in the least.’

‘Not in the slightest,’ he replied. ‘So where did you grow up?’

‘In foster homes,’ she carried on. ‘I don’t have any family of my own. That’s why Lily, Hannah and Ella are so important to me. They’re my family, as well as the Jacksons, of course. Hey! That includes you now, I reckon. Is that a scary thought for you? That I think of you like my own family?’

But instead of laughing along with her, she watched as Noah came down the steps of the stepladder and walked towards her. For a crazy moment, she thought he was going to take her in his arms and found herself almost wanting him to do so.

However, he gestured at a nearby flask and said, ‘I could do with a break. Care to share a hot chocolate with me?’

‘I’d love to,’ she replied, sinking down onto a stool.

There had been a subtle shift in their relationship, although she had a feeling that the shift was all on her side. Now, instead of believing him to be cold and aloof, she saw that he was guarded. Instead of controlling, she saw him as someone determined to be in charge of his own destiny.

She trusted him, although she was desperately trying to ignore the feeling inside that was beginning to want him as much more than just a friend.

31

Noah unscrewed the flask of hot chocolate that Faye had made for him earlier upon learning that he would be working on the boat again that evening.

He hadn't intended on stopping for a break so soon but somehow Beth's story of her childhood had rendered his to-do list regarding the renovation of the boat somewhat unimportant at that moment.

He had always considered his own childhood as pretty awful. But at least his dad had tried to be a father. Sort of. In any case, he hadn't abandoned him. Not like his mother. Somebody had wanted him, unlike Beth.

'You never wanted to trace your parents?' he couldn't help but ask.

She shook her head. 'It was really expensive to look into and, to be honest, I really don't think I'd have had much luck. No name, no way of tracing whoever left me on the steps of that hospital. How do you begin to try and find someone that doesn't want to be found?'

'How come you weren't adopted?' he asked, as he handed over the mug of steaming hot cocoa. 'I'm guessing you were pretty cute as a kid.'

She blew across the steam to cool the drink down a little. 'I guess when faced with the possibility of dealing with a poorly child all the time, it was just too hard for people to cope with. And I get that.'

'You were ill?' he asked.

She pulled down the neck of her sweatshirt and he could see the top of an almost invisible scar that ran vertically down, although he didn't know

how far. ‘Heart defect which couldn’t be operated on until I was old enough to cope with it.’

Noah was shocked. ‘That’s a lot for a child to go through alone,’ he said.

‘I wasn’t always alone,’ she told him. ‘My various foster carers were great. But by the time I’d had my operation at sixteen, I was too old to be adopted.’ She shrugged her shoulders but he could see the usual sparkle had dimmed in her eyes. ‘It was too late for me to have a family of my own.’

He felt stunned by her story, thinking that it was ironic that Beth’s heart had been defective when she appeared to have the biggest, most generous heart of anyone that he had ever met.

He suddenly felt very protective of her, wanting to shield her from any more pain.

‘I think it’s amazing that you’ve remained a very positive person,’ he found himself saying.

‘That sounds like a criticism,’ she replied, laughing. ‘But yeah, I want to embrace all that life has to offer. I have to be optimistic. I mean, what choice do I have otherwise? To be miserable and alone for the rest of my time? No way. My childhood wasn’t Disney perfect but I’m not going to let it cast a shadow over me now, am I?’

He gave a start. Is that what she thought of him? And was it true?

Thankfully he didn’t need to say anything as Beth had clicked back into chatty mode. ‘Friends and having a family of my own are so important to me these days. That’s why I believe in love and happy ever afters. I’ve had to. Some days it was the only thing that kept me going. That’s why you were the perfect fake boyfriend material. You don’t believe in love and I want nothing but the real deal.’ She looked at him. ‘I don’t want to be alone ever again. Not that I am. I mean, I have my best friends and they keep me going in the worst of times. Thank goodness. I didn’t really have any friends growing up. Life was pretty lonely going in and out of hospital all the time. I don’t want to feel like that ever again, to be honest.’

Noah considered what Beth was telling him and, for the first time, began to question whether his choice to remain on his own had rendered him lonely as well. Some days in the past when he had been working in the boatyard, he didn’t see or speak to another living soul. He’d even considered getting a dog at one stage, just to offset the isolation.

He was still somewhat overwhelmed by the closeness of everyone who lived at Maple Tree Lodge but perhaps he envied them as well? Deep down, he knew that was true.

Beth took a sip of hot chocolate and looked at Noah. ‘Anyway, enough of the doom and gloom of my childhood,’ she carried on with a wide smile. ‘In any case, it’s hard to take things too seriously when you look through a telescope and see just how small and insignificant you are in the universe.’

Something had obviously shown in his face because she suddenly reached out to take his hand in hers.

‘You okay?’ she asked. ‘I know you hate talking about anything personal so I’ve probably made you deeply uncomfortable.’

He blanched at her touch but then relaxed and gave her hand a squeeze in return, grateful for her friendship. But then he noticed a long strand of dark hair was caught on her lips and he found himself tempted to draw it away. He suddenly realised that he had never wanted to kiss anybody more than at that moment.

‘So let’s change the subject,’ she carried on, letting go of his hand. ‘What are you going to do with this boat when it’s finished?’

He cleared his throat which had suddenly become dry. ‘Walter says I can store it here,’ he told her. ‘But I want to go out on it somewhere. I’ve always thought sailing to the Channel Islands in the spring would be great.’

‘Sounds lovely,’ she told him. ‘Well, I’d better give you a hand if you’re going to get the boat ready in time for your dream to come true. I might be rubbish with a hammer but I can give extremely precise measurements and understand the science as to what makes them float.’

He looked at her before draining his mug of hot chocolate. It was true what Beth had said. He didn’t believe in love. At least, that’s what he’d always told himself. But the truth was that he did love. After all, he had loved his father in a strange, convoluted way. And he did probably love Walter as well. There were different types of love, not just the romantic type that Beth wanted so badly.

All his life, he had avoided women just like her. Those who believed that there were soulmates for everyone and wanted the whole happy-ever-after show.

And yet he found himself drawn to Beth, more than any other woman he had ever met. He understood now why she dreamed of a family of her own and why she had put so much emphasis on finding her life partner. He

also knew her to be courageous, given what she had gone through with her serious heart issues throughout her childhood. He knew that they were incompatible as far as their futures were concerned. He knew that their kisses in front of Jeremy had been only for show.

However, he liked her as a person. As a friend. He'd never had many friends and certainly not a female one. But, despite never trusting anyone and wanting to keep everyone as far away as possible from himself, he trusted Beth.

When he glanced at her, he found Beth watching him with a question in her eyes.

He stood up. 'So you want to know about boats?' he asked.

'Absolutely,' she told him, also standing up. 'All the best astronomers have an insatiable curiosity. They're always asking questions and then gathering data to get their answers.'

'So I'm research?' he asked.

She laughed. 'Don't worry. I won't publish a scientific paper on you. I'm not sure anyone would believe me,' she told him with a cheeky grin.

He smiled down at her, aware how close they were now standing to each other. 'Thank you for trusting me with your story,' he told her. 'I'm sorry you had such a tough time of it growing up.'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'You can't change the past, as they say,' she replied, in a bright tone of voice. But still, he could see the pain in her eyes and wanted to help her however he could.

He hesitated for a moment before putting his arms around her and holding her close for a moment. She was initially stiff with shock before she relaxed against him. He could smell her perfume and felt the softness of her hair brushing against his chin.

Finally she stepped back to smile up at him. 'I hope this doesn't mean that you've fallen in love with me,' she joked.

'Don't worry,' he told her. 'You're safe with me.'

As they walked towards the boat, he knew that it wasn't love. But he did feel fond of Beth. And wanted to know more, much more about her. But just as a friend, he reminded himself.

Because he could never give her what she truly wanted.

32

A fortnight later, Beth and Hannah went out of the hotel and around the side of the building before stopping short.

Beth stared at the absolutely huge crowd who were lined up on the beach in the darkness of early evening and blanched.

‘That’s a lot of people in the middle of the countryside on a Wednesday night,’ she said, looking at Hannah in amazement.

‘Isn’t it wonderful?’ said Hannah, grinning. ‘Apparently Lily had to stop any more bookings due to safety reasons which is why you’re going to have to do this all over again tomorrow night, meteor shower permitting, of course.’

It turned out that Ella’s idea to update the Starry Nights blog, as well as marketing it on her own far more successful account, had worked wonders and the place was packed. Even the cut-out astronauts had gained some notoriety on social media and had added to the number of bookings apparently.

So much so that they had hurriedly had to add the following night for bookings so that nobody would be disappointed.

‘Isn’t this great?’ said Alex, beaming from ear to ear as he walked up to them. ‘The snug is going to be packed afterwards and we’ve had loads of enquiries about everything from staying here in one of the bedrooms to the water sports centre and even renting out the whole Boathouse Café for a private event.’

‘Some people hadn’t even heard about the light festival and want to come back for that next weekend,’ added Hannah.

‘Brilliant,’ replied Beth, still gazing at the crowd. It was a far greater number than she had ever imagined would turn up for a meteor shower.

Something was suddenly thrust into her hands and she looked down at the microphone.

‘What’s this for?’ she asked Alex, who had just handed it to her.

‘I thought you had a PhD,’ he replied, with a smile. ‘It’s for amplifying your voice.’

Beth grimaced. ‘I’ve never used one of those before.’

‘It’s all quite easy,’ Alex was telling her. ‘Just press that button on the side and everyone will be able to hear you without you going hoarse from shouting.’

She nodded. People had actually paid money to hear her speak, she reminded herself. They wanted to hear her knowledge, something that she was still getting used to. After all, she wasn’t an expert like Jeremy.

She frowned to herself, annoyed for even thinking about him at a time like this. She was delivering her magazine articles on time, trying to keep their relationship on a purely business level, but he was still bothering her with texts and missed phone calls. She didn’t reply to those. After all, he still thought that she was having a passionate affair with Noah and why let him think any different?

She was still staring down at the microphone when she felt someone else come up to them. She looked up to see Noah.

‘All set?’ he asked.

She nodded, somewhat grateful that he was there once more. She needed his quiet presence more than ever. She had felt as if they had grown a little closer, especially since she had told him about her childhood. Sometimes she wondered whether he just felt sorry for her but then she reminded herself that his upbringing had sounded equally awful which at least made his empathy a little more understandable.

She blew out a long breath to steady her nerves, seeing it in the cold air. The temperature was low, although not quite freezing, but thankfully it had also meant a clear sky in which to view the meteor shower.

Hannah shivered. ‘It’s freezing out here tonight,’ she said.

‘I’d better not keep everyone waiting then,’ replied Beth, fixing on a bright smile.

‘That’s the spirit,’ said Alex, nodding his approval.

They made their way to the beach just as Ben switched down the lights around the hotel to a low lighting, just for safety. It meant that the night sky above them twinkled even brighter with the stars all coming alive.

Beth stood at the end of the beach and looked at the microphone once more with terror. Then she found herself looking up into Noah’s eyes as he stepped forward in front of her. He reached out and zipped up her coat all the way to the top.

‘Just to me, like last time,’ he murmured.

She instantly relaxed, her nerves steadied by his presence.

So she switched on the microphone and wished everyone a good evening before introducing herself.

She gave out a few safety instructions before finally getting onto the important bit. The stars.

‘We’re all here tonight to hopefully witness the Leonids meteor shower,’ she announced. ‘The Leonids are so-called because they appear to originate from the constellation Leo. And you’re in for a treat as it’s one of the most prolific annual meteor showers. When these pieces of celestial debris enter our planet’s atmosphere, they’ll be travelling at speeds of up to 43 miles per second, at which point they vaporise and create the spectacular streaks of light known as meteors.’

A ripple of excitement went around the crowd at her words.

‘The meteors can be very bright because they’re moving so quickly. Sometimes we get fireballs as well during the Leonids and they can outshine a star or a planet. Luckily, all of this can be seen with the naked eye, although of course you’re welcome to use any binoculars or telescopes which you might have brought with you.’

She then went on to suggest that everyone began to look up at the sky to get their eyes accustomed to the darkness.

‘Whilst we’re waiting for the big show, let’s have a little tour around the sky, shall we?’ she carried on, now totally at ease as she stared up at the heavens. ‘Let’s start with Sirius, otherwise known as the Dog Star. And it’s the brightest star in the sky. It’s always somewhere in the winter skies, especially in the northern hemisphere. There it is, flickering like a sparkling diamond, just above the treetops, even though it’s 8.6 lightyears away from earth.’

Beth lost track of time, chatting away amiably to the crowd about how ancient civilisations viewed Sirius as well as other stars and planets that she pointed out.

In fact, she was so relaxed that she was as amazed as everyone else when the meteor shower began. The first bright light dashing across the sky brought ooohs and aaahs from the crowd and then continued over the next hour to everyone's delight.

By then, Beth had stepped back to let everyone just enjoy the show, only talking into the microphone once in a while when anyone had any questions.

Finally, she brought the evening to a close, inviting everyone to warm up with a drink inside the hotel.

By then, the majority of the crowd were getting a bit cold and were only too happy to head indoors to the snug bar. Quite a few people headed over to thank Beth and tell her how much they had enjoyed themselves, as well as asking a few more technical questions.

Finally everyone had had their fill of the starry skies, and Beth could relax.

'That was amazing,' said Noah, who had waited behind to walk back with her.

'Wasn't it?' she said, glancing up as another meteor whizzed across the inky black sky. 'I know most people think of them as shooting or falling stars, whereas I know that it's not a star at all. It's just tiny pieces of space dust burning up in the earth's atmosphere.'

'Is that all?' he asked. 'How dull.'

She glanced at him and was pleased to see him smiling at his own joke.

'Well, I did it,' she told him.

'You were great,' he said. 'Especially dealing with a crowd that size.'

'Thanks for being my muse once more,' she told him. 'It really helped in the beginning when I was so nervous.'

'I think you've outgrown me,' he replied, as they began to walk up to the path.

'Never,' she said. 'I'll always need you, I think.'

They exchanged a long look and for a moment she regretted her choice of words until she remembered that it was just Noah.

'Don't worry,' she added. 'I'm not falling in love with you.'

He smiled at the familiar joke between them.

But despite the success of the evening, Beth's own smile in return felt a little forced. She wasn't going to fall in love with him, she reminded herself. Noah wasn't interested in love in the same way that she was.

So why did she keep thinking of those fake kisses in front of Jeremy all those weeks ago and hoping that they might get another opportunity to kiss for real?

33

When the new generator arrived at the end of the month, Noah couldn't stop himself from smiling at Ben's delighted reaction.

'Isn't it great?' asked Ben, his face lit up with excitement. 'It's like Christmas come early.'

'Well, Christmas is only a month away,' replied Noah, looking at the huge metal box placed on a sheltered wall outside of the hotel.

They watched as the two workmen who had arrived with it began to unwrap it ready for installation.

'It means no more power cuts,' said Ben. 'Even when the whole area's out, we'll still have electricity. It's going to stop any food going to waste. We can stay warm and dry but most importantly it means our guests won't need to leave and we can carry on business as usual.'

Noah could see just how much it meant to his cousin. It had obviously been a huge strain on Ben and the family and now that he understood how precarious the hotel business was, he could see the relief in his cousin's face.

'Between this and the lodges, the future's looking much brighter,' said Ben. 'What are your plans for today?'

'I'm hoping to finish the roof tiles on the last lodge so that will be all four pretty much weatherproofed at last,' replied Noah.

Ben nodded. 'Excellent,' he said. 'Especially as there's talk of more high winds early next week. I'll be over as soon as this is installed.'

‘Okay,’ said Noah. ‘And your grandad is threatening to come over and supervise me at some point with the front door hanging.’

Ben grimaced. ‘Good luck with that. He’ll be desperate to help you.’

‘I know,’ said Noah. ‘And it is a two-man job but both men need to be able to lift those heavy oak doors. Anyway, I’ll do my best to stop him.’

They both exchanged a knowing look of understanding. Even a broken collarbone hadn’t stopped Walter from heading over to the lodges each day, anxious to do what he could to help.

‘He’ll be even worse when that sling comes off in a week’s time,’ said Ben.

Noah nodded. ‘Yeah, we’ll have to do something about that.’

Noah spent most of the morning fixing the remaining roof tiles on lodge number four whilst Walter supervised from his camping chair on the ground below.

But despite Walter’s assurances that he could help with even one arm, Noah just about managed to keep him at bay.

