

# A Slice of Cake

**By Helen and Gavin Tyte**

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To our three gorgeous, naughty girls: L, G, and R.

# 1

In their small, modern, London flat, as they sat on their stools at the kitchen counter, Sophie split the last of a bottle of a Napa chardonnay, first topping up her own glass before drizzling the remains into the glass belonging to her best friend, Clare.

“Mmmm. Dinner smells...interesting?” ventured Clare, glancing nervously towards the oven.

“It’s pizza,” Sophie replied, placing her hands on her slim hips. “What can go wrong with pizza? Another five minutes and it’ll be ready. Now, are we eating with our fingers or a knife and fork?”

Clare thought for a moment then put on her best Pony Club accent, “Well, we are two proper and rather well-to-do ladies. It simply wouldn’t do to be seen to be so vulgar as to consume such fine fare using our dainty fingers now, would it?”

“But there’s no-one here but us?”

“Indeed!” Clare snorted her best horsey laugh, sending Sophie’s wine spraying out of her nostrils.

“I get what you mean though,” agreed Sophie, screwing up her nose, “It does have a rather um...”

“Acrid, molten, burning, sulphurous, fiery pit of hell smell?”

“Okay, okay, I’ll check,” conceded Sophie.

Sophie downed the last of her wine, slumped off her stool, walked over to the oven, and threw open the oven door. Noxious, black smoke billowed from its dark interior. “Oh fuck!”

Clare leant over to try and see. “What?”

Sophie wailed. “I followed the sodding instructions for fuck’s sake!”

Clare grabbed a tea towel from the counter to cover her nose and mouth, before sliding off her stool to stand behind Sophie. “What is it?” She peered over Sophie's shoulder and into the oven, “Oh.”

Sophie groaned. “I think it’s the polystyrene.”

“I thought we were having a meat feast?”

“No. The polystyrene on the base of the pizza. I left it on. It’s melted to...well, everything.”

“Oh God. But I’m starving.”

“I could try and salvage the topping. Maybe if I get a knife and scrape?”

“No thanks hon.” Clare reached past Sophie and shut the oven door with a kick. “We’ll just have to go out for munchies and vino. Plan?”

“Plan,” agreed Sophie.

The two girls sat opposite each other at a candle-lit table-for-two in ‘Ali Oli’, the best, and only tapas bar in Balham High Street. Despite being heralded as a *taste of Spain*, the owner was Greek, and mellow folk music, played on mandolins and bouzoukis, strummed from hidden speakers. “I can’t believe you put your make-up on so quickly? And that you look so good!” Sophie glanced at Clare’s bold clothes, fitting tightly to her curvaceous body, her Nigerian skin glowing under stunning gold make-up and accessories. “It’s not fair. All I had time for was a bit of lippy.”

“You did take ages in the bathroom though!” insisted Clare.

“Just a call of nature. You know how I like to take my time,” laughed Sophie, raising her Margherita glass. They chinked, and each took a large swig.

“Seriously though, it’s amazing how fast you can get ready when you’re hungry,” continued Clare.

Sophie glanced hopefully in the direction of the restaurant kitchen and slurred her words, "Cheers to that!"

“To be honest, with our combined culinary talents I’m surprised neither of us have succumbed to food poisoning or vitamin deficiency!”

“Hey, my cooking’s not that bad!” Sophie leaned forward and frowned before resigning and slumping back into her chair. “Okay, well, maybe it is. But how come you don’t cook at all? Surely it must be your turn for a change?”

“Oh, cooking is so beneath me darling.” Clare held up her glass, “And besides, I like to get *my* vitamins in a different way!”

“To vitamins!” cheered Sophie. They chinked glasses again, draining their cocktails. Sophie tried to focus on a couple that had been shown to a table opposite them. The man held out the chair for the woman who sat as he tucked it back in behind her, and Sophie sighed. *How amazing must it be to be treated like that?* She turned back to Clare. “I must admit, I do feel a bit woozy.”

“You need some food inside you,” suggested Clare, just as her phone buzzed in her handbag. “I’m sure it won’t be long.” Clare reached into her bag, rummaging until she found her phone.

“It’s him again isn’t it?” Sophie rolled her eyes. “Seriously, you two. It makes me sick. What’s your boyfriend sending you this time?”

Clare held her phone closer to her body to hide the screen from Sophie. “I’m not sure it’s appropriate for a younger audience.”

“Me, younger? What? By two weeks! Come on *mum*, please tell me?”

“Oh you know, the usual selfie,” answered Clare, nonchalantly.

“What? A dick pic?” Sophie screwed up her nose.

“No! Well...not a whole one.” Clare laughed.

Sophie whispered. “Aren’t you gonna send him one back?”

Clare glanced around the restaurant which was mostly empty, and the couple sitting opposite them were engrossed in their menus. “What here?”

“It’s dark enough.” Sophie winked and nodded downwards. “You could just, you know, under the table?”

“Maybe later,” giggled Clare, who returned to looking at her phone.

“Honestly though, has there ever been a time when you haven’t had a man on the go?” Sophie sighed. “I wish I had some stud muffin sending me pictures — studs, muffins, I’d take anything.”

Clare finished typing something on her screen. “Sorry, what?”

“Oh, never mind.” Sophie glanced again towards the kitchen wondering if the food was ever going to come. “Seriously though, when are we going to meet your latest conquest? What’s his name, Mikey?”

“Michael,” corrected Clare. “Yeah. One day. He’s shy, that’s all.”

“Shy? Since when have you dated the shy and retiring type?”

Clare thought for a moment. “Well, there was Vernon.”

“Vernon doesn’t count!”

Clare crossed her arms defensively. “Yes he does, *he* was shy.”

“But you didn’t date Vernon!” insisted Sophie, raising her eyebrows and leaning in, “Did you?”

Clare feigned being caught off guard. “Oh, well, no, not exactly. We did have a snog in the school bogs though. Well, actually, I kinda cornered him and snogged him.” Clare screwed up her nose. “Tasted of Cheetos.”