Noah had just come down the ladder when Ben arrived carrying a wicker basket, with Tiny the dog alongside him.

‘Time for a picnic, have you?’ teased Walter, before reaching over to stroke Tiny.

‘Mum thought you both might like some lunch,’ said Ben. ‘But if you’re not hungry, I can return her delicious sandwiches.’

‘Hand them over, lad,’ replied Walter. ‘Being site manager is hungry work.’

Ben laughed and handed Walter the basket before going over to run his hand over the oak front door which was leaning up against the wall ready to be hung. ‘Beautiful wood.’

Noah nodded. He had been pleased at the level of craftsmanship that Ben and Walter were eager to install in the lodges. Where they couldn’t make or create some items, they had made sure that any additions were handcrafted from the best of materials.

‘That’ll do a grand job keeping out yet another storm early next week,’ said Walter, from his chair.

‘If nobody else gets hurt then I’ll be happy,’ replied Ben, wandering over to peek underneath the tea towel on top of the basket to pick up a sandwich. ‘Come and grab something,’ he called across to Noah.

‘I wondered why you had company with you,’ replied Walter, taking a bite of his sandwich as Tiny sat down next to him, his tongue lolling out in hope.

‘Tiny never turns down a meal,’ said Ben.

Noah helped himself to a couple of sandwiches and sat down on the front doorstep. It really was an incredible view, he thought. It would be hard to get bored of looking out at the changing skies and seasons of the countryside all around them day after day.

Tiny gave up on begging Walter for a bite to eat and wandered over to chance his luck with Noah. Unable to resist Tiny’s soulful dark eyes, Noah gave him a slice of ham from his sandwich.

‘Now you’ve done it,’ muttered Walter. ‘He’ll eat the rest of your lunch if you’re not careful.’

Noah shrugged his shoulders. ‘I’m used to going without,’ he replied, without thinking.

During his childhood, he had often missed lunch when his dad had failed to provide him with any food or the funds to purchase something.

A short silence followed as his cousin and uncle exchanged looks and Noah instantly regretted being so honest.

‘Hate the idea of anyone going hungry,’ said Walter, shifting uncomfortably in his chair.

‘We let you down,’ said Ben, shaking his head.

‘I survived,’ Noah told them. ‘It just means that I don’t need to depend on anyone else.’

Ben was still frowning. ‘I had no idea things were so bad for you. If only you’d said something.’ Then he appeared to correct himself. ‘But of course you wouldn’t. It wasn’t your place to speak up. You were just a child.’

Noah was touched by their concern. ‘I was fine. Well, no. Obviously I wasn’t but here I am. All fit and healthy.’

But his cousin and uncle weren’t to be put off so easily.

‘It was neglect,’ said Walter, shaking his head. ‘I never knew. I’m sorry, lad.’

‘It wasn’t your fault,’ Noah told them.

And it was true. He didn’t blame anyone for the tough times in his childhood. It was just how it had been for him, year after year, until he could take control and make sure that he was never hungry again.

‘You’re family,’ said Walter, in a shaky voice. ‘That doesn’t happen to my family. Or rather, it shouldn’t have happened under my watch.’

Uncomfortable at the attention, Noah reached out to stroke Tiny’s soft fur.

‘Dogs are very sensitive animals,’ carried on Walter. ‘They sense who they can trust.’

‘Maybe he’s wrong,’ joked Noah. He tried to shift the enormous dog from leaning against him with no luck.

‘I don’t think he is,’ said Walter. ‘Besides, I’m not going to argue with Tiny, are you?’

‘Who’s arguing with Tiny?’ asked Alex, appearing at the front door suddenly.

‘Nobody in their right mind,’ replied Ben.

Alex looked down at where Tiny was still leaning against Noah.

‘He’s really taken to you, hasn’t he?’ A frown crossed his forehead. ‘Hang on. You didn’t give him any food, did you?’

Noah shifted awkwardly. ‘He seemed hungry so I gave him a bit of my ham sandwich,’ he confessed.

Alex laughed. ‘Oh, you’ve done it now,’ he said. ‘You’re his best friend for ever. He’s a total scavenger.’

‘Sorry,’ Noah told him.

But Alex just shook his head. ‘No worries but he’s all about the ham now!’

Noah looked down and realised that Tiny was looking up at him in both adoration and expectation at the sandwich in his other hand.

Then he joined in the laughter of the other men, feeling lighter than he had in a very long time.

The conversation might have been awkward for a while but he found that he didn’t mind being honest with his family these days. They were all beginning to understand each other and grow closer because of it.

Even more surprising was the thought that he was enjoying living and working at Maple Tree Lodge. He reminded himself that it was only for the winter but still, he would miss it when he finally had to depart.

For now, he was grateful that his time to leave was a few months away yet.

34

‘Tell me again why we’re doing this on a Saturday night when we could be in some glamorous bar somewhere?’ asked Ella, making a face as she carried on adding to the long paper chain on the table in front of her.

‘Because it’s December tomorrow and we need to decorate the café ready for a hopefully really big Christmas rush next month?’ suggested Lily, trying to unravel some fairy lights on her lap.

‘Because you love coming here and helping out?’ called out Hannah from the top of a stepladder as she hung a star on top of the large Christmas tree in the corner next to the balcony, its reflection sparkling in the glass doors.

‘Er, wrong answers,’ replied Ella.

‘Because we’re all living here in Cranley at the moment and you have to come to us?’ suggested Beth, handing Hannah a couple of baubles to be hung at the top of the tree.

‘Is the right answer.’ Ella sighed. ‘I miss our glamorous nights out in the city.’

‘We haven’t done that for ages,’ replied Hannah, before slowly coming down the stepladder.

‘A fact of which I’m well aware,’ said Ella, in a pointed tone.

Living away from the city for the first time, Beth was beginning to realise that she much preferred living in the countryside. Away from the lure of the Greenwich observatory and her dating disasters, she could see that it wasn’t all that it had promised.

Besides, stars are hard to see at night in the city with all its ambient light, she thought, glancing through the glass. The clouds suddenly parted and the moonlight flooded the lake, making it look like molten silver.

Every clear night, she could head outside and study the skies, filling her soul with celestial wonder.

The endless starry skies were also having a marked effect on her bank account. Thanks to Ella's marketing efforts and the success of the meteor showers stargazing nights, her Starry Skies blog had had a huge uptick in both followers and clicks. She would never be rich, but along with her magazine article and percentage of sales from tickets sold at the stargazing nights, at long last she felt she was beginning to build a career from her passion for astronomy.

There had been other unexpected benefits as well.

'Did I tell you that I got an email this afternoon from one of the cruise ship companies in Antarctica?' she told her friends as they all sat down for a well-earned glass of wine. 'Apparently somebody from the cruise line was here as a hotel guest for the meteor showers recently and now they want me to go there and be a guide for their stargazing cruises at the end of January.'

'That's incredible,' said Hannah.

'Chance of a girly holiday?' added Ella, with a grin.

'Only if you're paying for the plane tickets,' muttered Lily.

'I haven't said I'd go yet,' Beth told them, laughing.

'Why not?' asked Ella, amazed. 'It would be an amazing career opportunity.'

Beth nodded her agreement but still wondered why she was hesitating.

The old Beth, scratching out a non-existent career in the city and desperate to get ahead in astronomy, would have snatched the chance to be a guest speaker on a luxurious cruise ship in Antarctica. And yet, out here in the countryside, she was finally beginning to silence her inner voices and find peace with where she was in life.

She wondered whether it was because finally she had a career of her own. She felt she was beginning to reach the potential that she had always known that she had regarding astronomy.

The feedback from the meteor shower stargazing night had been incredible and given her no end of ideas for the special Christmas night that was already in the calendar and beginning to be booked up already. In

addition, it had fed her a wealth of confidence which she had been sorely lacking until that time.

Jeremy was still hassling her, on the premise of it being about the magazine articles that she was still writing, but he was also trying his best to flatter her into going back out with him, despite assuming that she was still having her fake affair with Noah.

But she now knew that she wasn't worthy of the way he treated her. She was worth a thousand Jeremys and finding her self-worth was more than anything that he had ever been able to offer her. He had never been the right man for her and it had only taken talking to Noah and some time away for her to realise how wrong Jeremy had been about everything.

She was slowly discovering that she was a natural teacher. That she did have something to give back after all her many years of studying. And that she was good at it.

Ella was still chatting away about how amazing a girly holiday would be for them all. 'I mean, come on, ladies,' she urged her friends. 'After all, you all live here now and I'm stuck on my own in the big city with nobody to play with. My weekends are so boring these days. Who am I supposed to go out with on a Saturday night?'

'A date?' suggested Hannah.

Ella rolled her eyes. 'The dating apps are all full of non-starters. As if this time of year wasn't bad enough.'

'You mean the lead-up to Christmas?' asked Lily, bewildered at her friend's attitude. 'Oh, I love it.'

'Me too,' added Hannah.

Ella blew out a long sigh. 'That's because you're all loved up and it's far easier with Christmas around the corner to snuggle up to someone special under the mistletoe rather than getting a turkey dinner for one like a saddo.'

'You're not a saddo,' Beth told her. 'And by the way, I'm not loved up either.'

'Aren't you?' Ella raised her eyebrows at Beth in question.

'No,' replied Beth. 'I told you before. That was an entirely fake thing with Noah. And I don't know if any of you have actually noticed but this is the longest I've ever been single or not dated anyone.'

'We'd noticed,' Hannah told her. 'We just didn't want to upset you by pointing it out.'

‘And how do you feel about that?’ asked Lily.

Beth thought about it. She didn’t know if her break-up with Jeremy had been the last straw or what had changed but she felt stronger, as if she could cope with whatever life threw out at her by herself. She still wanted love and a family of her own but the need wasn’t so great any more.

‘Actually I feel good,’ said Beth truthfully. ‘I’m happily single at last.’ She reached out to squeeze Ella’s arm. ‘You’ll find someone special to love though, I’m sure.’

‘I sincerely hope not,’ replied Ella, looking horrified. ‘When I finally choose who I’m going to be involved with, it’s going to be an entirely business partnership. None of that mushy stuff for me.’

Beth and her friends shook their heads at their friend’s cynical attitude towards relationships and giggled to themselves.

But glancing back at the mistletoe that they had just hung around the café, Beth was transported back to the sweet memories of Noah’s kisses once more before she pushed the idea from her mind, no matter how tempting.

35

The wind had been whipping up all morning so Noah and Ben had to give up working on the lodges, such was the intensity of the storm that had swept in.

Ben headed into the office to do some paperwork whilst Noah wandered into the kitchen to make himself a coffee before heading to the barn to work on his boat.

He found Faye and Dotty surveying lots of boxes piled up on the kitchen table.

Dotty looked up as he walked into the room.

‘Noah, be a dear and switch on the lights, would you?’ she asked. ‘We can’t see a thing over here it’s so dark today.’

Noah flicked the switch and walked over to the table. ‘What is all this?’ he asked, looking into the box that Faye had just opened.

‘Christmas decorations,’ she told him. ‘Hannah’s already finished the Boathouse Café ones and we need to get going on decorating the hotel.’

‘You should see the tree that we put up in the entrance hall,’ said Dotty, with a grin. ‘Great big one. Walter moans every year that it’ll ruin the floorboards but it never does.’

‘These are ones that we’ve collected over the years,’ Faye told him, bringing out a plastic box full of baubles.

‘Or rather decades,’ added Dotty, in a wistful tone. ‘Some of them are from when Walter and I first got married.’

‘I’m going to make a coffee,’ said Noah. ‘Does anyone want one?’

‘Yes, please,’ said Dotty.

‘That would be great,’ added Faye.

As he walked over to the kitchen counter, Noah thought about the Christmases that he had had in the past. Growing up, he and his dad had always gone to the pub. After he had moved away, Noah had pretty much spent Christmas by himself, always refusing offers from any work colleagues who had been kind enough to extend an invitation to him.

This year, of course, he would be spending it at Maple Tree Lodge for the first time. He still felt a bit overwhelmed by them all at times but the family didn’t overpower him as they had done when he had first arrived.

He made the mugs of coffee and carried them over to the table.

‘I knew it was in here somewhere,’ said Dotty, pulling out a blue shiny bauble decorated with blobs of paint.

Noah stared down at it, thinking that he hoped they hadn’t paid much money for such an ill-decorated ball.

‘Don’t you remember?’ asked Dotty, placing it in his hands.

Noah was puzzled. ‘Remember?’ he asked.

But as he turned over the bauble in his hand, he realised that a name had been painted on the other side. His own name. Noah.

‘You came here early December one year with your dad,’ Dotty told him. ‘We had all the decorations out like today and you wanted to help out so I let you loose with the paint tin. Seem to remember you enjoying yourself.’

Noah heard his aunt’s words but he continued to stare down at the ball with his name on it.

‘We’ve always put it on the family tree here in the kitchen,’ said Faye softly. ‘You might not have been with us in person but you were always in our hearts.’

Noah gulped back the emotion he was feeling, unable to speak and only able to nod his reply. Something of him had remained at Maple Tree Lodge all these years. He felt overwhelmed with a mix of emotions, mostly a sorrow that he had missed out on so much so far in his life.

‘Oh!’ exclaimed Faye suddenly.

Noah looked up to see that she had been carefully unwrapping a rather ancient-looking nativity scene.

‘One of the shepherds has lost an arm,’ she carried on in dismay.

‘Let me have a look,’ said Noah, putting down the bauble and taking the small wooden figurine from her.

It was in pretty poor condition, he realised, as it was cracked all over.

‘I can fix this,’ he told her, before glancing at the rest of the figurines in the set. ‘They all look like they need some wax as they’re pretty dry. I have something in my tool box that will help, I’m sure.’

‘How kind, thank you,’ said Faye, smiling.

‘It’s blowing a hoolie out there now,’ said Walter, coming into the kitchen with Ben close behind him. ‘It might be time to test that new generator.’

‘It’s one of those things where I’m happy to spend the money but never use it,’ replied Ben.

But at that exact moment, he wasn’t so lucky as the kitchen lights went out and Noah could hear all the electrics ping to a halt.

He looked across the kitchen at Ben who was standing still, his eyes closed as if he was praying.

Thankfully his prayers were answered only a few moments later as the overhead lights came back on and so did all the appliances.

Ben quickly checked the app on his phone and gave a massive sigh of relief. ‘It works,’ he announced. ‘It’s the generator that’s keeping us going.’

‘Thank goodness,’ said Faye. ‘I mean, we’ve only got a handful of guests tonight but at least we’ll be able to keep them warm and lit, as well as fed.’

‘The generator works then?’ asked Frankie, coming into the kitchen. ‘That was money well spent.’

‘I agree but what about the poor folk without generators?’ asked Walter. ‘There’s a few of them in the area.’

‘Most are used to it, of course,’ said Dotty.

‘But that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t check in on them,’ Frankie told her.

‘I agree,’ said Walter. ‘Especially as these power cuts normally last for hours, if not longer.’

‘Right,’ said Faye. ‘I can easily reheat some chicken and vegetable stew to share out. Noah, could you start buttering some rolls for me. Frankie, why don’t you dig out those old Tupperware boxes. We can dish the food out in that. Ben, there are spare thermos flasks in that cupboard. Dotty, start boiling the kettle.’

Noah was impressed at the efficiency with which everyone moved. Within an hour, they had twenty portions of stew to hand out, as well as at least ten thermos flasks full of hot water. Faye had also added bread and cakes to the food delivery service.

'I've got to stay here, just in case there's a problem with the generator,' Ben told Noah.

'No problem,' Noah told them. 'I can drive them wherever they want to go.'

'Excellent,' said Ben, looking relieved, and clapped him on the shoulder. 'Thanks. Just take it easy out there, okay?'

Noah began to load up the back of his truck with all the food and drinks before Walter shouted out for him to pick up a load of logs as well.

'Just in case folks haven't got enough firewood,' he said. 'I could come with you,' he added in a hopeful tone.

Dotty rolled her eyes. 'So you can break the other shoulder?' she told him, before slipping her arm through his good one. 'Come inside and let young Noah get on.'

They crossed paths with Faye as she headed out into the wind and rain, closely followed by Frankie.

'I know of a few people who might need an extra hand,' said Frankie, climbing into the backseats.

Thankfully this time around the driveway to the road stayed clear of fallen trees and Noah was able to get out onto the main country lanes with ease. It wasn't the most relaxing of drives with quite a bit of debris on the roads but thankfully it was without incident before he pulled up outside a small row of cottages only a mile away from Maple Tree Lodge.

Noah carried the food gifts whilst Faye knocked on the front door of the first cottage.

After a short wait, it was opened by a frail-looking elderly man.

'Faye, what are you doing out in this weather?' he asked, looking amazed.

'It's okay, Michael,' she replied. 'I've got our nephew here to keep me safe.'

Michael gave Noah a onceover. 'Have you indeed? Come in, come in.'

Noah knew that he wasn't technically Faye's nephew, only Walter and Dotty's. And yet, he felt warmed by her referring to him as such. Once indoors, Faye explained the parcels that Noah was carrying and the elderly

man looked both pleased and a little teary. ‘My word,’ he replied. ‘How kind of you and the family, Faye.’

‘You’re welcome to come back with us and stay at the hotel until the weather clears up,’ replied Faye. ‘We’ve got power now thanks to Ben’s new generator.’

‘What an invite!’ he replied, with a smile. ‘But I’ve got my battery radio all set up and England are going to take the first test in the Ashes, hopefully. But I shall enjoy a hot meal and a cup of tea, thanks to you.’

Noah checked Michael’s fire which was cheerfully aflame on the opposite wall and went to fetch a few more logs.

He received a hearty handshake from Michael before they left.

‘Noah Jackson, eh?’ he said. ‘Glad to make your acquaintance, son.’

It was a familiar story as they went from house to house to check on their neighbours and friends in the close vicinity. Some had camping stoves all set in readiness for a power cut, others were grateful for the food and drink, even raving over the addition of Hannah’s cakes.

It was a couple of hours before they headed back to Maple Tree Lodge, empty-handed but pleased to have ensured that everyone would be having a hot supper that evening.

‘Not sure the power will be back on this evening,’ Ben told them when they arrived back at the hotel. ‘But the generator’s holding firm, thank goodness.’

They headed into the lounge to warm up in front of the large fireplace.

As Faye and Frankie updated everyone on their neighbours, Noah sank into a chair.

‘Here,’ said Beth in a soft tone as she placed a cup of tea in front of him. ‘I think you deserve it.’

She sat down next to him on the sofa and he was pleased that for once, she wasn’t in a talkative mood. He leant back and looked at the fire which was roaring in the nearby hearth.

He was feeling pretty mixed up inside. He had been a part of something good that afternoon, helping out the local community. And yet he had been a definite part of the Jackson family too. Everyone now knew who he was.

His gut reaction instantly told him to flee, to run away just like he had when he was sixteen years old, but he managed to calm himself down with a few deep breaths.

He relaxed and looked around the family as they all chatted. His family.

Normally the thought would unsettle him but, in that moment, he felt proud to share his name with such generous people.

He was starting to become a part of the Jackson family. And he was beginning to like the idea as well.

36

The following morning, Noah heard that the power had been restored to the local villages. He felt pleased for the local people that he had met the previous day, especially as it was beginning to turn colder after the storm.

The high winds had yet to die down though and so work on the lodges had to be halted for another day. He had intended to hunker down in the barn to spend the day working on his boat and yet, as he walked through the entrance hall on his way out, he found Lily and Dotty weaving a Christmas garland up the vast oak staircase.

Remembering his promise to Faye, he swerved into the kitchen instead and picked up the box full of the nativity scene to take with him to the barn.

Once there, he spent a surprisingly enjoyable morning fixing and restoring the figurines, first repairing any damage and then waxing and polishing them. It was therapeutic to work with any type of wood, he realised. But also to know that he was giving something back to the family Christmas, as he couldn't stop himself thinking of the Christmas bauble that he had decorated all those years ago.

The wax brought up the beauty of the original colours and he returned the nativity to Faye, feeling pleased with himself.

She was thrilled. 'Oh, Noah,' she cried, when she saw what he had done. 'It looks like new! Thank you so much!'

Faye had insisted on fixing him a delicious lunch and, buoyed up from good food and seeing the nativity placed on the reception desk in the entrance hall, he headed back to the barn with a spring in his step.

He had already replaced the frame of the hull and was sanding one of the new cedar planks that he had bought for the starboard side of the boat when the door to the barn opened later that afternoon.

'Hi,' said Beth, stepping inside before quickly closing the door behind her.

'Hey,' he said. 'Thought you were prepping for your next stargazing event at the weekend.'

After the success of the meteor shower viewing, a special Christmas-themed stargazing night had been hastily arranged for that Friday night.

'I think I'm pretty much ready,' she replied, wandering over to a nearby stool to sit down. 'Faye wanted you to taste the latest batch of Christmas biscuits,' she said, bringing out a parcel wrapped in a napkin. 'And she's still raving about how good the nativity scene looks.'

Noah shrugged his shoulders. 'It wasn't much effort,' he told her, trying to resist the aroma of the spiced cookies that he knew would be delicious. 'If I have any more of her lovely biscuits or desserts, I'm not going to fit into my jeans.'

'I know the feeling,' said Beth, nodding.

Noah ran a brief eye over her long legs, encased that day in bright pink thick tights and a short black miniskirt, before trying to concentrate on the sanding once more.

'What are you working on?' she asked.

'The starboard side,' he told her.

'Did you know that the port side was named because it literally was the nearest part of the boat to the port so allowed supplies to be taken onboard easily?'

Noah looked up at Beth. 'Are you changing your studies to concentrate on maritime now?' he asked.

She laughed. 'I was just interested, that's all.'

He really had never met anyone like Beth, with her thirst for knowledge and wonder, he never knew quite what she was going to say next. He found it both baffling but also interesting at the same time.

Beth shivered. 'It's colder out here today.' She leant over and wrapped his scarf around her neck. 'That's better. You don't mind, do you?'

'Be my guest,' he replied, thinking that the burgundy colour suited her.

'I don't mind the cold if I'm dressed for it,' said Beth, before picking up a biscuit and taking a bite. 'You should have seen me in Canada a couple of

years ago. I had so many layers on I couldn't bend my legs to sit down.'

'Canada?' he asked.

'Churchill,' she told him. 'It's great for dark skies. You just have to make sure you don't bump into a polar bear on your way home.' She finished the biscuit before carrying on. 'Did you know that polar bear skins are black? It helps them absorb the heat from the sun. And their fur is actually translucent. It only appears white because it reflects visible light.'

She broke into a wide smile and he was reminded just how beautiful she was.

'There's a lot of time for studying when it's dark twenty hours of the day,' she carried on. 'Am I annoying you?'

'No,' he told her truthfully. 'I've kind of got used to you chatting away.'

She brought a warmth with her that automatically made a person feel happier, he realised. She only ever spoke the truth and what was on her mind. It was refreshing, the lack of lies. It made him trust her and he never trusted anyone. Until now.

'Plus you brought snacks so…' He let his voice trail off.

'I know the way to a man's heart,' she joked, holding out the napkin for him to take a biscuit.

'Through his stomach?' he asked.

Beth nodded. 'Exactly. Especially if Faye or Hannah are doing the baking. They're making the Christmas cake in the kitchen. I'm deemed a liability near any kind of baking so I left them to it. I can't believe Christmas is just around the corner. I haven't even thought about any presents yet.'

'What's on your letter to Santa this year?' asked Noah.

Beth inclined her head, temporarily deep in thought. 'I can't decide,' she told him. 'Between a woolly hat or some new thermal underwear.'

'Thermal underwear?' Noah laughed. 'That's not very sexy.'

'I can't ask Santa for sexy underwear!' replied Beth, blushing. 'What would the elves think?'

Right now, Noah was trying to suppress his own thoughts from considering Beth's underwear.

'So either could arrive in your Christmas stocking?' he asked, quickly changing the subject.

Beth's good mood appeared to fade a little. 'I wouldn't know,' she told him. 'I've never had one.'

He looked at her for a moment. ‘Really?’

Even his own father had managed to stick some chocolate and cheap plastic tat inside an even cheaper stocking when he had been growing up. Perhaps not every year but at least he had experienced receiving a Christmas stocking.

‘We always had a present under the tree in whatever children’s home I was housed in at that time, so that was nice,’ said Beth, trying and failing to look cheerful. ‘But stockings never seemed to be a thing. So I always made my own. Sewed together two pieces of red felt and put a new pen and a couple of chocolates in there from the kitchen. Then I placed it at the bottom of my bed on Christmas Eve.’ She frowned. ‘Silly now I come to think of it. I always knew what was in there. I guess I was still hoping Santa was real.’

His heart ached for her in that moment.

‘Wait a minute, Santa’s not real?’ said Noah, in a mock shocked tone, hoping to cheer her up. It worked as Beth’s face lit up.

‘Don’t say I’ve ruined Christmas for you! I’ll never forgive myself!’ she said, laughing. ‘How will I ever make it up to you?’

For a second, he was going to suggest a kiss. It had been on his mind for some time, those fake kisses in front of Jeremy. Although there was nothing fake about Beth, especially her soft lips.

‘Give me a biscuit and we’ll call it even,’ he said, forcing away the urge to take her in his arms and find out what it was like to kiss Beth when there was nobody about.

37

After Noah had eaten his biscuit, Beth was just thinking how relaxing it was watching him work on the boat when she glanced over to the nearby workbench and saw a mouse scuttling across the surface.

She leapt up from the stool she had been sitting on with a shriek.

Noah jumped. ‘What’s the matter?’ he asked, rushing across to her.

‘Mouse!’ she shouted, pointing at the offending small animal.

He looked at her in amazement. ‘How can someone as bright as you be scared of something that small?’ he asked.

‘I know,’ she told him, shuffling so Noah was between her and the mouse. ‘It’s very frustrating and not logical at all.’

‘It’s not even that big,’ he said, smiling back at her. ‘I think it’s a dormouse.’

‘It’s plenty big enough,’ she told him, backing away from the bench. ‘I tell myself that the fact they communicate through ultrasonic sound is pretty amazing.’ She wrapped her arms around her body. ‘But mostly I hate that they move so fast.’

She shuddered, watching warily as Noah ushered the mouse away from the workbench where it disappeared into one of the many dark corners.

‘All gone,’ he told her. His grin lit up his handsome face and she couldn’t help but smile in return.

‘You deserve another cookie for that,’ she said, going over to take one from the napkin for him.

As Noah went over to the boat once more, Beth joined him to look up at the giant struts of wood that ran the length of the large boat.

She reached out to stroke one plank. ‘What was it about boatmaking that attracted you in the first place?’ she asked.

He took his time to reply, finishing his cookie before speaking. ‘I guess it’s the sense of accomplishment from creating something from nothing,’ he told her. He reached up to place his hand next to hers. ‘See this piece of wood? That’s come from a mighty cedar tree and has now become part of this boat that will hopefully be used for many years to come.’

‘So it’s the longevity that interested you?’ she asked.

He dropped his hand. ‘I guess it was the feeling of making something that would last.’ He appeared to hesitate before carrying on. ‘Everything was such a mess growing up, so disruptive. I think that’s why it’s so satisfying to work on something like this. Something steady that could be kept and remain the same.’

‘So perhaps it was even therapeutic,’ Beth told him.

‘Perhaps,’ he replied, nodding thoughtfully.

‘I think maybe the stars were the same for me,’ she said. ‘Like you, I was looking for something constant, something to rely on. After all, we’ve both been let down by the very people that we should have been able to depend on.’

He flicked a look at her warily. She knew that he wasn’t used to talking about himself. She had only been able to piece together about how bad his childhood had been from talking to the family when he hadn’t been around.

‘We’re not so different, you know,’ she murmured. ‘But where I came out of a bad childhood determined to find true love, you’ve ceased to believe it even exists. Maybe that’s why we’re both so bad at relationships.’

He gave a start. ‘How do you know about my past relationships?’ he asked, raising his eyebrows at her.

‘I’m bright, remember?’ she told him. ‘I can guess stuff correctly.’

He looked at her with his dark eyes for a long time before finally speaking. ‘When you’ve been let down over and over, it’s easier not to trust anyone.’

She nodded. ‘I understand,’ she said, softly. ‘I don’t agree that it’s healthy but I can see why you might want to think that way.’

‘What about your past relationships?’ he asked.

‘Disastrous,’ she admitted. ‘I probably trusted the wrong people which is just as bad as trusting no one. But, to be truthful, none of my many ex-boyfriends were the special, can’t live without that person, that best friend that so many people talk about. None.’ She shook her head before looking up at him. ‘You probably think I’m a lunatic.’

‘That wasn’t what I was thinking at all.’

She couldn’t read his eyes in the shadow of the boat.

‘I think you’re very special to stay so positive,’ he carried on. ‘I’m not sure when I gave up hope of a happy, normal life. Probably when Mum walked out on us both.’

She held her breath, realising how big a deal it was for him to talk about the deeply personal hurt from his childhood.

‘Maybe Dad gave up as well,’ he said. ‘Perhaps that’s why we had to move around so much. Maybe he was running from all that pain, just like me.’

Beth looked at Noah. He seemed to have been given the message early on in his life that love didn’t exist, between parents, between family, between anyone. She hated to think of him continuing that sadness into his adult life as well. He deserved so much more happiness.

Noah seemed to suddenly become conscious that he had spoken out loud and blinked back to life before looking down at her.

He reached out to stroke her cheek which she suddenly realised was wet with tears.

‘You need to toughen up,’ he said, but he kept his tone gentle.

‘I’m tough,’ she told him with a sniff before brushing away another tear.

‘You’re as soft as one of Faye’s cookies,’ he replied.

She smiled. ‘Aren’t they amazing? She’s so talented.’

‘So are you,’ he told her.

Beth shook her head. ‘Not at baking. All the scientific knowledge in the world doesn’t seem to stop any cake I make ending up as flat as a pancake.’ She smiled up at him. ‘You know, I really do think that we’re superheroes, you and me, for surviving our childhoods.’

He laughed. ‘Superheroes? Aren’t they the good guys?’

The thought that he didn’t include himself in that group made her heart ache. Didn’t he know how special he was? She knew the answer, of course. Nobody had ever told him otherwise.

‘You are a good guy, Noah.’ She reached up and brushed her lips on his cheek with a soft kiss. ‘You just haven’t realised it yet.’

As she stepped back, they locked eyes. She could feel herself growing closer to him, feel them changing from being just friends into something more, something deeper.

But he didn’t want a permanent relationship and that was all she wanted, wasn’t it? So she stepped away, making a joke about seeing another mouse, and the moment was lost.

38

Christmas music was coming from the nearby speakers and everyone was wearing Santa hats. Noah thought that the only thing to make it even more festive would have been if the Christmas stargazing event had been held at the North Pole instead of Maple Tree Lodge.

Next to him, Beth was swaying and humming along to 'Santa Claus is Coming to Town' whilst staring at her phone.

'You all set?' he asked her.

She nodded. 'I'm just tracking the International Space Station. Hopefully we've judged it just right so that when it passes over during the meteor shower, the kids think it's Santa doing a trial run.' She shot him a look. 'Don't tell them the truth.'

'I wouldn't dream of it,' he replied, with a grin.

'Glad to hear it,' she told him, adjusting her Santa hat. 'Right, time to get this show started.'

Noah stood and watched from the veranda as Beth picked up her microphone and headed towards the large waiting crowd. Even a little way away, he could hear her enthusiasm as she explained the night sky to everyone.

'When you're experiencing the night sky, you connect with nature,' she began. 'That in turn can trigger a whole load of physical and mental benefits. It can lower stress, help creativity and even make us care more about taking care of the planet as a whole. It's a way of connecting with the wider world and the universe. When we realise that we're all a part of

something much larger than ourselves, it can help you to worry less about your smaller problems.'

'She's a natural,' murmured Ben, who was standing next to him, alongside Alex and Jake who had come down for the weekend. 'We've already got a waiting list for next month because these stargazing events are becoming so popular.'

Noah nodded his agreement, but kept his eyes on Beth.

'I'm so glad you've all joined me tonight because the Geminids are one of the year's best and most reliable annual meteor showers so you're almost guaranteed a spectacular show tonight,' she carried on. 'In perfect clear skies like we have tonight, thank goodness, you may be able to spot 100 to 120 meteors each hour! Isn't that amazing? So who out there knows what causes meteor showers?'

As the crowd shouted out their answers, Noah watched as Beth's head nodded along, thrilled with everyone's enthusiasm.