“Cheetos?”

“Yes.”

“Not Cheesy Wotsits or Pickled Onion Monster Munch?” Sophie asked, remembering her favourite childhood crisps.

The girls were laughing just as a young, tall, Greek-looking, waiter brought a selection of delicious smelling tapas to the table. Sliced and fried chorizo, battered baby squid, spicy lamb tagine, fat kalamata olives, and triangles of soft flatbread. Clare rested her perfectly manicured, smooth hand on the arm of the waiter, squeezing his muscles through his starched white shirt, as her gold bangles slid enticingly up her forearm. “Same again please.” She smiled at him, offering her empty glass with her other hand, and burning through him with her sultry, obsidian eyes.

“Of course madam.” He returned Clare’s smile, holding her gaze for just long enough to communicate a smoldering look in return before heading back to the bar with her empty glass.

Sophie stared at Clare with her mouth open. “What was that?”

“What?”

“That? You’ve pulled the waiter and you’re not even trying.” Sophie moaned. “He’d better bloody well bring me a drink too.”

“I haven’t pulled.” Clare took a quick glance towards the bar. “Anyway, it’s all online these days. You should try it.”

“Me? Online dating?” Sophie scoffed, looking hungrily at the food on the table. “I don’t think so. It’s all perverts only after one thing!”

Clare put on her most seductive voice. “Sometimes they want *two* things.”

Sophie shook her head and laughed. “You’re disgusting!”

“So give it a go. You’re slim. You’re beautiful. What have you got to lose?”

“My self-esteem?” Sophie scooped some of the tagine onto a flatbread and popped it in her mouth, chewed, and swallowed. “Seriously, my past is littered with mistake after mistake. Remember Graham? The one with the...” Both Sophie and Clare held up a hand and curled their little fingers, wagging them, laughing. “He couldn’t even reach the bits I could reach, for fanny’s sake.” The two girls tucked into the tapas before Sophie continued. “Then there was Edward. He spent five minutes trying to find the bloody thing.”

“Don’t forget ‘golden shower’ Gary,” suggested Clare.

“The less said about him the better!” Sophie laughed. “See what I mean about my dates, though?” She thought for a moment, “I suppose there was Roger?”

Clare held up a dish and spat out an olive stone. “The bad boy?”

“I wonder if he’s out of prison yet? God, it was good while it lasted.” Sophie gazed dreamily into space before snapping back to reality. “Okay, so nobody’s perfect. But I suppose that’s what I want. Perfection.”

The waiter arrived and placed two cocktails on the table, waking Sophie from her reverie. “These are from a gentleman at the bar,” he said, raising his eyebrows and giving the girls a knowing look. “He wants me to give you his card.”

The waiter plucked a card from his shirt pocket, and Clare took it and held it out for them both to read. *Mr C. Mangrove, Sewerage Consultant. #1 in the #2 Business.*

“Ewwwww!” chorused the girls. They glanced past the waiter to view a balding, bulging, middle-aged man in a grey suit sitting at the bar. A brown tie hung loosely from his unbuttoned collar, his trouser legs had risen up, and his white socks positively glowed as if lit by ultraviolet light. He raised his beer glass and waved at them.

“Oooh, see! Clare, you’ve pulled again.”

“Eugh!” Clare grimaced. She raised her glass and smiled through gritted teeth at the man at the bar. The waiter sauntered off again, leaving the two girls with their food and drinks.

Two bottles of wine and six cocktails later, the table cleared of empty plates, Sophie was decidedly tipsy. “So are you going to do it?” asked Clare.

“What?” slurred Sophie.

“Strike a match?”

Sophie gave Clare a puzzled look. “But I don’t smoke?”

Clare laughed. “The dating app, you noggin! It’s how I found Michael.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Sophie paused then shook her head. “No. Definitely, no! I’d have to be completely *fitshaced* to do thuch a *sing*.”



“Well, that confirms it!” Clare grabbed Sophie's phone from the table, and despite protest from Sophie, she managed to download the *Strike a Match* app and create an account for Sophie in just a few, deft taps. “Right, your personal details. Email address and Postcode...blah, blah... Occupation: Journalist”

“Hardly,” objected Sophie.

“You write for a magazine don't you?”

Sophie blinked to try and focus her eyes. “Well, I suppose I do.”

“Age: 23. Status: single. Hair Colour: brown,” Clare looked up, “with caramel highlights. Height: 5'6”. Eyes: hazel. Body shape: petite. Boob size: more than a handful. Hobbies: cooking,” Clare laughed, “yoga, tennis...”

Sophie sighed. “But I don't play tennis?”

“Yes, but your matches won't know that!” Clare concentrated on the phone. “Fine wines, blah, blah. There. Done!” Clare read the screen. *Are you ready to strike a match?* “Yes. We sure are!” She swiped Sophie's phone screen. “Oooh, a match already! His name's Martin.”

Sophie yawned and stretched. “Sounds boring.”

“He's an architect. Money!” Clare raised her eyebrows then sucked in a breath, “Ooh, he also...”

Sophie grabbed the phone and took a look. “It says here that he's...but surely no-one's *that* big? How come there's no picture?”

“Oh, see at the bottom,” instructed Clare, waving with her finger, “you have to *flame* or *dowse* to see a photo. Choose wisely though, you only get a few free flames before you have to pay for more.”

Sophie's finger hovered over the phone. "Oh, sod it. In for a penny in for a pound." She tapped the *flame* button. Martin's photo popped up. "Oooh, he's actually quite dishy. Mmmm. Not bad!"

Clare tried to grab the phone. "Give it here and let me see!"

"No! For once, this one's mine."

"What? You're actually going to meet this guy?"

Sophie glanced at the screen wide-eyed. "Oh shit. I must've pressed something. It says I've already set up a date!"