'That's right,' she replied. 'Meteor showers are typically caused by a comet. However, the Geminids are actually celestial debris left behind by a rocky asteroid known as 3200 Phaethon. That's one for the real space nerds out there,' she joked, giving the crowd a wink. 'Now, I'll let you in on a little secret,' she carried on. 'The Geminids meteor shower is one of my favourites. Why? Because of the distinctive colours you're going to see tonight. Hopefully you'll see white, yellow, green, red and blue streaks of light across the sky. Perfect colours for Christmas time.' Beth checked her watch. 'Now, our celestial light show is due to begin in around fifteen minutes' time so take a moment to let your eyes adjust to the darkness. That will help you to see much easier if you're not looking at any bright lights, such as your phone screen. I'll let you enjoy the peace and quiet and then I'll be back in a little while once the meteor shower starts.'

Noah watched as Beth weaved her way through the crowd, handling them with ease. She was kind to everyone, listening patiently to their questions and answering them as best and honestly as she could.

She had been the same when they had talked the other night in the barn. He had opened up to her more than he had ever done to anyone in his life. He had spoken out loud of his internal pain for the first time ever.

Later on, whilst thinking over their conversation, he had anticipated that he would feel embarrassed, even cross that she might have tricked him into

opening up to him. But in truth, it had felt cathartic to talk to Beth, because she had such a capacity to listen but not judge him.

She had told him about her heart operation that she had endured, and he thought it ironic considering she had the biggest heart of anyone he had ever met. It worried him that her kind and loving heart would keep getting her hurt if she wasn't careful. And he found that he couldn't bear the thought of that.

'Here,' said Alex, holding out a mug for Beth to take as she joined them. 'Hannah made you a hot chocolate to keep you warm.'

If this story has put you in the mood for another, keep going.

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'Oooh,' said Beth, clutching the mug close to her. 'I knew there was a reason I loved her.'

'It's going great,' said Ben. 'And the microphone is fine. We could hear you all the way back here.'

'More's the pity,' said Jake, grinning at his own joke.

Beth rolled her eyes and smiled. 'Well, maybe even you, Jake, might learn something this evening,' she replied. 'What stars do you already know about?'

'The stars on the England football team shirts,' he said. 'They're pretty special.'

She gave Jake a nudge with her elbow. 'That isn't quite what I meant,' she told him, before heading over to Noah. 'Was it really okay?'

He nodded. 'You're doing great,' he replied, anxious to reassure her.

She relaxed her shoulders. 'It's so hard to know what people expect,' she said and he was reminded how little confidence she had in her abilities, despite her sunny and positive nature.

'Just be yourself,' he told her. 'You're a great teacher.'

She smiled at him. 'Thanks,' she said. 'Are you going to stay and watch the meteor shower?'

'Of course,' he replied. 'Why would I want to miss streams of cosmic energy streaking across the sky?'

She laughed. 'Oh, wow,' she told him. 'You're like my star pupil.'

They were smiling at one another when a ripple of excited murmurs went through the crowd.

Beth quickly spun around and immediately looked up to the sky. Noah followed suit and saw that the meteor shower had begun. For a moment, he was transfixed. How had he never studied the night sky before now, he wondered, as he watched the shooting stars fly across the inky black atmosphere above them. It was truly magical.

‘Isn’t it amazing?’ Beth asked him before heading back towards the waiting crowd.

It was, thought Noah. But he was starting to think that Beth was pretty amazing as well.

39

The Christmas tree lights twinkled in the soft light of the Boathouse Café.

It was evening time and the café was closed to customers due to a very important event five days before Christmas.

‘Happy Friendmas!’ Beth said, along with Lily, Hannah and Ella as they chinked their champagne glasses together.

Hannah had recently bought some comfortable second-hand leather sofas which she had placed in the corner of the café for people to enjoy a casual coffee. This evening, however, it was where the four best friends were curled up to celebrate Christmas a couple of days early.

In the background, Hannah had put on Christmas music and the large coffee table between the two sofas was groaning with food.

‘You didn’t need to cook for us,’ said Lily. ‘We could have gone out.’

‘I love cooking for you all,’ Hannah told her. ‘Anyway, it’s just picky bits.’

‘My favourite,’ murmured Beth, reaching forward to dip a breadstick in a bowl of melted camembert.

‘Why is my champagne red?’ asked Ella, staring at the red liquid in her glass.

‘Because it’s a special Christmas cocktail,’ replied Hannah. ‘Frankie told me to add pomegranate syrup to make it more festive.’

‘It’s delicious,’ Lily told her, before taking another sip.

‘I can’t believe we won’t all be together for Christmas,’ said Beth, making a face.

‘Who am I to turn down a free holiday in the Alps?’ asked Ella, with a wide smile.

A chance date a fortnight ago had quickly turned into something more significant before her brand-new boyfriend Benedict had surprised her with a last-minute trip to the Italian Alps for Christmas.

‘It sounds so romantic,’ said Hannah. ‘Wish we had snow here.’

‘Next month apparently,’ Lily told her. ‘They reckon we’ll get loads in the new year.’

‘Excellent,’ said Beth. ‘I love the cold crisp days of winter.’

‘It’ll be even colder and crisper in Antarctica if you get that cruise ship job,’ Hannah reminded her.

Beth nodded. The Zoom interview had gone well and now it was just a case of waiting to see if they wanted to hire her as a stargazing guide on their latest cruise ship.

‘It’s an amazing opportunity and would look great on your resume,’ said Ella, nodding her approval.

‘Of course it would,’ said Hannah.

‘So tell us about this last-minute holiday,’ said Lily to Ella. ‘Do you ski?’

‘I après-ski,’ Ella told her, with a smile. ‘Besides, you can’t really expect me to go hurtling down a mountain on two planks of wood. I mean, I’m not that crazy. So expect lots of photos on my blog of fondue, fireplaces and twinkling lights.’

‘You could have that here,’ murmured Hannah.

‘I agree,’ said Lily. ‘Are you sure you wouldn’t rather be with us? I know we’re not sophisticated and all that but it might be more relaxing.’

‘Maybe she just wants to be with her new love,’ said Beth, as always thinking of the romance of a snowy holiday in the Alps at Christmastime.

‘I’m there to support Benedict with his career,’ said Ella. ‘All the business partners at his firm are staying in the resort, that’s why he’s invited me. They’re having a thought shower whilst they’re out there.’

‘A what?’ Hannah looked mystified.

‘It’s all corporate jargon,’ said Ella with a shrug. ‘Basically he needs to network this Christmas to stand him in better position to get a promotion. He’s vying with another guy for Vice-President of Finance. I’m there to help market him and improve his prospects.’

‘Sounds really fun and festive,’ murmured Lily, rolling her eyes.

Ella shook her head at her friend. ‘It’s not about fun. It’s business. It could be a real game changer for him.’

‘You won’t mind that it’s a work thing?’ asked Beth.

‘Not at all. You know I hate all that soppy stuff,’ said Ella with a shudder. ‘That’s why Benedict is such an amazing find. He’s good-looking and ambitious, as well as having the most amazing apartment in town as well.’

Beth loved Ella but had always struggled to understand her friend’s attitude towards relationships.

‘Yes but does he know all about your hopes and dreams?’ asked Lily. ‘Does he want to get married? Have a family?’

Ella frowned at her. ‘Of course not,’ she replied. ‘He wants his own business and to make as much money as he possibly can.’

‘But what about the magic?’ asked Hannah, in a dreamy voice.

‘The magic?’ Ella looked nonplussed. ‘Don’t look at me. I don’t believe in soulmates and magic and all that stuff.’

Beth realised in that moment that it had been the magic that she had been missing so far from every relationship.

‘What about Noah?’ teased Ella, looking at Beth. ‘Are you feeling the magic there?’

‘Of course not,’ she said, shuffling in her seat. ‘Besides, I’m not going out with him, am I?’

She leaned forward and topped up her glass with champagne, grateful for when the conversation moved on to Ella’s ski wear and what the resort was like.

The champagne helped her to relax but still she felt restless and a little out of sorts.

‘Are you okay?’ asked Lily, slipping her arm into Beth’s as they headed back to the lodge later that evening.

‘Too much champagne,’ she replied.

‘Can you actually have too much champagne?’ asked Ella, on the other side of Lily and Hannah.

‘I’ll let you know in the morning,’ said Lily.

The combination of alcohol and fresh air made them all a little giggly as they headed indoors. They could hear the laughter and conversation coming from the bar where the men were having their own festive evening.

‘Come on,’ said Lily. ‘Let’s go find our men.’

She knew that Lily was referring to Ben and Alex but even so, Beth hoped that Noah was still there as well. It might have been all the champagne she had drunk that evening that made the thought of seeing him quicken her pulse.

But despite the alcohol, she knew that it wasn’t. She had a huge crush on Noah and had no idea what to do about it.

40

In the past, Christmas had pretty much passed Noah by without too much of a fuss. Sometimes he had gone out for a festive drink with any co-workers but otherwise, he would normally be found on Christmas Day working on a boat. Real-life Christmas wasn't like it was portrayed in the movies.

And yet, there at Maple Tree Lodge, he could slowly feel himself succumbing to a touch of magic.

Everyone had decorated the hotel from top to bottom and so he was constantly surrounded by the aroma of pine, orange and cloves. Holly and fairy lights were everywhere and he had never seen so many Christmas trees inside a home before. There was one in every room, including the snug where he was having a drink with Ben and his friends. Even the bar where Frankie was serving up various drinks had fake red felt stockings hanging from the front.

Now that the last guests had left and the hotel was closed for Christmas, everyone could finally relax after a busy few months of hard work.

Not that everyone appeared to be getting into the spirit of peace and goodwill to all men.

'Oh, I'm sorry,' Ella was saying to Jake. 'Did I roll my eyes too loudly for you to hear?'

Ella and Jake had a relationship based on mutual loathing, although it appeared to be heavily weighted towards Ella. Jake always seemed to shrug off the barbed comments that she directed at him.

‘Listen,’ he replied, giving Ella a cheeky grin. ‘Don’t get your tinsel in a tangle. I’m just saying that I see no good reason to act my age.’

‘Well, you never have done before now,’ snapped Ella, taking her drink from Frankie and walking away to the far side of the room.

Jake laughed as he picked up his set of darts. ‘Now, what was the score before we were so rudely interrupted? Oh, yes, I was winning.’

‘Don’t get used to it,’ Ben told him, standing nearby.

Noah had to admit that he was enjoying himself. Also that he was beginning to enjoy the company of the other men. Not used to having friends, he still remained a little reserved in the group but if the others noticed, they certainly didn’t say anything.

Having worked on the lodges almost every day for the past two months, Noah and Ben had grown closer, getting used to each other. Ben had told him about the struggles of the past few years, as well as how meeting Lily had completely turned his life around. In turn, Noah had opened up a little about how nomadic his life had been so far. Ben had asked about the different places where Noah had lived but if there had been any judgement from his cousin, Noah hadn’t detected it.

Noah had also begun to get to know Alex a little better and had even begun to join him and Tiny occasionally when they went for their morning walk around the lake. He liked his quiet nature, certainly in stark contrast to Jake’s more exuberant personality. Alex had told Noah about his previous career as an athlete and how the water sports centre he had set up near the boathouse had given him much more satisfaction than any sporting competition.

Not that he wasn’t competitive, thought Noah as Alex won the game of darts with a hearty cheer.

Jake shook his head. ‘There was some blatant cheating going on there, I’m sure,’ he said. ‘Right. As it’s not a school night, shall we have another beer?’

Jake was the man that Noah knew the least. He had a dry wit which meant, according to Ben, along with being an extremely talented chef and good-looking, Jake had no problems attracting the opposite sex.

He was also a flirt, thought Noah, as he watched Jake wander over to the bar to chat and laugh with Beth who was also getting herself a drink.

‘I’m just saying that you should be more naughty,’ he was telling her. ‘Save Santa the trip.’

As Beth laughed along with Jake, Noah suddenly found his good mood fading. She was bright and beautiful. Of course Beth would attract guys wherever she went.

'He does that with every woman he comes across.'

Noah spun around to find Alex standing next to him.

'He would never do anything to take it further with her,' carried on Alex in a soft tone so that only Noah would hear him. 'Beth's like family to him. We all are.'

Noah nodded but he didn't like Jake flirting with Beth and he didn't want to dig too deeply into why that might be. They had grown close and he had trusted her with pieces of his past that he had never told anyone. They were just good friends, despite the chemistry that had passed between them all those weeks ago when they had kissed. And yet he had found himself yearning for something more, which confused him. He had never wanted a permanent relationship in his life.

'Jake's never been serious about anyone,' added Ben, also coming to stand with them. 'His parents' awful divorce pretty much scared him off any relationships.'

Noah looked from Ben to Alex. 'Okay,' he said. 'No worries.'

As usual, he shrugged off any concern or attempt to get him to open up about his innermost feelings. In that respect, he was the complete opposite to Beth.

Ben studied him for a moment longer before suggesting they all play a game of snooker. Noah relaxed once the men had wandered away, grateful that they hadn't pushed him.

Perhaps it was true and they had no reason to lie. Perhaps Jake was just a big flirt with everyone except perhaps Ella. But Noah didn't like it all the same.

He couldn't stop himself from watching Beth for a while longer, even after Jake had walked back over to the snooker table.

Chatting to Frankie, Beth suddenly spun around on the bar stool to survey the room and spotted Noah watching her. She broke into such a wide smile that it made the breath catch in his throat.

They exchanged a smile before she spun back around once more. He finally blew out a breath, wondering why it made him feel so much better knowing Beth wasn't a flirt.

As he turned to head to the snooker table, he glanced once more at the bar and looked at the row of fake red stockings along the front. He thought back to Beth telling him that she'd had to make and fill her own Christmas stocking growing up and his heart went out to her.

She had done so much for him, listened and not judged him when he had opened up to her. How could he possibly repay her kindness? Then he realised what he could do.

He quickly excused himself from the game and went to find Faye to ask her a favour.

41

Beth yawned and rolled over to check her phone. It was seven o'clock on Christmas morning and she was at Maple Tree Lodge. She smiled to herself, thinking about the lovely festive day ahead with the family before stretching out under the covers.

However, as she pointed her toes, they hit something at the bottom of the bed and she looked up from her pillow to stare down the bed to see what it was. She saw a flash of red and, sitting bolt upright, stared down at the object on her covers in amazement. It was a Christmas stocking.

She looked around the room but there was no other evidence that anyone had been there. Was it a mistake? Was it really hers? She shuffled down the bed and reached out to turn it over. Immediately she saw the name Beth embroidered on the white felt. It really belonged to her. Her first ever Christmas stocking.

With a whoop of glee, she shuffled back up, clutching onto the precious stocking. Leaning against the pillows, she took a slow and calm breath. She wanted to savour the moment and hug it to herself to recall whenever she felt low.

Reaching inside the opening, she picked out the first wrapped parcel and carefully revealed a pair of big thick socks. They were pink and purple striped and she giggled, thinking they suited her perfectly.

The next present she unwrapped was a pair of pink wool gloves, thick and warm enough even for the coldest of nights, along with a matching bobble hat. The colour was absolutely perfect.

Finally there was one more present in the bottom of the stocking. As she pulled it out, she realised that it was a lot heavier than the previous presents and couldn't work out what it was at all.

She carefully unwrapped the present until the object was revealed. It was a beautifully hand-carved set of stars, the smaller of which could fit inside the larger one. They were 3D effect, the carving smooth as she ran her hand over the oak wood. The grain on both pieces was beautiful and as she placed them on her bedside table, she realised that the bottom of each piece was flat so that they could be placed as an ornament on any surface to be admired.

Tears pricked her eyes. It was the most thoughtful, incredible gift she had ever been given. They could only have been made by someone with immense carpentry skills. And she instantly knew just who the stocking was from.

Beth leapt out of bed and rushed out of the room, grabbing a wrapped present nearby as she went.

She immediately turned right and knocked softly on the bedroom door. She hopped impatiently from foot to foot as she waited for it be opened.

Finally, the door swung open.

'Good morning,' said Noah, running a hand through messy hair. He was wearing a pair of sweatpants and pulling a jumper over his head. 'You're up early.'

'Good morning and happy Christmas!' cried Beth. She hesitated before stepping forward to give Noah the most enormous hug.

But she was a little too hasty and having only just revealed his head through the top of his jumper, Noah wasn't braced for impact and they both fell down onto the ground.

'Ooof,' cried Noah, on impact with the thankfully soft carpet underneath them.

'I'm so sorry,' said Beth, leaning back to look at him as he lay beneath her. 'But I just had to say thank you. A million times thank you. It's the nicest, most thoughtful present that anyone has ever given me. I woke up to a Christmas stocking and it was amazing. Like Santa had been there himself! You must have been awfully quiet. God, I hope I wasn't snoring or anything dreadful like that. Anyway, you're just the sweetest person ever and I had to say thank you.'

She couldn't stop herself from throwing her arms around him once more. She felt Noah still before she felt his arm slide across her back.

'You're welcome,' she heard him murmur, into her hair. 'Although I don't think anyone's ever called me sweet before.'

'Well, they should have,' she said, pulling up to smile at his face which was now so near to hers.

She looked into his dark eyes for a moment, thinking how warm they were up close like now.

'You must have your Christmas present from me now,' she said, feeling around on the carpet next to them with her hand to pick up a somewhat messily wrapped present. 'I hope we haven't squished it.'

'Perhaps we should sit down on a chair just in case,' he said.

'Of course,' she replied, leaping off him. She had obviously just embarrassed him but for once, she didn't mind what he thought of her. She was too eager to give him his Christmas present after the amazing one that he had gifted her.

They sat down on the bed, their legs touching as they sat close to one another.

'Go on,' she urged him.

'You're just like a kid on Christmas morning,' he said, smiling at her.

'I've had my first ever Christmas stocking so yeah, I guess I have regressed a little,' she told him. 'Come on! I'm desperate for you to open yours now.'

He unwrapped the present and stared down at the battered leather box. She watched as he opened the lid to look down at the gold timepiece.

'It's a maritime compass,' she told him in a proud tone. 'From the 1920s. I saw it in an antique shop in Aldwych a fortnight ago and thought it would look perfect in your lovely boat and you could use it when you head out for your first ever voyage.'

Noah looked shocked and stared down at the compass for a moment, completely speechless.

'It's okay,' she told him, reaching out to take his hand in hers. 'I felt the same way about the stars you made me.'

He looked down at their hands entwined before looking up at her face.

'Thank you,' he said.

'And thank you. Nobody's ever given me anything like that before,' she told him, looking at him with wide eyes.

‘Not an ex-boyfriend?’ he asked, reaching out to stroke her cheek and she felt her stomach clench as his fingers trailed down her skin.

‘Definitely not,’ she told him. ‘Normally if I were in a relationship at Christmas, my present would be some kind of underwear. Probably flammable.’

She heard Noah gulp.

‘You know, I love this secret side of you, making special presents for me.’ She grinned at him. ‘Don’t panic. I’m not asking for a proposal but I don’t think you’re the cold-hearted person I did when I met you.’

He was still studying her with his dark eyes. ‘You don’t?’

‘I think you’re guarded but there’s another side to you that you don’t show very often, sometimes only to me. And I like it.’ She laughed once more. ‘Don’t worry. I don’t love you.’

‘Good to know.’ He grinned.

‘Next time I’m in a relationship at Christmas, I’ll have to make sure I up my present request expectations,’ she carried on. ‘Although yours will be hard for any boyfriend to top.’

‘Glad to hear you’ll be aiming higher next time,’ he replied.

Beth nodded. ‘I will. But I’m beginning to realise that it doesn’t mean I have to be in a relationship to be happy. After all, I’m happy now.’

‘So am I.’

He said it so softly and yet she caught the heavy weight of his words.

She looked up at him and time stood still.

Slowly, he dipped his head towards her, his arm wrapping around her to draw her close. It was inevitable that they would kiss in that moment. She couldn’t stop her hands creeping around his shoulders until they were both embracing the other close and tight. She felt dazed by his slow but thorough kiss.

Finally, and she had no idea how long they had kissed for, they both pulled back a little.

There was nothing but their heavy breaths in the silence as they stared at each other.

She understood now what her friends had been talking about a few nights ago. It was the magic that she had missed from every other relationship. The magic felt real with Noah.

‘What was that for?’ she asked, still feeling dazed and trying to make light of her growing feelings for him. ‘To keep our kissing game up in case

Jeremy returns?'

He shook his head. 'It was a kiss between friends.'

Friends. What friends ever kissed passionately like that? The word shook her out of her daze and she blinked back to life.

'And there isn't even any mistletoe nearby!' she told him, fixing on a wide smile. 'You know what? As a reward for giving me my first ever Christmas stocking, I'm going to make sure you get an extra portion of roast potatoes at lunchtime.'

She stood up, suddenly needing to get some distance between them. The kiss had been wonderful and she felt shaken to the core.

She looked down at Noah to see if he was feeling the same way. But his face was a mask as usual as he smiled up at her and said, 'Happy Christmas, Beth.'

'Happy Christmas, Noah,' she replied before leaving the room.

She went back into her bedroom and leaned against the door after she had closed it. Just friends, that was what he thought of them.

She sighed heavily. The trouble was that she didn't think of him at all like that. But if he didn't think the same way then what future did they have?

42

After Beth had left the bedroom, Noah lay back on the bed against the pillows.

He was thrilled with her reaction to the Christmas stocking that he had left at the bottom of the bed. He smiled to himself, glad that she was so pleased with her present. It had taken many hours of secrecy working on the carving, with only Faye in on the surprise as she had sewn the stocking. He had chosen the piece of wood that the stars were carved from with extreme care, wanting only the best for her.

He couldn't help but pick up the maritime compass and stared down at it. The fact that it came from Beth made it even more special, he realised. Because he was beginning to really care for her.

Was that why he hadn't been able to stop himself from kissing her? When his mind had been silently screaming at him not to go near her, the chemistry between them had been too much for the rest of him to ignore. It had been the sweetest, most wonderful of kisses but it had to be the last as well, he told himself. She was a romantic who believed in happy ever afters and everything that went with that. And he could not and would not be the one to deny her that opportunity.

Suddenly needing to keep busy to ignore his confused feelings, he got dressed and headed downstairs. He was quickly embraced by various members of the family as everyone got into the Christmas spirit.

Breakfast was a melee of noise and merriment, as usual centred around the kitchen table. Pots of tea and coffee were placed on the table alongside

bagels filled with smoked salmon and eggs or bacon, followed by delicious Christmas tree sweet pastries full of cinnamon cream and cranberries. Even Tiny the dog was given his very own bacon bagel. It was a feast but a very relaxed affair as everyone chatted, with Christmas music playing in the background.

After breakfast, everyone wandered into the lounge where the fire was stoked and roaring away next to the huge Christmas tree. There on the tree, he could see the blue bauble that he had helped decorate all those years ago, along with similar ones with Ben and Hannah's names on them. Underneath the tree were a pile of presents to be handed out.

Ben had explained to Noah beforehand that to save money, each member of the family received only one present but that meant that the gift could be home-made or that care could be taken over what to buy.

The present to Beth had been personal from him only but Noah had also helped carve a new gardening trug for Faye who was delighted with her gift. The remainder of the presents had been all created or made by different members of the family. Beth looked delighted with her new miniskirt which Faye had made using an old sewing pattern from the 1960s.

'It's perfect,' she declared, beaming from ear to ear as she held up the teal-coloured velvet against her legs.

As each person took their turn to open their present, Noah had become almost convinced that there wasn't actually anything for him. He was so used to being left out and had already decided that he didn't mind at all when Ben stood up and went to retrieve the last parcel under the tree.

It was also the smallest and Noah was surprised when Ben walked over to the sofa where he was sitting and held the present out for him to take.

'Happy Christmas,' he said, looking down at his cousin.

'Thanks,' said Noah, before looking at his gift.

It was a small box and didn't take him very long to unwrap and open the lid. There, nestled amongst a pile of purple tissue paper, was a large silver key.

He looked at Ben who had now sat down opposite him. 'Is this to the family fortune?' he joked, feeling a little confused.

Ben laughed. 'I wish.' He hesitated before looking across to Walter. 'I'll let you tell him, Grandad. It was your idea, after all.'

Walter cleared his throat. 'It's the key to Lodge No. 1,' he said.

‘The lodge?’ Noah was astounded but pleased. ‘That’s amazing. You want me to rent it from you? Test it out to be ready for the guests now that it’s the first one that we’ve completed?’

Walter shook his head. ‘No, lad,’ he replied softly. ‘We don’t want that one to be for strangers. It’s your home. And even if you go away for a while, it will remain your home here. Forever.’

Noah’s mouth dropped open as he realised what Walter was telling him.

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‘But you need the money from renting them out,’ he stammered.

‘Family will always be more important than money,’ said Walter, his shaky voice betraying the emotion he obviously felt.

Noah glanced at Ben, who was nodding at him, as if trying to reassure him that he could actually believe what he was being told.

‘We felt you might not want to be in the hub of things all the time what with all the hotel guests,’ Ben told him. ‘But you’re still near enough to have to put up with us all, I’m afraid,’ he added with a grin.

Noah was astounded. A home. A forever home, here by the beautiful lake and surrounded by the countryside with Maple Tree Lodge on his doorstep. He still couldn’t believe it.

‘It’s yours,’ said Walter, with a firm nod. ‘You’re a proper part of the family now.’

‘Poor sod,’ said Ben with a grin. ‘But it’s true, I’m afraid. So you’re stuck with us for the foreseeable.’

Noah was speechless. He could feel the emotion welling up inside him and didn’t know what to do or say. Nobody had ever given him anything like this. Ever been so generous. The Jackson family weren’t just giving him a permanent home. They were giving themselves as well.

The silence stretched out and suddenly he felt a hand slip into his. He knew without looking down that it was Beth’s and squeezed it tight and felt grateful for something to hold onto.

‘Right, who wants a coffee?’ asked Frankie, standing up. ‘And can I add a bit of Christmas spirit to it?’

Noah was grateful for the change of conversation to steer the almost overwhelming attention away from him. But he kept Beth's hand in his for a while longer, squeezing it back until he felt able to speak once more.

He stood up and went over to his uncle.

'Thank you,' he said, holding out his hand for Walter to shake.

Walter slowly stood up out of his chair and stepped forward to give Noah a hug before adding a hearty slap on the back.

'Are you sure?' murmured Noah.

'Never been more certain of anything in my life,' replied Walter. He looked across to his grandson who had headed over to join them.

'I agree,' said Ben, putting his arm around Noah's shoulders. 'There is no pressure from any of us but we thought that you should have a permanent place here. Somewhere of your own. So you've always got a home to return to.' He hesitated before adding, 'And a family to come back to as well.'

Home. Permanent. Family. Three words that had been so far removed from Noah's whole life up to that point.

It scared him but pleased him all at the same time. He was still nervous about opening up to anyone. But for once, he wanted to go with his gut. And that was telling him that these people weren't going to hurt him.

So he took a deep breath and smiled back at Ben, despite feeling overwhelmed with emotion.

His shoulders began to relax as he glanced down at the key once more. He really was among family now and he felt better, stronger and happier because of it.

43

Walter had insisted on carving the turkey, reminding everyone that his collarbone was well and truly fixed. Everyone was still grateful that Faye supervised his use of the electric carving knife though.

After a delicious and extremely large Christmas lunch, the family agreed that they needed a walk around the lake to walk off the big meal.

'It's tradition,' Lily told Beth, as they watched Tiny the dog lead the way ahead of them all on the path.

'Yes, we eat far too much every single year,' added Frankie, wrapping her scarf around her neck.

'So we basically learn nothing from one year to the next,' said Hannah, with a giggle.

Beth slipped on her new pink gloves and bobble hat, smiling as she thought of Noah wrapping them and placing them in her first ever Christmas stocking.

'That's a great colour on you,' said Lily, nodding her approval.

'Thanks,' replied Beth.

She hadn't told anyone about Noah's Christmas stocking. He was a private person and she didn't want to upset him by revealing too much. And yet his presents had touched her more than any gift she had ever received.

He walked ahead of her around the lake, talking quietly with Walter and Dotty. Meanwhile Beth joined in half-heartedly with the conversation with her friends and yet she couldn't put Noah's kiss out of her mind. She felt

that the wooden stars, a very special present, had to mean something, didn't they?

At least it was a lovely walk in the winter sunshine, she thought. The clouds occasionally drifted across the sun but the air stayed crisp and refreshing, the perfect tonic after a long and hearty meal.

Everyone was eager to see Noah's new home and so they all crowded around the first lodge as he put the key in the lock.

Beth could see that he was embarrassed at the attention but thought that he was dealing with it well with good humour. But as he opened the front door, Noah gasped in shock and the family pushed forward to see what had stunned him.

As they all crammed inside the space, Beth instantly understood his surprise. At some point since completion a week ago, the lodge had been furnished. It was no longer just an empty shell, it was a warm and comfortable home.

On one wall was a log burner in front of which had been placed a leather sofa, draped with soft blankets in shades of blue. Beyond that was the kitchenette along the back, which although small had everything needed such as a stove, fridge and coffee maker. Then there was a door through which was the bathroom which had a shower slotted neatly into the corner.

Finally, on the other side of the main room was a double bed, already dressed in matching shades of blue. A small bedside cabinet of oak had been placed next to the bed, as well as a sheepskin rug for fluffy warmth over the wooden floorboards.

It was a perfect hideaway from normal life, thought Beth. But a comfortable as well as romantic one as well.

There was only one person that could have decorated it so well.

Beth spun around to face Lily. 'Oh, it's amazing,' she told her.

However, Lily was looking straight at Noah. 'I hope I didn't overstep but we figured that you would want to move in straight away so I ordered a few bits for you to help settle in,' she said.

'It's incredible,' replied Noah, sounding a little stunned as he continued to stare around in disbelief. He blinked back to life and looked at Lily. 'It's perfect, thank you.'

Lily instantly relaxed and smiled tearily at him. 'You're welcome,' she replied.

‘Right, get the kettle on,’ said Dotty. ‘Let’s get the place christened, shall we?’

‘There’s mugs and teabags already in the cupboard,’ Lily told her.

‘And milk in the fridge,’ added Faye.

With everyone squeezed inside, it was a cosy tea break from their walk, with Noah getting the log stove going to bring some warmth into the place and everyone taking turns to look around. Beth thought that it already felt very much like a family home, especially once Tiny had sprawled on the floor in between them all.

As the sun began to sink below the trees, the family headed back to the hotel to get everything ready for a few board games and yet more food.

Noah told them that he would be along in a while and Beth opted to stay behind with him.

‘So do you really like it?’ she asked, as soon as they were alone.

‘How could I not?’ he replied, staring around and shaking his head in wonder. ‘I’ve never lived anywhere this nice. I can’t believe it’s all mine.’

‘Maybe you deserve it,’ she told him.

He turned to look at her. ‘You always believe the best in people, don’t you?’ he asked.

‘I try,’ she replied.

‘You amaze me,’ he told her.

‘That makes a change,’ she said. ‘Most of the time I think I just annoy people by wittering on about stars and other stuff.’

‘Talking of stars,’ he said, pointing upwards.

She followed his gaze up to the ceiling and gasped. There in the roof, placed above the bed, was a large skylight through which she could see the rapidly darkening sky.

‘How could I have not spotted that earlier? Oh, it’s wonderful!’ she told him, clapping her hands. ‘I would never get any sleep if I were in bed here!’ She groaned as she heard the double entendre out loud. ‘Sorry. That’s not what I meant.’

She looked at Noah to give him a sheepish grin and found that he wasn’t smiling, merely looking at her with a look she couldn’t fathom.

‘I shouldn’t have kissed you this morning,’ he said.

Her heart went into her throat. ‘It was just a kiss between friends,’ she stammered, reminding him of his own words.

‘This is no good,’ he carried on, shaking his head. ‘Not for you. I’m cynical and you’re the most carefree person I’ve ever met.’

‘Opposites can attract,’ she replied quickly. ‘Just look at magnets. The polarity causes…’

‘Beth.’

He interrupted her rambling and she gulped. She knew what he was about to say and couldn’t stand to hear it. Not on Christmas Day. Maybe later in the new year but for now, she didn’t want to have him reject her. It had been the most perfect day and she wouldn’t let it be ruined in her memory.

So, upon hearing the honk of geese outside as they skidded their landings onto the lake, she walked over to the open front door and looked out.

‘Did you know that geese navigate by the means of stars and magnetic fields through the nerve endings in their upper bills?’ she said, in a bright voice. ‘Nature’s incredible, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘It is.’

Beth gave an overly dramatic shudder. ‘Gosh, it’s getting cold, isn’t it? Time to head back, I reckon. Are you coming? I play a mean game of Scrabble so prepare yourself.’