# 2

The following morning, when Sophie finally flopped out of bed and into the kitchen, she found Clare sitting at the counter with a mug of black coffee. She was dressed, make-up perfect, braided cornrows pulled into a bun, and her deep brown eyes sparkling; Sophie couldn't understand how Clare never seemed to suffer the effects of alcohol. *Perhaps she's one of those artificial intelligence android things from a sci-fi movie?*

“Morning!” chirped Clare, a little too cheerfully. Sophie managed to reply with something between a groan and a grunt as she took an empty glass from the drainer and filled it with water. “I don’t want to be a party pooper, but we have to leave for work in fifteen.”

Sophie greedily gulped down the water and wiped her lips with the back of her hand. “On it.”

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror and feeling nauseous, Sophie looked at her pale face. She wondered what kind of green she was, and then it hit her. *Shrek green. I look like Shrek's girlfriend, a bloody troll thing. What's her name? Fiona. That's it. I look like Fiona Shrek, albeit a skinny version — thank God for the make-up bag in my office drawer.* She reckoned she had five minutes for a shower and then ten minutes to get dressed.

She could do this.

She might not match Clare's sparkle but she'd give it a good go. Clare had all the curves but Sophie could still fit into skin-tight jeans, or

perhaps she could pull off the sporty equestrian look today? Yes. That'd work. But first, it was shower time.

Sophie and Clare sat opposite each other on the tube, trundling the short way from Clapham into the city centre. Sophie looked up at the advertising boards. A black-and-white photo of a white-haired granny smiled and held a phone. The text read: *Don't smart! Get smart with Smart!* It was confusing, and as the words swam in front of her, it began to make her head hurt.

Clare peered at Sophie. "You don't look too good."

Sophie groaned. "Urgh, my head's splitting and I feel like I'm gonna yack." She let her head hang forward. Despite nursing the hangover of doom and cradling a large take-out coffee in a polystyrene cup, she had managed to dress in a white, lacy, tie-up blouse; tan jeggings; and long, brown, heeled boots. She wore a fitted, brown leather jacket to complete the ensemble. As they walked to the tube station, Clare had told her she looked like she was ready to go horse-riding, and that all she needed was a whip and a riding helmet to complete the look. That's flatmates for you. Always ready to big you up and make you feel good about yourself.

As the train rattled and swerved, it was all Sophie could do to keep from throwing up over the blue-and-red, tartan-patterned seat next to her. At least the carriage was less crowded than usual, and there were plenty of empty seats. Sophie always found it incongruous how quiet people were on tube trains. No-one looked at each other or offered a friendly smile,

let alone spoke to each other - *heaven forbid*. This morning, however, the silence was fine by her.

Clare rummaged in her handbag. “Here, take a couple of these.” She held out two small white pills in the palm of her hand.

Sophie looked across the aisle at perfect, perky Clare. “What are they?”

Clare glanced around shiftily, leant forward slightly, and shook her head. “You don’t want to know. Trust me on this.”

“What the fuck Clare? Drugs?”

Clare looked indignant and rolled her eyes. “Oh, for fanny’s sake, get a grip. What do you take me for? They’re just paracetamol!”

Sophie reached out and took the pills, downing them with a swig from her coffee. Immediately she felt bile rise up in her throat.

“Here, have some gum,” offered Clare.

Sophie gratefully took the gum. Anything to take away the burnt polystyrene smell that filled her nostrils. She wasn’t sure if it was coming from her clothes or from the coffee. Either way, it wasn’t good. “So, this Martin of yours is into the horse-riding look?” mocked Clare.

Sophie sighed. “Very funny.”

“Seriously, girl. It’s sexy as. Your bum looks fab. You really do have a great figure. I’d do you.”

“You should be so lucky!” The two girls laughed. Sophie was always amazed how laughing made her feel instantly better, and Clare made her laugh more than anyone she’d ever met. She owed a great deal to Clare Adebayo, after everything she’d been through; Clare was a true friend. “I still can’t believe I’m going through with this.” Sophie placed a

hand to her head and nervously twisted a strand of her shoulder-length hair with her fingers. “At what point did I ever think a blind date with a random guy was a good idea?”

“I think it was after the second bottle of chardonnay and the third cocktail?” Clare wiggled her sculptured, elegant eyebrows. “And when you saw his...”

“I only saw his face!” Sophie glared at Clare. “Anyway, it's not too late to back out. I could just delete my account and no-one will ever know.”

“He’ll know! I’ll know! Oh, go on,” encouraged Clare. “You never know, you might have a great time. He might turn out to be the man of your dreams.”

Sophie laughed. “Or the *Number One in the Number Two business!*”

“The thing is to go in strong. Be assertive. Be bold. You need to command the situation. Be in control. Where are you meeting him anyway?”

“I’ll read you the details.” With her left hand, Sophie unzipped her bag, retrieved her phone, flicked it on, and used her thumb to navigate *Strike a Match*. “Here you go. Your Match will be at The Gecko Lounge, Lambeth, at seven p.m. The Gecko Lounge. I suppose it’s some kind of bar.”

“No way! I know it!” Clare’s face lit up with excitement. “It’s where I first met Michael. Ooh, you’ll love it. It’s all rainforest themed. Bamboo furniture; vines hanging from the ceiling; that kind of thing. And they do some seriously potent cocktails.”

“Urgh, that’s the last thing I need.” Sophie groaned. “The Gecko Lounge. Sounds like a place where reptiles hang out.”

Clare glared at her friend. “Excuse me?”

“Oh sorry, I didn’t mean Michael. He’s not a... I mean. You know. Anyway, won’t you come with me? Protect me? Keep me safe?”

“I’d love to but I’m seeing *the man himself* tonight. And when I say *seeing* I mean *seeing*.” Clare rapidly raised and lowered her eyebrows in a Groucho Marx ‘what about that then?’ kind of way. “I might be late home, or I might not come home at all. I’ve bought some new undies and I’m dying to try them out!”