He looked at her for a long moment before nodding. ‘Yeah. I’ll come back with you.’

They walked back to Maple Tree Lodge in silence, both lost in their own thoughts.

For once, Beth could think of nothing to say, wishing it was Christmas morning again and that her heart hadn’t been broken yet.

44

January was heralded in with mild Atlantic storm fronts, soaking the country over and over. Gone were the sunny skies of December, now everywhere was dull and dark, subdued by the heavy grey clouds overhead.

Despite the awful weather, Noah and Ben continued to work on the three remaining lodges. Thankfully they had been made watertight before the bad weather had rolled in so they could carry on fitting them ready to be rented out in the spring.

Noah had particularly enjoyed making the furniture from wood that had come from the surrounding forest.

‘This is a great piece,’ said Walter one morning, running his hand across the coffee table that Noah had just brought into one of the lodges. ‘I like that it’s a cross-section. Look at those rings. It’s got to be over a hundred years old.’

Noah nodded. ‘It was one of those older trees that came down in the storms before Christmas. There are some beautiful cuts that I want to use for the kitchen cupboards in here.’

‘It’s looking great,’ said Ben, looking over from where he had been hanging a blind at the window.

‘Reckon we’ll be done in time for those first bookings at Easter?’ asked Walter.

‘Absolutely,’ replied Ben, coming back down the stepladder.

‘Well, if you need extra help, I’m up and running now,’ said Walter.

‘There’ll be no running if Grandma has her way,’ said Ben, giving his grandad a pointed look.

‘All this mollycoddling is driving me insane,’ muttered Walter, frowning.

‘How did you get on with those drawers for the boat cabin?’ asked Noah.

Walter immediately looked more cheerful. ‘Finished them this morning,’ he replied.

‘Excellent,’ Noah told him. ‘I look forward to seeing them later.’

‘Do you want me to start work on the matching cupboard doors?’ asked Walter.

‘Absolutely,’ replied Noah. ‘If you’ve nothing else on, that is.’

‘Nothing but my own time.’ Walter headed to the front door. ‘Right. I’ll get going on them now.’

‘See you later,’ called out Ben, before looking at his cousin. ‘Well done,’ he said. ‘Keeping him busy but safe has been an ongoing issue this past year so I’m grateful for some help in that regard.’

Noah nodded. ‘We can both protect him,’ he replied.

He was discovering that perhaps he was more like his great-uncle than he had initially realised. After all, he understood all about keeping busy. Work had been the one constant throughout his life that had kept him company when he had been so alone. It had helped to keep his mind from going towards darker thoughts at times too.

These days though, he felt a lightening of the spirit inside of him. Working on the lodges had brought him a newfound sense of being part of a team and he was enjoying Ben’s company. Day by day they were growing closer and he even found that he was automatically included whenever Alex and Jake were around to play a game or two in the snug.

‘What do you think of the blinds?’ asked Ben.

Noah nodded, as he looked at the autumnal pattern on them. ‘Looks good,’ he replied. ‘So it’s going to be decorated differently to my lodge?’

My lodge. He still found that hard to get his head around.

‘Yeah, Lily wanted yours to be more personal,’ Ben told him. ‘Everything in here is a little more durable for the high turnover. Hopefully,’ he added, with a grimace.

‘They’ll come,’ Noah assured him. ‘How could they not? I mean, waking up to this view every day? I tell you, it’s incredible.’

‘For what it’s worth, you seem happy.’

Noah looked at his cousin in surprise. He was happy, he realised, before frowning to himself. The person he had to thank for his happiness was Beth.

Ben shook his head as he watched him but he was smiling. ‘Hey, it’s not the end of the world to be content in life, you know.’

Noah nodded and wandered over to the doorway to look out across the lake. He stood and watched as he spotted Beth rushing along the path towards the Boathouse Café, no doubt to help Hannah out with the busy coffee morning shift.

From the outside, it would appear that nothing had changed between them in the past fortnight. She was as cheerful and chatty as ever whenever they were together. Superficially she was merry as usual but Noah knew she was upset. She hadn’t visited him in the barn where the boat was since Christmas. He knew it was his own fault. He had told her that their kiss on Christmas morning had been a mistake and that had been the truth.

The last thing he ever wanted to do was hurt her. He had always considered his own childhood particularly awful but at least he had had one parent around, most of the time. Beth’s story though had touched him deeply and the more he got to know her, the more he realised just how vastly different their own dreams were. She wanted a serious relationship and love, all the things that he didn’t believe in.

So in order to protect her, he had told her that they should be just friends and he had meant it. He cared too much to lead her on, no matter how much he wanted to kiss her again. It just wouldn’t be fair on her.

Noah felt Ben wander over to join him at the doorway where they both looked across the lake to where Beth was about to reach the boathouse.

‘So you’re enjoying living in the lodge?’ asked Ben.

‘How could I not?’ replied Noah. ‘It’s the most incredible place I’ve ever lived.’

‘You know,’ said Ben, turning around to stare at the inside of the lodge, ‘these places are a great size. Definitely big enough for two people to live here.’

Noah gave his cousin a pained look. ‘That’s not going to happen,’ he said, with a shake of his head.

Ben merely shrugged his shoulders. ‘You never know,’ he replied.

‘If you let someone in, they will only hurt you,’ stated Noah. It had been his mantra from day one, his rule in life to live by.

‘Not here, they won’t,’ said Ben. ‘You know the family wouldn’t hurt you. And I’m pretty certain Beth wouldn’t either.’

Noah looked at his cousin. ‘I didn’t know we were talking about Beth,’ he said.

Ben gave him a long look. ‘My mistake. So,’ he carried on, turning away. ‘What’s next? The kitchen, I reckon.’

Noah relaxed, knowing that Ben would never push him to open up regarding any kind of relationship with Beth and he was grateful. And yet he couldn’t stop himself from glancing back across the lake. But Beth had already disappeared out of sight.

45

The morning of the first of the predicted meteor shower dawned with yet more rain.

It did nothing to soothe Beth's troubled soul. Since Christmas, everything had changed and she had no idea what to do about any of it.

The good news was that her blog continued to grow and grow. Ella's help with the marketing clicks had meant that Beth finally had a steady income week on week. In addition, the magazine wanted to extend her column into a double-page spread which also meant a pay increase. Finally, the stargazing nights were already sold out and proving to be hugely popular. She had done it. She was finally successful in her own right.

So successful, in fact, that she had been offered the job in Antarctica on the cruise ships and they wanted a reply by the end of the week. The offer was incredible and yet she longed to stay at Maple Tree Lodge. But Noah was there permanently now and everything between them was stilted and awkward, ever since he had rejected her, in fact. It was all a muddle and she had no idea what to do about any of it.

'It'll clear,' said Walter, with an assured nod as he looked out of the window at the rain.

Beth sincerely hoped so. Especially when she saw the line of people checking into the hotel for the weekend.

'We're full,' Lily told her with a wide smile. 'And there's a waiting list as well. Everybody wants to view the meteor shower.'

'Let's hope this weather clears up,' said Beth, biting her lip.

‘Walter’s always right about these things,’ Faye told her, with a soft smile.

But although Walter was right and the rain did stop, the thick heavy cloud continued to linger over the lake and trees for the remainder of the day.

‘This is a disaster,’ muttered Beth, late in the afternoon as she stood in the kitchen staring out of the window. ‘We’ve only got these two nights, perhaps even Sunday night as well to view the meteor shower. What am I going to do with all these people with a cloudy sky?’

She turned to look at her best friends.

‘Play Uno?’ replied Ella, with a shrug.

‘Maybe it’ll clear,’ said Hannah, trying and failing to sound optimistic.

‘Come on,’ urged Lily, looking more serious. ‘Keep the faith, eh? It’ll turn out okay.’

But after the dinner service that evening, the sky still hadn’t cleared. Everyone was gathered in the lounge and expectantly looking at Beth as she went in.

She felt nervous and gulped at the attention, despite wearing her favourite red velvet minidress which had always made her feel fabulous.

‘Well, good evening,’ she said to her audience.

‘Good evening,’ they all chorused back to her. Some people were even wearing their coats in anticipation of heading outside.

‘As I’m sure you can’t have failed to notice, the weather is not on our side tonight,’ she told them. ‘So we have two choices. We can head outside anyway although it’s completely clouded over. Or we can stay here in the warmth and enjoy all the hospitality that Maple Tree Lodge has to offer. Perhaps we can head into the snug and I can answer any questions you may have about stargazing and astronomy.’

There was a general murmuring of assent and a small time later, everyone had a drink and was either standing or sitting around the bar.

Beth hesitated to speak up once more but then saw Noah standing at the back of the room watching her.

She had missed him the past couple of weeks. It had been a deliberate choice on her part to step away from the closeness that they had begun to enjoy but all the same, her heart ached for him. Perhaps they would just have to remain friends but she knew that she would always wonder what could have happened between them.

She knew that he didn't trust romantic love and completely understood why that was. He had been deeply hurt and that had influenced his whole outlook on life. He might have let the Jackson family into his heart but it would probably always be closed off to her or anyone else romantically.

But right at that moment, she was grateful that his ever-steady presence gave her the strength to carry on speaking to the large crowd.

'Welcome to Maple Tree Lodge,' she began. 'And, for many of you, I understand that this weekend will be your first step into astronomy as well. You're going to receive a lot of information but please don't worry. Stargazing can be done at your own pace. There's no timetable, no deadline for you to appreciate the wonders of the universe. It's a personal journey and one which I hope you'll enjoy going on.'

She took a breath and glanced at Noah once more; he was nodding for her to carry on.

'Now, I'm going to chat a little bit about the equipment that you need, such as binoculars and telescopes,' she continued. 'But in all honesty, there really is only one thing that you need to do and that is to go outside on a clear night and look up at the sky. The stars are waiting up there to become your friends and believe me, I'm sure it'll become a lifelong friendship.'

Beth then talked about types of telescopes and binoculars, as well as various apps for people's mobile phones. She then happily chatted away about the various constellations, planets and galaxies as well as her favourite myths and legends regarding the skies.

When she had finished and was almost hoarse from talking so much, she received a large round of applause and then spent a good while answering the many varied questions.

She realised as she spoke how much she was growing stronger. She finally felt as if she was sharing her love of stargazing with so many more people and it made her happy. Her smile was genuine and she found herself wondering whether the career path of an academic that she had been so intent on pursuing wasn't actually for her. There were so many other opportunities for her to use her knowledge and sharing the amazing wonder of space made her far happier than she had ever felt.

After she had finally exhausted every question, Beth received a large round of applause before heading to the bar to take the drink that Frankie had already made for her.

'I'm absolutely parched,' she murmured. 'I needed this.'

‘Gave it an extra shot as well,’ Frankie told her with a wink. ‘Thought you’d need pepping up after all that talking.’

Beth swallowed the cocktail and coughed a little at how strong it was. ‘Thanks,’ she spluttered.

‘By the way, that was fantastic,’ said Frankie, smiling.

‘I agree,’ said Noah, coming to stand next to the bar.

‘Thank you,’ said Beth.

She looked up at him for a long time and was pleased to see him smiling down at her.

‘It was perhaps a little long on the fairy-tale stuff though.’

Beth spun around to see who had spoken, hoping she hadn’t mistaken the all-too-familiar voice. But her hopes were dashed when she found Jeremy standing in front of her.

46

Beth stared at Jeremy in shock. Was he really back at the hotel?

‘What are you doing here?’ she croaked, more from shock than Frankie’s strong cocktail.

‘Enjoying the dark skies around here, although that doesn’t seem to be the case tonight with this ghastly weather,’ he replied smoothly, leaning forward to give her a peck on the cheek. ‘You did very well, darling.’

Jeremy then gave Noah a nod of greeting but didn’t seem to notice that it wasn’t returned.

‘What can I get you?’ asked Frankie, glaring at him from across the bar. ‘Gin? Rum? Arsenic?’

‘Pardon?’ asked Jeremy, thinking that he had misheard her.

‘I’ll just make up my own special concoction for you,’ Frankie told him, with an evil grin.

Looking a little alarmed, Jeremy turned back to Beth. ‘So how are you?’ he asked, with a glance at Noah. ‘Still blissfully in love?’

‘That’s none of your business,’ muttered Beth, blushing furiously.

She shuffled her feet under his scrutiny. She had always been terrible at lying and would have sworn Jeremy would have detected her unease had Noah not slipped an arm around her shoulders and drawn her against him.

‘Why would anyone with half a brain let someone as wonderful as Beth go?’ murmured Noah, kissing the top of her head.

She could feel the warmth and strength of him through the sweater he was wearing and leant gratefully against him.

‘I see.’ Jeremy’s eyes narrowed as he looked at them.

‘Here you go,’ said Frankie, passing Jeremy a cocktail glass full of brown liquid over the counter of the bar.

‘Thank you,’ he replied, absent-mindedly taking a large gulp before going puce in the face. ‘What is this?’ he croaked.

‘It’s called the Four Horsemen,’ Frankie told him, with a winning smile. ‘Equal parts of Jack Daniel’s, Johnnie Walker, Jose Cuervo and Jim Beam. All of my favourite men, in fact.’

‘It’s awful,’ spluttered Jeremy, his eyes watering.

‘Don’t you like it?’ asked Frankie, in an innocent tone. ‘I find they go together like drunk and disorderly.’

Jeremy put down the glass before either he or the glass exploded.

‘What do you want, Jeremy?’ said Beth, who had been enjoying his discomfort as she knew he always liked to be in complete control of any situation.

‘Could I have a word? In private?’ asked Jeremy.

Noah’s hand briefly tightened on her shoulder before Beth nodded. ‘It’s fine,’ she murmured and gestured with her head for Jeremy to follow her.

They walked through the busy bar and lounge before finally finding themselves alone in the entrance hall.

Beth looked at Jeremy and raised her eyebrows at him in question.

‘I just wanted to make sure that you weren’t letting down the good name of the magazine with any erroneous information,’ he said. ‘I’m sure you can understand.’

‘You never were a good liar,’ she told him.

‘Well, perhaps I was a little bit tempted to discover whether you and that person were still together?’ sneered Jeremy. ‘After all, what does he do, darling? What on earth do you see in him? He’s hardly got your intellect, wouldn’t you agree?’

‘I wouldn’t agree, no,’ Beth told him, feeling the anger flare inside of her. ‘He’s good and kind and supportive, abilities which you have no idea about. He’s also an extremely talented boat maker and carpenter actually. Which means he’s very good with his hands as well!’

She heard the double entendre just as soon as she had spoken out loud and was about to roll her eyes at herself when a hand slipped around her waist and spun her around.

She found herself face to face with Noah and before she could say anything else, he spoke instead.

‘I couldn’t have put it any better myself,’ he murmured with a gleam in his eye.

He quickly drew her up against him until their bodies were touching. As he dropped his head to kiss her she had to remind herself that it was all for show. But as his lips touched hers, she found all thought of Jeremy went out of her head and then there was nothing but Noah’s lips on hers.

All time stood still as Noah kissed her with a passion that Beth knew was pretence but wanted so much to believe that it was real.

All too soon, he lifted his head and smiled down at her. As they stared at one another, still a little breathless, Beth heard Jeremy clear his throat as if to speak. But she didn’t want to let him have the last word and she spoke to Noah instead.

‘Take me home,’ she told him.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ he replied and, taking her hand, he led her across the entrance hall and out into the fresh air.

47

The rain had thankfully finally stopped but the air outside was still damp and chilly as Beth walked with Noah, still hand in hand.

'I'm so sorry about all this again,' she murmured, glancing over her shoulder.

As expected, Jeremy was watching them from the hotel entrance so she carried on holding Noah's hand as they walked around the lake and towards his lodge.

'I didn't know what else to do,' she said.

'It's fine,' he told her. 'Are you okay?'

She nodded. 'I am. You know, I truly am. I wish I hadn't been so upset over him in the first place. He's awful. I was settling and you should never settle for love, should you?'

She realised as she said the words that it was true.

'I should be with someone who adores me,' she carried on. 'Because, and I realise I'm sounding like a beauty advert here, I'm worth it.'

'Yes, you are,' replied Noah, giving her hand a squeeze.

'You mean I do sound like a beauty advert?' she asked, with a grin.

He laughed and she was reminded what a glorious sound it was. Jeremy had never made her laugh. Why had she been so upset over someone like that? He was only half the man that Noah was.