Sophie let out a groan.

“Anyway, you’ll be fine,” Clare continued, “Just have my number ready to call in case he turns out to be a complete dweeb.”

“Or an axe murderer.”

“Axe murderers can be dweebs too!”

Sophie sighed. “Thanks for that. I might need more than coffee to have the guts to go through with it.” She took a gulp of the coffee just as the tube lurched to a halt, causing a large wave of the dark brown liquid to slosh over the edge of the cup and onto her crotch. It soaked in immediately, staining the whole area between her legs. “Oh fuck, really? It looks like I’ve peed myself.”

Clare stared at the patch. “Or worse.”

As the tube doors closed, a middle-aged woman in a Tweed suit sat down in the space next to Clare. Sophie stared at her stained crotch and with one hand pulled at the clingy wet material which happily slapped back into place making a wet smacking sound. Sophie looked up. The woman in the Tweed suit stared at Sophie, then smiled, looking at her sympathetically.

Clare put on her soft mumsy voice, the one she used for her impersonations of television adverts for sanitary products. Stifling a smirk she leaned forward and said, rather too loudly, “It’s okay hon, we’ll buy you some Tena Ladies. Thin and discreet, reassuringly absorbent, and with odour control.”

Sophie looked mortified and stuttered. “I haven’t... I didn’t...”

The woman spoke. “It’s happened to me before, too. Ever since I had the twins, a little leaks out from time to time. It’s nothing to be ashamed about.”

Sophie was dumbstruck — too shocked and embarrassed to say anything — and she forced a crude smile. *A stranger. An effing stranger on the train thinks I’ve peed myself. Flipping great.*

Clare almost died from stifled laughter. She put her hand over her mouth, shuddering.

“My stop next,” announced Tweed Woman. She leant over and handed Sophie a wad of tissues, then gave Sophie another sympathetic and reassuring look before heading for the opening doors. As soon as the doors closed behind her, Clare let out an uncontrollable howl.

Sophie rolled her eyes, gnashed her teeth, and let out a frustrated yelp. “Oh shut your gob! I’ve got a date tonight and I can’t go looking like I’ve sh...pissed myself can I?”

“Put the coffee on the floor,” commanded Clare. “We’ve got this.” The two girls started dabbing at Sophie’s stained crotch with the tissues.

“Oh my God. Not only do I reek of singed plastic, my lady bits stink of coffee, and now my crotch is covered in bits of fluffy white tissue.” Sophie was losing it. “For fuck’s sake look at it! Just look at it!” she



yelled crossly. It then struck both girls that the train carriage was eerily quiet — even more than normal. They stared at each other wide-eyed, then slowly turned their heads to see all the other passengers looking at them; Sophie with her legs spread apart and Clare kneeling between them, steadying herself with a hand on each of Sophie's knees. Sophie closed her eyes. "Oh bollocks." She glanced up and the white-haired granny grinned down at her: *Don't smart! Get smart with Smart! Oh, fuck off*, thought Sophie.

# 3

At the office, Sophie stood in the tiled restroom pointing Clare's BaByliss hair dryer between her legs. She glanced down at the dark brown stain and the reflection of it in a mirror above one of the sinks before switching it off.

"At least it's dry now," offered Clare.

"I can't go out like this tonight. I'm calling the whole thing off."

"Hey, look, you have time to nip out at lunchtime to get something new. It'll be alright." Clare put a comforting arm around her bestie and rested her head on Sophie's shoulder. "Please don't cancel. You've not had a date in ages and you're in for a really great night. You'll have fun! You'll see."

Sophie was close to tears. "What's the point? It'll only go wrong, like the rest of my life."

"Hey, come on." Clare pulled Sophie in for a hug. "It's all fixable. Remember, you're Sophie Kingsman; strong, resilient, ace reporter with *Staying In* magazine. You're Lois Lane and tonight you have a date with Superman!"

Sophie sniffed and raised her eyebrows. "Superman?"

"Okay, well, he might not be able to see your underwear with his x-ray vision."

"Just as well right now!" Sophie sniffed again and began to feel a bit better. The two girls broke the hug and stood apart. Sophie held up the hair dryer like a gun. "And if he tries anything he'll get a load of this!" She made a Star Wars blaster sound. "Pew!"

Clare laughed. “That’s more like it, Lois...I mean, Leia! Come on, let’s get back to work. I’ll make you a cuppa.”

Sophie sniffed. “Better make it tea.”

Sophie’s desk was positioned in the middle of a row of three partitioned desks in the centre of the office space. Her desktop was surprisingly neat, and sitting on it was a sleek-looking iMac with a wireless keyboard and mouse. To the left of her computer was an open notepad and to the right was a small silver mesh pot with an assortment of pens and pencils. Below the desk, and to her left, was a set of three drawers. The first contained various stationery items, the second was full of make-up, and the third was rammed with an assortment of magazines, flyers, and other printed material. She opened up Mail on her Mac and began scrolling through her emails when Jeffrey, Clare’s dad, and the editor of *Staying In* magazine, leant over the partition. “Hi Soph, I won’t mention the fact that it’s almost nine-thirty a.m. and you’ve only just sat down at your desk.”

Sophie stammered. “I was...”

“I know.” Jeffrey held up the palm of his hand and winked.

“You do?”

“I do. You were investigating a hot story, one that will propel *Staying In* to become a top shelf magazine selling millions of copies every week. Am I right?”

“Um, I think you mean top *flight* magazine?”

“Yes. Exactly that!” Jeffrey winked again. “See you in my office in five. I have a new assignment for you.” He did that same Groucho Marx thing

with his eyebrows that Clare had done, before disappearing. *It must be a genetic thing.* Jeffrey had been like a second dad to Sophie since the car accident that had claimed her parents and left her orphaned.

She was seventeen when he and his wife Jumoke took Sophie under their wing, and since then they'd done everything they could to support her emotionally through the grief. They'd paid for both girls to have driving lessons and supported Sophie financially while she studied Sociology at uni. They had even given her a job with *Staying In* to give her a leg up, even though they both knew she was a bit useless at it. JJ, as Sophie called them, had been so kind, but she worried that Jeffrey was too soft to be able to turn *Staying In* into a major-league publication. Sophie thought a monthly magazine aimed at lonely homebodies, was never going to be a huge hit. That said, even though it was a small outfit, it was enough to keep them well occupied and earning enough to be comfortable. Sophie returned the favour by doing the very best she could. She wanted to repay them for some of the kindness they'd shown her. If only she could come up with a great article — something special that could get syndicated to bigger publications — it would make her feel that she had given something back. So far, it felt as though all she had done was take, take, take, even though she knew they wanted nothing in return. They loved her and had treated her like their own child, and although she missed her mum and dad, and still cried at the memory of them, she had grown to love and adore this amazing family.

Sophie grabbed a pencil and a fresh notepad from her desk drawer, and holding the notepad to cover her stained crotch, she scuttled over to Jeffrey's glass office, which was situated in the corner of the large open-plan working space. As she approached, Jeffrey saw her coming and beckoned for her to enter. She pushed open the door with one hand and, keeping the pad in place, manoeuvred into a chair opposite Jeffrey's large wooden desk, pulling it towards the desk, such that her legs were hidden from view. Operation *Get-into-the-Office* was a success!

"Everything all right?" asked Jeffrey.

"Huh?" replied Sophie.

"Only, you seem to have a limp?"

"Oh, yes, um, nuns-and-poodles."

"Nuns and poodles?"

Sophie squirmed, wriggling in her chair. "Oh yes, sorry, um, pins-and-needles. I used to call it nuns-and-poodles when I was little."

"I see," said Jeffrey in a way that clearly made it sound as if he thought that Sophie was barking mad. "Okay, so, I have a great idea for a new assignment for you. You like chocolate cake, right?"

Sophie's eyes widened. "Is the pope Catholic? Is the sky blue? Are Pinky and Perky the cutest pigs you've ever seen?" *Maybe this is going to be the best assignment ever.*

"Perfect!" Jeffrey slid a flyer across the desk towards her. It read, *THE GREAT BATTERSEA BAKE-OFF*, and on the front of the flyer was a photo of a grey-haired granny holding an extravagant chocolate cake towards the camera. "That", nodded Jeffrey, "is Miss Gwendoline Humphrey. She's

won the baking competition for ten years in a row, and she lives in your neck of the woods.”

Sophie picked up the flyer and looked at the photo of Miss Humphrey. It reminded her of someone but she couldn't place her. “Great, so you want me to cover her story? I can do that.”

“Oh no, it's better than that.”

Sophie waited for Jeffrey to speak, but he just leant back in his office chair and smiled knowingly. “Oh?”

Jeffrey let out a breath and leant forward placing his elbows on the desk. “This year, Miss Humphrey's judging the competition.”

“Right?”

He looked Sophie directly in the eye. “And you, Sophie, are going to enter!”

“What?”

“The competition! You are going to enter the competition and write about your experience for the mag.”

Sophie stammered hoping for a way out. “But surely it's too late for me to enter?”

“Each year they invite someone from the press to take part. It's great free exposure for them, and Gerald can't cover it with his wife's own bun about to be done!” Gerald was the food columnist for *Staying In* and his wife was due to give birth to their first child any day. Jeffrey laughed at his own joke. “Get it? Bun in the oven? Gerald?”

*Oh God.* Sophie ignored Jeffrey's attempt at humour. “So, I'm not your first choice then?”

“Sophie. You'll be brilliant. I have every faith in you.”

“You know I can’t cook, right? I burn toast! I could even burn Rice Krispies!”

“Ah, but this isn’t cooking, it’s baking!” said Jeffrey triumphantly.

Sophie protested. “Okay, so I can’t *bake* either.”

“Aha! I thought you’d say that!” Sophie inwardly groaned. “I’ve been in touch with Miss Humphrey and she’s agreed to give you baking lessons. How brilliant is that?”

Sophie’s face fell. *Oh, brilliant.* Then it occurred to her. “Ah, but won’t that be cheating, her being a judge and coaching me for the competition?”

“Not at all. The entrants all bake on the same day and the judges have no idea who has baked which cake — just like the telly programme. You can’t cheat.”

Sophie forced a smile. *Perfect.* It didn’t seem as if she was going to get out of this one.

“I’ve set up a meeting for you with Miss Humphrey this afternoon at two o’clock. I’ve scribbled her address down on the bottom of the flyer.”

“Thanks.” Sophie got up from her chair and momentarily forgot about the brown stain between her legs before remembering and swiping the flyer to cover the area. She turned quickly and limped for the door.

As she opened the door she heard Jeffrey call out from behind her, “Nuns and poodles?”

Sophie turned to see Jeffrey smirking. “What? Oh yes...yes.” She bolted from the office and back to her desk.

Sophie sat staring at the flyer. The Great Battersea Bake-off. *Great*. The competition day was in three weeks, held in a large marquee in Battersea Park. The thought made her stomach churn. Then she figured, well, why not? Perhaps some baking lessons were exactly what she needed. Besides, it would get her out of the office for a bit. As she pondered the idea, her phone buzzed on the desk in front of her. It was *Strike-a-Match* reminding her about tonight's date. It was now a quarter past ten. She had plenty of time to head back to Clapham, treat herself to some new jeggings, and then walk to Battersea for her meeting with Miss Humphrey.

Clare's desk was behind Sophie's, against the wall. "Hey!" Sophie called out to Clare who had just put her phone down and was tapping at her PC keyboard.

"Hey yourself!" retorted Clare, not bothering to turn around.

"I have an assignment. I'm gonna head back to the flat, maybe get changed or treat myself to some new jeggings. After all, I do have a date tonight!"