'You know what, I'm going to be fine by myself,' she decided, thinking out loud. 'I'm stronger and better without him. I just wish I could have told him that to his face.'

‘You were right to lie,’ replied Noah, to her surprise. ‘He’s the type of guy that would never accept the word no, I reckon.’

‘Perhaps you’re right. Maybe I’m not as strong as I’m pretending to be,’ she said.

‘Yes, you are. In fact, you’re amazing,’ he told her, putting his arm around her as they neared the lodge. ‘You held those people in the palm of your hand tonight. It was incredible. You have a real gift. Not just with astronomy but dealing with people. Perhaps you should think about teaching astronomy rather than studying it.’

She nodded thoughtfully. ‘That does sound tempting. Hey, when did you get so insightful?’ she teased.

‘I always have been,’ he told her with a nudge of his elbow. ‘You were just too busy looking upwards to notice.’

She was grateful that it was the first relaxed conversation that they had had in a fortnight. Perhaps being friends with him would be all right after all.

‘Well, you’re amazing too,’ she told him, as they reached the front door. ‘And I mean it. You’ve taught me so much and I’m grateful.’

‘You’re welcome,’ he murmured.

He opened up the door for them but they stayed on the threshold, staring at each other. His dark eyes were even darker but she couldn’t tear hers away.

‘Don’t worry about all this praise,’ she murmured. ‘It doesn’t mean that I love you or anything.’

He smiled back at the standard joke between them.

Except as she followed him inside, Beth realised that it was no longer true. She wasn’t sure when her feelings for him had changed and yet everything had. She loved him. She loved Noah.

All the other relationships hadn’t been like this. They hadn’t felt real. This was the magic that she had been waiting for. And she had no idea what to do about it.

In a daze, she watched as he switched on a light and closed the front door behind them. She stared around the lodge, looking at the pieces of Noah which were everywhere. A boat-building book. Some tools. Aftershave. A pair of gloves. And the compass she had given him for Christmas was on the coffee table by the sofa.

She went over to stare down at it. When had she fallen in love with Noah? Was it when she had bought the present? No. It had been longer than that. Perhaps even from that very first kiss in front of everyone. It turned out that she really was a sucker for love after all. But the joke was truly on her because her fake love had turned into the real thing.

She only realised she was still staring down at the compass when she felt Noah come to stand next to her.

'I'll take the sofa,' he told her.

'No need,' she said quickly.

He smiled. 'You had the sofa last time.' He reached out to stroke her cheek with his finger. 'This is becoming a habit of ours, sharing a room.'

'I know,' she said, with a shake of her head. 'I'm sorry.'

'I'm not.'

With his words hanging in the air, he headed into the bathroom, giving her the space to get changed. He had left one of his t-shirts on the bed for her to use as a nightshirt. She picked it up and could smell the faint tang of his woody aftershave.

She quickly put it down before he came out of the bathroom and found her sniffing his top.

With a sigh, she reached around to try and unzip her red dress. But try as she could, she couldn't get the zip to budge. It had always been a little tricky but this time it was well and truly stuck. She groaned just as Noah came out of the bathroom.

She took one look at him in his tracksuit bottoms and nothing else and felt the heat rise to her cheeks.

'Are you wearing that dress to bed?' he asked, picking up a pillow from the bed and throwing it onto the sofa.

'I might have to,' she told him, trying not to look at his bare muscular chest. 'I can't take it off. The zip's stuck.'

'Here, let me,' he replied, going to stand behind her.

Beth reached up to lift her hair so that he could see what he was doing.

She gave a little start as she felt his fingers touch the bare skin at the bottom of her neck.

'Sorry,' he said in a soft voice. 'Are my fingers cold?'

She shook her head, unable to speak as she felt his warm breath on the nape of her neck as he leaned into her.

Beth closed her eyes, willing herself to not give in to the sensation of having Noah's fingers on her skin but it was no use. She gulped and it sounded loud in the still quiet of the cabin.

Noah took a few seconds to manoeuvre the zip until finally it gave out and he slowly slid it down her back.

'All done,' he murmured.

Beth realised that he sounded a little breathless as well.

They stood there for a moment as he moved his hands across to her shoulders and she leaned back into him. It should have been terribly awkward but it wasn't. It was Noah.

If she turned around now she knew that she would give herself to him. If she turned around now, she was risking everything for a man who had declared that he would never fall in love with anyone, not even her. Was it worth the risk?

She knew the answer before she even finished asking herself the question. She turned around and was immediately enveloped in his arms as his lips came crashing down onto hers.

48

Beth woke up and found herself wrapped in Noah's arms.

She took a moment to remember the sweet memories of the night before and snuggled in closer, relishing the feel of him lying next to her in the bed.

It was a bittersweet moment though. She loved him. Truly loved him. But he would never love her. He had told her as much. Love, for him, was still something to be mistrusted. She loved Noah. But he didn't want her love and never would, despite how much he cared for her.

She just couldn't set herself up for more heartbreak and so, lying there, she made her decision. She would accept the job offer from Antarctica which had come through only two days previously. Her first instinct had been to turn it down but now? Now she was just hoping that leaving Maple Tree Lodge wouldn't hurt as much as being here and not having Noah's love.

However, she couldn't stop herself from staying in his arms, willing the day not to start and interrupt the sweet moment. But, of course, it did. The sun rose and she watched the darkness in the skylight in the roof above the bed slowly change to daybreak.

She slipped out of bed and peered out of the window to see a heavy mist hugging the lake and trees for the second day running. She sighed. Stargazing, like both the weather and love, could be highly unpredictable. But she had been so hoping to be wrong on both counts.

She hadn't even heard Noah stir but suddenly felt his arms come around her and she leant back against him as he stood there despite her better

judgement.

‘You okay?’ he asked.

‘Just worried about what today brings,’ she replied, not untruthfully. ‘Hopefully the skies will clear before tonight’s meteor shower.’

‘It’ll be fine,’ he murmured, before reaching down to kiss her neck. ‘I promise.’

She nodded, believing him about the weather but not about their relationship.

Still feeling blue, she headed over to the Boathouse Café once she had dressed on the pretext of helping Hannah out. When she arrived, she found Lily and Ella had already arrived before her, despite the early hour.

‘So?’ she asked, as she joined them at one of the tables. ‘How’s everyone?’

But as if her best friends had some kind of sixth sense, they all turned at once to look at Beth with knowing smiles on their faces.

As always, she couldn’t fake anything with them and couldn’t return their smiles. She watched in dismay as their happy faces quickly turned into frowns.

‘What is it? Is it Jeremy?’ asked Lily.

‘Because Alex is quite happy to throw him in the lake if necessary,’ added Hannah.

‘Good idea,’ said Ella with a firm nod.

But Beth carried on shaking her head. ‘It’s not him,’ she said.

‘What’s happened?’ asked Hannah, reaching across the table to take Beth’s hand.

‘Everything. Nothing,’ replied Beth in a dull tone.

‘Everything?’ prompted Lily. ‘Noah?’

Beth nodded.

‘I told you I saw them heading over to the lodge last night,’ said Ella with a smug nod. ‘But then what? Is he rubbish in bed?’

‘No!’ spluttered Beth, blushing. ‘It was amazing but…’

‘But?’ prompted Hannah.

Beth sat still, unable to get the words out, even to her best friends.

‘I’ll kill him if he’s hurt you,’ said Ella, scowling.

Beth shook her head. ‘He’s my rebound guy, remember? He can’t possibly hurt me because that would mean I care for him and I don’t. I really don’t.’ Her voice cracked on the last word and tears began to fall

down her cheeks, betraying her need to try and hold it together. ‘Just ignore me,’ she told them, brushing her wet face with her hand.

‘Ignore you when you’re crying and upset?’ asked Lily. ‘Absolutely not.’

‘It’s all my fault,’ said Beth, with a sniff. ‘It was all fun and fake and stuff. We said we weren’t going to get involved. But I broke the rules of rebound dating. I fell in love with him.’

‘Oh, honey,’ said Ella, shaking her head. ‘A man like that doesn’t love anyone if he doesn’t even love himself.’

Beth frowned. ‘Actually, I think he now loves Walter and the rest of the family as well. He’s changed.’ She looked at Ella. ‘So you’re wrong about that. He just doesn’t trust people. I can’t give you all the details because it’s personal but life dealt him a rotten card in the beginning. He just automatically protects himself from ever getting hurt again.’

‘But you wouldn’t hurt him,’ said Hannah.

‘I know.’ Beth sighed. ‘But he needs his security. He’s been very honest with me about not wanting a long-term relationship. He would never mislead me the way Jeremy did. He’s not a liar.’

‘But he should have told you all of this before you got involved,’ said Lily, shaking her head in dismay.

‘He did but I didn’t listen,’ replied Beth.

Her best friends all sighed at the same time.

‘Do you regret it?’ asked Hannah. ‘Getting involved with him, I mean.’

‘No. It’s been the most wonderful time of my life being with him,’ said Beth. ‘He’s taught me so much about myself including how to be more realistic about who I might end up with. About my future relationships. And for that, I’m truly grateful to him.’

The trouble was, she knew deep down that any future relationships were doomed. Nobody would ever match up to Noah and how could they? He felt like the other half of her.

‘Does he know how you feel?’ asked Lily.

‘Absolutely not. That would be utterly mortifying. We made a promise to not commit to each other and I’m sticking to that.’ Beth sighed. ‘The sad thing is that anyone else he dates won’t know what I know. They won’t know the kindness underneath that hard shell he’s built around himself. And he’ll be alone again and that’s not fair. He deserves not to be alone. He

deserves to be loved.' Her voice caught again and she took a sip of the hot chocolate which Hannah had pushed across the table towards her.

'Talk to him,' urged Hannah.

Beth shook her head. 'I can't. It's for the best that we just leave it and move on. And it's important that I must move on. So on that subject, I'm taking the job, by the way. The cruise ship in Antarctica.'

Her friends looked shocked. 'You are?' they chorused.

'You're leaving?' said Hannah, biting her lip.

'They've just emailed me back,' Beth told them, glancing at her phone. 'They're really keen for me to get going. And as the meteor shower finishes tonight, it looks like if I set off tomorrow then I'll be just in time for one of the many flights and boats that it'll take to get me there.'

'You're leaving that soon?' asked Ella, aghast.

'You can't leave yet,' said Lily, looking upset.

They were all close to tears.

'I have to,' replied Beth. 'This is his family home, not mine. He has a family of his own now and that's so much more important than what I can give him.'

'Are you sure about that?' asked Lily.

'Why can't he have both?' added Ella.

'Because life doesn't work out that way,' said Beth.

The tears poured down her face once more as she tried to process what an unholy mess she had got herself into. She loved him so much she was prepared to leave Maple Tree Lodge so that he could be happy. It was the ultimate sacrifice.

Thanks to Noah's encouragement, she could be herself now. She knew that she could stand on her own two feet. Her blog was getting more followers each week. She could talk about the thing she loved, the stars, now. She believed in herself. The happy ever after she had always wanted she now had. It didn't include romantic love but she loved herself now. Perhaps that would have to be enough without Noah's love as well.

Ella put her arm around Beth's shoulders and leant her head in so they were each touching. Everyone was upset as they all reached across the table to hold hands.

'At least there's one bit of good news this morning,' said Lily eventually into the silence that followed.

'Thank goodness,' murmured Hannah, with a sniff. 'What is it?'

Lily pointed out of the window. ‘The cloud’s lifting,’ she told them, in a teary voice.

Beth turned her face and realised it was true. There were patches of blue sky amongst the cloud which were reflected in the water of Dragonfly Lake below.

Thank goodness, she thought. Perhaps with the sky clearing, there would be time for one more miracle before she left Noah behind for good.

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Noah spent the day in somewhat of a daze. He tried to keep busy working on the remaining lodges but his mind kept wandering back to holding Beth in his arms all night and he couldn't concentrate.

His head swam from the inner turmoil. He had become way closer to Beth than he had ever intended. He had been so determined to stay away from her. He had broken every rule he had ever made for himself and yet, when they had been alone last night, nothing in the world would have stopped him from returning her kisses when she had lifted her face to his.

When his stomach rumbled late afternoon, he realised that he had worked through lunch without even noticing. But not able to live on just fresh air, he headed back to the hotel to find some food, hoping it would stir him out of his stupor.

However, upon arriving in the reception, he came face to face with Jeremy who was in the middle of telling a small audience about some kind of scientific breakthrough that he had made many years previously.

Noah scowled at him. Jeremy obviously felt threatened by Beth's success and wanted to overshadow her at every opportunity.

He had just stepped forward, his mind reeling with every kind of punishment that he could inflict on Jeremy, when Ben rushed out from behind the reception desk and took Noah's elbow and led him away and into the office.

'Don't worry,' murmured Ben so that only Noah could hear him. 'We're about to have an unexpected double booking and he's about to be thrown

out of here. Then he'll be away from your girl for good.'

Noah turned his head to look at Ben. Your girl? he thought. He took a deep breath. 'You know that our romance is just for show?' he said. But even he could hear the lie in his voice.

Ben looked at him for so long that in the end it was Noah that broke the eye contact first.

'I thought we were becoming mates,' Ben told him. 'I thought you could trust me with the truth at least.'

Noah blanched. 'The truth?' he repeated.

'That you're crazy about her,' replied Ben.

Noah wanted so much to open up to him but his head was so mixed up and whenever he felt like that he retreated into the depths of his past where he had managed to keep himself safe all these years by not trusting anyone.

Ben studied him for a long while before nodding. 'Well, you know where I am if you ever want to talk,' he said.

As Ben turned to walk away, Noah caught him by the arm. 'Thanks,' he said.

Ben reached out to squeeze him on the shoulder briefly before heading across the entrance hall to break the bad news to Jeremy about having to leave that afternoon.

Noah blew out a long breath of relief before abruptly turning back outside to head towards the barn, having completely lost his appetite once more.

He hid away from everyone, including Beth, in the barn working on the boat until it grew late and the skies had already become dark. As he walked back along the track, he was glad to see the first star appear in the sky with not a cloud to mask the view that night.

By the time he returned to the hotel, everyone was busy preparing for the meteor shower and he was able to avoid talking to anyone, especially Beth, as the crowds were beginning to gather in the reception hall.

However, he was able to wish her 'Good luck' briefly as they all headed outside.

'Thanks,' she replied before walking on.

It shocked him how much he wanted to reach out and hold on to her. To never let her go. And yet he forced himself to stand as far away from Beth as he could endure.

But although he couldn't see her in the crowd, he had forgotten about the microphone and so he could still hear Beth's soft voice as if she was standing next to him.

'Good evening, everyone,' she said. 'And welcome. We're starting the new year off with one of the strongest meteor showers of the year and, thankfully, the skies are finally clear!'

A huge cheer went up around the audience.

As Beth carried on explaining about what they were about to see, Noah stared upwards. He tried to concentrate on the vast, dark velvet sky above, punctuated by the glittering constellations that he knew so much about now, thanks to Beth. Would he ever be able to look at the stars again without thinking of her? He didn't think so.

Suddenly, the first meteor streaked across the night sky and everyone gasped at the beauty and wonder of the spectacle that carried on for a couple of hours.

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Finally, the celestial show was over and everyone headed back to the hotel, chatting excitedly about what they had just seen.

The remainder of the night was busy serving guests food and drink until, sometime after midnight, all the guests had gone to bed and it was finally just the family remaining in the bar tidying away.

'What a lovely night,' said Dotty, with a yawn.

Walter nodded. 'Told you those skies would clear,' he said to Beth, who reached out to hug him.

'You were absolutely right as always, Walter,' she told him.

'Let's not get too carried away by telling him that,' said Ben, with a grin. 'But before you all turn in for the night, there was just one more thing I wanted to say.'

Everyone looked at him in surprise.

'I've been thinking today about family and how it comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes,' he began, glancing at Noah. 'But primarily I've been thinking about love. And talking of that most important of subjects…'

Ben suddenly sank down onto one knee in front of Lily and held out a ring box which he had just brought out of his jeans pocket.

'Will you marry me?' he asked, opening the box to reveal a diamond solitaire ring inside.

He had barely got the words out when Lily shouted, 'Yes!' and leapt into his arms.

Suddenly the whole family were cheering, laughing and crying, all at the same time. Even Tiny the dog woofed his joy at all the merriment.

Noah felt over the moon for Ben and Lily. They were a perfect couple and suited each other so well.

'Champagne for everyone!' called out Frankie, and there was another cheer. 'On the house, of course!'