Clare spun around in her chair. "That's the spirit! I'll see you back at the flat tonight for all the juicy details about *Mr. Lover-man*."

"I thought you were heading out with Michael?"

"Nah, he just called me. He has to work late. So my only date tonight is with a hot bath, a glass of chilled prosecco, and Netflix."

Sophie laughed. "Sounds perfect. I might join you!"

"Ha! Sorry, only room for one in the tub! Looks like you're just gonna have to go on your date after all."





# 4

Sporting new sand-coloured jeggings, Sophie enjoyed the gentle warmth of the unseasonal April sunshine as she walked along the streets from Clapham to Battersea. It wouldn't be long before the air was filled with smells from the hanging baskets that lined the streets, and she felt at home immersed in the hustle and bustle of the small shops, and the cafés and boutique restaurants with their outdoor seating. There was nothing she liked more than to nibble a croissant and sip a latte while watching the pedestrians pass by. The shops gave way to quieter residential streets, and she now stood outside No.7 Trimm Street; a mid-terraced house with a bright red front door and a small front garden filled with large hydrangeas, their leaves preparing to burst from the stems. She entered through a small iron gate, walked up the short, terracotta-and-black tiled checkerboard path, and rang the doorbell.

After a moment, the door was opened by a short, decidedly plump old woman with curly white hair and piercing green eyes, who appeared to be almost naked. Sophie gasped before she realised that the woman was wearing an apron that almost completely covered a flower-patterned dress. The design on the apron was of an equally plump body with big busty boobs popping out of a tiny red bikini. The character was holding a beach ball to cover her lower parts.

Before Sophie had time to speak, the owner said, "Ah! Welcome, welcome! You must be Sophie? Do come in!" She stepped back away from the door and began wiping her hands on her apron, breathing heavily. Clearly, it had taken some effort for her to answer the door.

Sophie stepped into the narrow hallway. Immediately, her nostrils, mouth, lungs, and what felt like her whole being, were filled with the warm, comforting smell of baking. It was like stepping into a soothing, scented sauna, and it made Sophie feel giddy and ravenously hungry.

“Do go on into the sitting room, second door on the right. Make yourself comfortable and I’ll be back in a jiffy,” smiled the old woman.

Sophie did as she was asked and walked into the cosy sitting room, furnished with a deep-red, patterned carpet, dark-blue sofa and armchair, and a wooden standard lamp with a dull, yellow shade. A wooden mahogany display cabinet stood against one wall and was filled with ornaments and china. There was a Victorian oil painting of fruit on one wall - perhaps a Charles Bale, and the bay window had patterned net curtains and heavy green drapes. There was a fireplace, and in front of it was a rather tatty looking grey rug. However, sitting on a dainty, oak coffee table was the centrepiece of the room: a large cake presented on a raised porcelain stand. It was decorated lavishly with creamy icing which also oozed enticingly from between two layers of thick, and presumably light, brown sponge. The surface was generously studded with walnut halves.

As Sophie eased herself onto one end of the comfy two-seater, she heard the sound of slippers padding on the carpet and Miss Humphrey came in holding a tray which she set beside the cake. On the tray lay three plates, two napkins, a silver cake slice, and two large mugs of tea.

“Oh, I hope you weren’t expecting fancy tea cups, a pot with a cosy, and all that?” chuckled the host, “Now, sugar dear?” Sophie shook her

head and accepted the mug handed to her. With some effort, and a large sigh, Miss Humphrey squeezed herself into an armchair. Leaning over, she shoveled three large teaspoonfuls of sugar into her tea, gave it a good stir, and set the teaspoon down on the tray.

“And you must be Mrs. Humphrey?” ventured Sophie.

“A bit less of the *Mrs* please, and do call me Gwen,” she smiled in return.

“Oh, sorry. Yes, of course, *Miss* Humphrey, I mean Gwen. Hello. Nice to meet you.” Sophie glanced again at the apron.

“Oh! Ha!” laughed Gwen looking down at herself. “Yes, a Christmas present, and wishful thinking on my part!” She untied the apron and then tried to pull the apron strings from beneath her body. She sighed, and gave up, leaving the apron in place. “Nice to meet you too. Cheers!” She lifted and held up her mug.

“Cheers!” echoed Sophie. She then turned to look again at the majestic cake on the stand. She couldn’t keep her eyes off it. It was compelling.

“Coffee and walnut.” Gwen’s eyes sparkled. “Want a slice?”

Sophie widened her eyes. “Mmmmm!”

Setting down her mug, Gwen took the cake slice and gently cut three healthy portions of cake. She was interrupted by a knock at the back door. “Ah, that’ll be Harvey, the fat, horny bugger! I’d better let him in.”

Sophie’s mouth dropped open as she wondered who this Harvey could be. Gwen, with considerable effort, heaved herself back out of the armchair and padded out of the room. From the kitchen she heard a door open, footsteps, and Gwen saying something about dirty feet,

before Harvey entered the room. The fat, barrel-shaped, French bulldog looked at Sophie, looked at the cake, and then back again, before heading straight for her. Before she could do anything, the old black-and-white dog had its paws on her lap and started humping her left leg. “Oh no you don’t!” commanded Sophie, “Not on my new jeggings you don’t.”

“Get down you dirty sod!” yelled Gwen as she entered the room, flapping her apron at the dog. Harvey glanced back at Gwen with a look that was a mix between shame and cheekiness, as if caught in the act and saying, *Well, you can’t blame a dog for trying?* He then obeyed, plopped his fat paws back down on the carpet, and manoeuvred himself to sit down in front of the coffee table, staring at the cake. He immediately began to drool. “I’m sorry, pet. He may be fat but there’s life in the old dog yet. It’s the only exercise he gets. Are you okay with dogs? I should have asked.”

“Yes, I’m fine.” Sophie smiled, brushing coarse, white hairs off her new jeggings and hoping her new purchase didn’t smell too much of dog. “He looks like he wants some cake.”

“Sex, sleep, and cake. That’s all that bloody dog thinks about. Come to think of it, a typical flipping male!” The two women laughed. Gwen continued to lift the three slices onto the three plates. She passed one to Sophie and set one on the floor for Harvey, who immediately wolfed it down, licking the plate, and then his chops. When he’d finished he looked longingly up at Sophie, before presumably deciding that he was feeling a bit full. He turned and waddled over to the rug that lay in front

of the fireplace, spun around three times, and lay down with his feet up in the air. He closed his eyes and immediately began to snore.

Gwen rolled her eyes. “Quite a performance isn’t it?”

Sophie agreed by shaking her head and smiling.

“Is it alright if we eat with our hands? I think cake needs to be smelled and touched, and then tasted.” She handed Sophie a napkin.

Sophie took the slab. It smelled divine. She felt the soft sponge on her fingers and lifted the corner of the cake to her mouth. The combined flavours of the coffee, nuts, and frosting exploded in her mouth. The sponge was light and moist, the rich icing smooth and creamy. *Perfection*. She had never tasted cake like this; never knew something so simple could be so good. Sophie closed her eyes, and if her mouth hadn’t been full she would have laughed with delight. “So?” asked Gwen once Sophie had taken her first mouthful and swallowed.

“Orgasmic!” Sophie went bright red, put her hand to her mouth, and looked at Gwen with horror. “Oh, sorry, I meant, sensational, sorry.”

Gwen laughed. “I’m not sure my cakes have ever been described quite like that, but orgasmic works for me.” She smiled and winked at Sophie. “I’ll send the rest home with you in a box. Perhaps you might like to share it with your friends or colleagues?”

Sophie laughed. “Like they’d get a look in, but thank you, that’d be fab.”

After they had finished their slices of cake, Sophie used a wet finger to gather every moist crumb left on her plate, before pulling out her notepad and pen from her bag. “Do you mind if I take notes?”

Gwen settled back into her chair, pushed back her shoulders, and brushed down her dress. “Not at all. Go ahead, my dear.”

The two women, one old and one young, chatted for the next hour, interrupted only by Harvey’s snorts and Gwen fetching them a second mug of tea. Sophie jotted down notes about how Gwen had moved from a small coastal village in Cornwall to London to look after her brother. In fact, the small house in Battersea had belonged to her brother and when he died she decided to stay on rather than return to the village. Gwen had been guarded about her life before London and Sophie had not wanted to push her on it. The focus was on how she had won the Great Battersea Bake-off for ten years in a row — a considerable achievement.

The conversation flowed and Sophie found herself absorbed as Gwen told her about the other contestants and the things that had happened at the event over the years — including an exploding oven, and how a seagull had once landed on a particularly jammy cake, only to get its feet stuck just as it was about to be brought to the judging table. Ironically, the cake was *seaside themed*, and as the seagull remained perfectly still, the contestant, not wanting to ruin the cake, left the seagull in as decoration. She would have got away with it too, if it hadn’t then pecked one of the judges as she went in for a slice. The way Gwen told the story, Sophie laughed so hard, tea squirted out of her nose. Thankfully, Gwen had a ready supply of napkins.

“So, the competition is in three weeks time. Do you think you’re up for it?” asked Gwen.

Sophie bit her nails, nervously. “There’s something you need to know.”

“Oh?”

“I can’t bake. I can’t cook. I’m useless. I can’t even make beans on toast. I’ve never cooked more than stuff from the freezer. Although, if you want someone to expertly tip your take-out onto a plate, I’m your woman.”

“Oh!” Gwen thought for a moment and looked seriously at Sophie. “We have some work to do then? Don’t worry. We’ll have you baking first place chocolate cakes in no time. How about we meet here every afternoon for the next three weeks?”

“I’m not sure there’s enough time in the world, but if it means I get to eat more cake like that then count me in! I only live in Clapham which means I’ll be able to walk off all the cake.”

“You could do with putting on a pound or two.” Gwen looked Sophie up and down. “Look at you, you’re all skin and bone. My doctor keeps telling me I need to lose weight and to cut back on the sweet stuff. Little brat looks like he’s just left school. Talk about wet behind the ears. I told him to sod off and that I’d probably outlive him.” She laughed. “Anyway, I hope you won’t be missed at the office if you’re spending half of every day with me?”

“To be honest, I think my editor, Jeffrey, will be glad to have me out from under his feet.” Sophie groaned. “I’m not much good at journalism either.”

“Well, I’m looking forward to it. Harvey and I could do with the company.” At hearing his name being mentioned, Harvey opened his eyes, looked up hungrily, first at the cake and then at Sophie’s leg.



# *Gwen's Coffee and Walnut Cake*

Perfect to serve when meeting new friends or for treating your office colleagues.

## **Ingredients**

- 250g softened salted butter (never margarine!)
- 100ml strong black coffee, cooled (2 tbsp of this is for the icing)
- 280g self-raising flour
- 250g golden caster sugar
- ½ tsp baking powder
- 4 large free range eggs
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 150g walnut halves, finely chop half of these (try not to eat them

like Gwen does)

## **For the icing**

- 200g icing sugar, sifted, plus a little extra for dusting
- 300ml double cream
- 200g mascarpone cheese, at room temperature
- Plus the reserved 2 tbsp of the coffee mixture from above

## **Step 1**

Heat a fan oven to 160°C and lightly grease two 20cm cake tins before lining them with baking parchment. Set aside 2 tbsp of the coffee for the icing.

## **Step 2**

Sieve the flour and baking powder into a large mixing bowl. Mix in the softened butter, sugar, eggs, vanilla, and half the remaining coffee until smooth. Fold in the finely chopped walnuts, then divide the mixture between the two tins. Bake the cakes for 25-30 minutes until golden, making sure that when you stab in a skewer it comes out clean. Drizzle one cake with the remaining coffee. Take the cakes out of the tins and cool.