'How wonderful,' Faye was saying, with tears streaming down her face. 'I'm so happy for you both.'

Noah waited to take his turn to hug the happy couple and offer his congratulations.

'Thanks,' said Ben, clapping him on the shoulder.

As Noah released Lily, Ella stepped forward.

'We're going to plan the most fantastic wedding for you,' she said. 'Or rather I am. Oooh, I'm having a wonderful idea…'

Hannah, who was standing next to her, shook her head. 'Can we just enjoy the moment for one night?' she asked.

'You can but I'm already planning the theme,' said Ella, with a gleam in her eyes.

Ben groaned. 'We should have eloped,' he muttered. But his smile betrayed his words.

'Don't you dare,' warned Dotty, hugging her grandson for the fifth time.

Alex slapped Noah on the shoulder. 'Looks like we're all going shopping for suits at some point in the near future,' he said, with a grin. 'We'll even have to get a bow tie for Tiny! It's going to be an amazing year.'

Noah revelled in the excitement and happiness of the occasion. This was his family, he realised. And he was a part of them now.

He had always believed that by letting anyone in, they would only hurt him. But Walter hadn't. Ben hadn't. And Beth wouldn't.

He realised in that moment that the blame of his past lay with his parents, not himself. That he was free to love and be loved.

If only he could just take that one leap of faith with the right person, he thought, looking across to Beth.

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Despite her overwhelming happiness for Ben and Lily, Beth's heart still ached.

Even more so, she felt the pain of having to leave this happy family home the following day. But there would be a joyful wedding day later that year to look forward to whilst she was away.

However, her happiness was tinged with sadness that she would never have what Ben and Lily had together. They loved each other as equals. And anything less, she couldn't endure.

When a familiar hand slipped into hers and gave it a squeeze, she knew without even turning her head that it was Noah. When had she grown so used to him that she knew his very presence, she wondered.

'Isn't it lovely?' she murmured, as she watched Lily smiling with joy as she glanced down at her new diamond ring once more.

'It is,' he told her. 'I'm happy for them.'

She looked around at him and was pleased to see nothing but the truth in his eyes. At some point he had lost that cynicism and had grown close to his family. She was glad. He deserved to be happy.

When the family celebrations died down, it was the most natural thing in the world to go back to the lodge with him. Jeremy had left already so there was no need to pretend any longer that they were a couple.

And yet she couldn't stop herself from going with him. One more night, she promised herself. Then she was leaving the next day. Thankfully Antarctica was so far away that she wouldn't be back for a few weeks,

maybe even months if she took on another job somewhere else. By then, her heart might have healed, although she doubted she would ever get over Noah.

As soon as they closed the front door, she couldn't stop herself from slipping into his arms. She only had this night and it had to last forever in her dreams and memory.

However, nothing lasts forever and when she woke up the following morning, her stomach dived in misery. It was time to leave. Time to say goodbye. She wasn't ready but perhaps it was better that way. She just wanted to get out of there with a smidgen of dignity. Most of all, she wanted to protect Noah by not putting him under any pressure to be anything other than himself.

So she fixed on her happiest of expressions and leapt out of the bed as soon as the sun rose.

'Coffee time!' she announced, grabbing her trousers and jumper which were lying on the floor and slipping them on.

Noah stared at her from the bed with a surprised expression on his face. 'Okay,' he said, with a soft smile. 'Although for the record, you seem hyper enough already.'

'It's okay for you, sleepyhead,' she told him, picking up his jeans from the floor and throwing them at his head. 'But some of us have got to get going.'

'Why?' he asked, laughing.

'I've got to get packing. I've got so much to do,' she told him, picking up the handbag which she had carried with her the previous evening and placing it on the coffee table. She had a couple of larger suitcases back in Maple Tree Lodge. She only needed to retrieve them and then she would be done. Lily had reluctantly promised to box up any of her additional items to clear the spare bedroom for when Ella came to stay.

'Packing?' he asked, sitting up in bed suddenly. 'Where are you going?'

'Didn't I tell you?' she asked, all innocent. 'That job in Antarctica. They accepted me for the cruise, isn't that amazing? It's a great opportunity for me and can you imagine the skies up there? The first plane leaves tonight so I've got to get going. Now, where did I put my gloves? Oh, here they are.'

'Wait a minute.' Noah swung his legs out of bed and quickly slipped on his jeans. 'You're leaving today?'

‘Of course,’ she replied briskly. ‘You should see the flight connections! They’re so tight and at this time of year it takes even longer with all the snow and stuff so I’m on a bit of a time frame.’

‘You’re leaving?’ he repeated.

Finally she forced herself to look at him.

I’m not going to cry, she thought, desperately willing herself not to show any emotion in front of him. She loved him. But what was the point in telling him that now? It would only make him feel worse and she cared too much for him to hurt him. She truly loved him but it was over.

She fixed on a sunny smile. ‘You know, I think it’s great that you’re staying here. You have a home now, with your family. It’s great.’ She winced at the repetition. ‘Maybe I do need that coffee after all if I’m going to keep repeating myself. I’ll get a large one to go from the Boathouse Café. Hannah’s trialling some new Colombian beans and they taste amazing.’

She couldn’t stop talking, anxious to fill his shocked silence as he stared at her.

‘You can’t leave,’ he said, walking across the room and taking the gloves out of her hand and flinging them over her handbag.

‘Of course I can,’ she told him, giving him a winning smile. ‘The job is done. The meteor shower happened. Everybody’s happy.’

‘Not me.’

Okay, thought Beth. Time to be the bigger person. Time to fake it one last time.

‘You know that this thing between us had to come to an end at some point. It was just a bit of fun. You know that, right?’ she said.

‘I don’t know anything other than nothing has ever felt more right than being here with you,’ he told her.

She gulped at his words but forced herself to carry on. ‘We’ve had a great time, haven’t we?’ she asked him.

He nodded, although his eyes were still boring into hers.

‘Listen, I want to say thank you,’ she carried on. ‘Truly, from the bottom of my heart. I know I threw a bit of curveball at you with this fake dating thing and yes, it’s been nice that we’ve become friends too. But you’ve taught me so many valuable lessons about love and dating. Everything I used to be so bad at! It means that the next time I fall in love, I’ll protect my heart just a little bit more.’

He looked aghast. ‘The next time?’ he stammered, before looking at her more closely. ‘What’s wrong? Something’s going on with you.’

‘Nothing,’ she said quickly.

‘Tell me,’ he said softly. ‘You can tell me anything.’

Finally her fake smile dropped and she shook her head, unable to keep up the pretence for much longer. ‘Not everything.’

He took her face in his hands and forced her to look up at him. ‘What is it? Why are you leaving?’

She pressed her lips together but lying didn’t come naturally to her. She gave a little sob and the words bubbled up inside of her. ‘Because I love you!’ She shook her head out of his touch and walked away, wrapping her arms around herself. ‘I’m such a dummy. All these years I think I was just in love with the idea of love. All those failed relationships and dating disasters. They weren’t right for me. I think I was pretending, hoping to feel love. Then you came along and I wasn’t trying to fall in love and it happened anyway.’ She groaned to herself. ‘I need a total body change. Maybe even a lobotomy.’ Finally she looked at him. ‘It’s okay. I understand,’ she told him. ‘You see there’s only one reason for me to stay and you don’t want that, do you?’

He was silently staring back at her and she knew that she finally had the answer she had been expecting from him.

She went over to the coffee table and picked up her handbag. ‘If you find anything of mine around here, just keep it. I’ll be back in, ooh, three months, maybe not until summer. Anyway, take care. I’ll see you around.’

She couldn’t look at him. Couldn’t bear to look into his eyes so she turned away and headed over to the front door.

‘Beth, wait.’

Finally he had spoken but she knew she didn’t want to hear what he had to say. Those words of pity about how he couldn’t feel the same way. All the things she already knew.

So instead she flung open the front door and was just about to step outside when he spoke.

‘What if I change the rules of our fake dating?’ she heard him say.

She turned around. ‘Isn’t it a bit late for that?’ she asked with a forced laugh. ‘The horrible ex has gone. Good riddance, I say. So what’s left for us?’

It was tearing her apart to be so close to him and yet not be in his arms kissing him.

'Us?' There was a softness in his gaze as he walked towards her. 'There's everything left for us.' He stopped in front of her.

She shook her head. 'You don't have to say any more. I know how painful this is for you.'

'But it's because of you that I can talk about it,' he told her. 'And I want you to understand how much I've changed. Because of you.'

'Me? I'm just stupid enough to believe in happy ever afters and all the sunny, sunshine stuff. It's ridiculous.' She sighed. 'You were right and I was totally wrong.'

'No, you weren't.' He reached out to take her hand in his. 'You're the brightest, most beautiful, funniest, sexiest woman I've ever met and I'd be the biggest idiot if I let you walk out on me.'

She looked up at him. 'Noah, please don't do this because you pity me. Honestly, I'll be fine. I'll get over you.'

It was a lie but she knew she would say anything to protect him.

He frowned. 'I don't want you to get over me,' he said sharply. 'I don't want you to move on. I want you to stay here, with me.'

'You want to fake date again?' Although as she spoke the words, she knew deep down that she couldn't do it. She couldn't bear the pretence of having him close but not having his love.

Noah shook his head. 'No. I want a real relationship,' he told her with a determined look on his face. 'I want you. I love you. And I'm really hoping that you mean it when you say you love me too.'

'Hoping that I…?' Her voice trailed off as the tears ran down her face. 'You love me?'

He nodded. 'Why are you crying? Are you upset?' he asked, looking concerned.

She laughed. 'They're happy tears,' she told him. 'I love you so much.'

He pulled her close and held onto her tightly. 'I know I'm going to stumble occasionally,' he murmured, bringing his forehead down to touch hers. 'That you've been in love before and I haven't.'

'I haven't either,' she told him. 'It wasn't true love. I think I was in love with the idea of it but with you, it was different. Better. Real. And I've loved you even more because of it.'

He searched her face with worried dark eyes. ‘Can you forgive me for not trusting you? For almost letting you go? I was terrified.’

‘That makes the both of us,’ she replied. ‘Thankfully it was almost. Not forever.’

‘No, this is forever. You and me.’ He stroked her cheek. ‘I want to propose to you, just like Ben did last night. I want to have a family of our own with you. I want all of it. The whole happy ever. I was wrong. I do believe in love and it’s because I love you.’

Finally they reached for each other and she knew as their lips met that it was forever. She had finally found the love of her life.

‘One more thing,’ he told her, once they drew apart. ‘I need to prove it to you.’

‘You don’t think that kiss proved everything to me?’ she asked, slightly out of breath.

‘Grab your coat,’ he said. ‘Give me one minute to get dressed. I have to show you something.’

They headed outside and he wrapped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close, as if he were reluctant to even let her go for a second. She didn’t know where they were going but found she didn’t care. They were together. That was all that mattered.

They walked around the lake but he didn’t stop at Maple Tree Lodge and continued along the path instead. Finally, they turned off the track and he led her to the barn where his boat was stored.

Outside the door he turned to face her. ‘The fake dating thing was never going to last,’ he told her. ‘Because nothing about us feels fake when it’s just the two of us. It feels like the most real thing that I’ve ever come across. I love you. And if you ever feel like you don’t believe me…’

He didn’t finish his sentence but turned around to unlock the large door and opened it up.

She followed him inside and stopped short as she saw the boat. It was almost finished and there was a new addition on the paintwork. The boat finally had a name.

‘I painted it yesterday,’ said Noah. ‘For you.’

She looked at the name ‘Beth’ handwritten on the hull. Then she turned to him and saw the love in his eyes. Real love.

‘I’ll spend the rest of our lives convincing you how much I love you,’ he told her.

‘No need,’ she told him. ‘I believe you.’

They both stepped forward at the same time and when their lips met, it was a kiss of forever love, the type of love she had always dreamt about.

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It was the perfect spring evening to be out on the water as the sea was calm and still. The April sun had just sunk below the horizon, leaving both the clear sky streaked with shades from raspberry all the way to the darkest orange.

'It goes like a dream,' Noah told Walter, who was on the other end of the phone.

The boat slid across the smooth water, graceful and elegant. Its classic lines were highlighted after the lengthy refurbishment which he had taken such care to accomplish. He was immensely proud to have given the boat, *his* boat, a new lease of life.

'Told you it would be smashing,' replied his uncle.

Noah smiled. He cherished the special relationship that he and Walter had, bonded over their love of woodcraft. Each day they grew closer but he was also grateful to have been given a second opportunity to get to know all of his family properly. He was learning to open up a little to them and trying not to close himself off to everyone all the time. They weren't going to hurt him, that much he knew now. He trusted them and would never let them down. He could feel all the wounds of his past beginning to heal at long last.

In this new spirit, he had even made contact with Michael from the boatyard to thank him for giving him that first encouragement all those years ago. Michael had been thrilled to hear from his teenage apprentice so

many years later and Noah had already sent him photos of his own renovated boat.

He was starting to allow trusted friends and family into his life now. He was growing especially close to Ben day by day. More than cousins, they were now best friends as well as custodians for the future of the Jackson family at Maple Tree Lodge.

The lodges were finished and he was proud of the work that he, Ben and Walter had put into them. He felt as if he had contributed to the history of the place that Walter had always talked so proudly about.

He could also see his future mapped out clearly for the first time in his life. Having finally put down roots with a home of his own, he could now help plan for the future of the hotel. There were a number of dilapidated barns around the forest that needed renovating and he and Ben had big plans for their use in the upcoming years. Not that he was finished with boatmaking either, as Alex had asked him to make some canoes for use on the lake that summer. Noah had even had the idea to run a couple of boatmaking courses, teaching others how to build a wooden kayak or canoe. Just like Walter, he wanted to pass on his knowledge to others. Every day reminded him of the power of togetherness and what could be achieved with both friendship and love.

'I'm very much looking forward to my birthday trip on the *Beth* next month,' said Walter.

'Me too,' Noah told him. 'See you in a couple of weeks.'

After saying goodbye, Noah looked out to the horizon. In the far distance was the island of Jersey. He had always wanted to see the Channel Islands and enjoy their beauty. And now he had two weeks to explore them as well as the perfect companion to share it with.

'Two cheese sandwiches, Captain,' announced Beth, climbing up the steps from the cabin below.

'Excellent work, Cadet,' he replied.

'I thought I'd been promoted to Lieutenant,' she told him, putting the plate down next to him and snuggling into his arms. 'Especially after last night.'

He grinned and pulled her close with his spare hand, the other on the wheel. 'Mmm,' he said, as she kissed him. She had made him happier than he had ever realised a person could be. He was whole, because of her love.

With Beth at his side, the future shone as brightly as the stars she so adored.

* * *

Beth looked across the sea at the kaleidoscope of colours that the setting sun had painted onto the water and sky. She didn't think the wonder of her own planet would ever be outshone even by the other ones in the solar system.

Not that she would ever give up on astronomy, such was her love for it. And, thanks to her recent success, she didn't need to.

The stargazing evenings were so popular that they now had waiting lists and Lily had persuaded her to put on more events each month. She knew it benefitted the hotel, of course, but Beth had found that it was she herself who was profiting the most from the success. She loved sharing her knowledge with anyone who was willing to listen to her.

She had spent so long feeling a failure but these days she felt buoyed up by the knowledge that she was making a difference to people's lives. Only the previous week, she had managed to show a sullen and disengaged teenager the Milky Way through a telescope and watched as his face had lit up, triggering many questions that he had about the universe. She hoped it might have ignited the same spark that had lasted for her too. It made her want to keep inspiring many more people for years to come.

Her blog was also a huge success and she was able to earn a relatively good living from it. Not that she wasn't happy living modestly in any case. After all, she had everything she had ever wanted. She had a gorgeous lodge that she shared with Noah, living amongst the Jackson family at Maple Tree Lodge, her favourite place in the world. She had a job where she could share her love of the stars.

Best of all, Noah had shown her that she didn't need anyone else's love but her own. That she herself had always been her own happy ending. She'd just been too blind to see it.

Not that she wasn't grateful to have found the man of her dreams. She woke up each day with a new sense of purpose and, with Noah's love, she could achieve anything. She had the love of a good man and loved him in return. She had learnt that romance could never be perfect but with the right partner, they were a team that together would survive any storms.

She looked out, ever more entranced by the view. The expanse of the sea and the darkening sky above was magical.

Beth leant back against Noah, feeling his arms wrap around her, just as the first star appeared in the night sky.

* * *

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