## **Step 3**

To make the icing, beat together the icing sugar, cream and mascarpone, then fold in the reserved 2 tbsp coffee. Place the coffee drizzled cake at the bottom and spread some of the icing on top of this. Put the second cake on top and cover it with the remaining icing. Decorate with the walnut halves. Dust with a little icing sugar.

# 5

It was just after seven p.m. when Sophie alighted from the taxi outside the Gecko Lounge. Bars typically didn't get going until much later in the evening, so she expected it to be quiet. She could hear the faint sound of Calypso music coming from inside, and was relieved to see it wasn't the kind of place that had a bouncer or someone on the door to guide you to a table. Here goes, she thought to herself, and taking a deep breath, she entered the foyer.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dark interior. Clare had been right; it was all bamboo furniture and floor to ceiling rubber plants, yuccas interspersed with trailing baskets, and orchids in raised jardinières. Across the pillared interior with its scattering of tables, the bar stood directly ahead where a lone barman, dressed in an Hawaiian shirt, was busy cleaning glasses — an impressive row of lit bottles lining the wall behind him.

Sophie spotted Martin sitting at the bar. He looked a bit older than Sophie remembered from his photo, but then again, the one that had been used for her own account featured a particularly flattering soft-focus look. Martin turned, and seeing Sophie, he waved. Following Clare's advice to *go in strong, be assertive, and be bold*, Sophie strode up to the bar. Martin couldn't help glancing down at Sophie's long legs and heeled boots as she approached. When she got face-to-face, she went straight in, kissed him on both cheeks, sat on the bar stool next to him and said, "Well, hello stranger."

The man looked bemused but also thrilled, and replied, “Hi baby.” There then followed an awkward silence as they each waited for the other to say something. *God, at least he could offer to buy me a drink,* thought Sophie. She held his gaze, and then, to her relief, he finally spoke. “My wife is in the restrooms,” he rested a hand on Sophie’s knee, “but if you give me a card or something with your number, I might be free later.”

Sophie was filled with horror and felt a wave of cold clamminess wash over her body. *This man isn’t Martin.* The Martin imposter gave her knee a squeeze, causing Sophie to recoil. “Do I look like a prostitute to you?” she yelled, jumping off of the bar stool, “and take your grubby hand off me!”

A woman in her late thirties began walking towards them. It was evident by the glare she gave the imposter that this was his wife. The woman turned on her heel and walked stiffly towards the door, leaving the husband calling after her, “Honey! It's not what you think — she's a pro!” He jumped off the bar stool to follow his wife.

“I’m not a prostitute, you slime ball!” she shouted at his retreating back. As she did so, she became aware of an audience. Leaning against a fake palm tree, a man was watching her with a grin that reached from ear-to-ear. Sophie was horror-stricken as he approached.

“Hi, I’m Martin. You must be Sophie?” Martin leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “Can I buy you a drink? Looks like you need one.”

Martin looked better in real life than he did in his photo. He had dark, almost black hair that flopped across his forehead above his hazel eyes

— it looked almost boyish. He was tanned and his body was in great shape. The man clearly worked out. His muscles rippled under a plain white T-shirt, and something about the way the top clung to him like a second skin shouted *Rip me off! Rip me off!* Sophie, although not going entirely weak at the knees, did feel a flutter of something else down below.

The couple decided to stay in the bar, and discovered the barman to be a real gent. Given the embarrassment Sophie had endured, he served them their first drink on the house. She decided on a Bahama Mama — the perfect blend of dark rum, coffee, and coconut liqueurs — and the perfect successor to the coffee cake she had enjoyed earlier. Besides, it sounded strong, and Martin was right — she did need it. Martin sipped a rum and diet coke. *That makes sense*, thought Sophie. *You don't get ripped by drinking bucketfuls of sugar.*

It turned out that Martin owned his own construction company, specialising in refits of interiors, turning old, tired town houses into modern flats. In fact, he himself lived in one of the refurbished apartments. Sophie wondered what it might look like, especially the bedroom. Sophie, get a grip of yourself and focus! Get to know him first before you start thinking about getting your kit off. So what if she hadn't had sex in an age? She mustn't come across as too desperate, although she couldn't help but flirt. Martin was a hunk!

After nine p.m., the bar began to fill with customers. Oddly, the couple hadn't talked much about their personal lives — though this was fine by Sophie; she didn't want to relive any heartache tonight. She had mentioned that she was a writer and shared a flat, but they'd mostly kept things neutral - films they'd seen, places they'd visited, that sort of thing.

As the evening wore on, Sophie got more and more tipsy, and flirtatious. She'd only had cake at lunchtime and was drinking on an empty stomach. Feeling more relaxed and fuelled by cocktails, she found herself touching him, resting her hand on his arm as she spoke, and when she got up from the stool to go to the loo, she made sure her left breast brushed against his back.

In the ladies, Sophie surveyed her appearance in the mirror. She touched up her lipstick and smoothed down her flyaways, before pointing a stern finger at her reflection. "Sophie!" she scolded, "You utter tart. What are you doing?" She lowered her finger and giggled, swaying slightly. *Exactly what I want to do! I deserve this. Clare will be proud of me.* "So what if you never see him again, tonight he's gonna be yours!"

"You go for it girl!" piped a woman from inside a cubicle, followed by the sound of a toilet flush. Sophie smiled to herself when she realised she had spoken her thoughts out loud. Clare had been right, she was having a great time, and she had a feeling it was about to get a whole lot better.

After they'd climbed the stairs of a beautiful town house, Martin tapped in the code to the key safe on the wall: 3485. *How funny*, thought Sophie, *the first four digits of the home telephone number I had when I was growing up*. She quickly pushed the thought from her head as they bundled into Martin's stylish apartment.

He flicked on the lights and turned to her, "Another drink?" but Sophie wanted one thing and she wanted it now.

She pulled Martin into her. He lifted her up in his strong arms and held her back as they kissed; deep and passionate. She felt weak at the knees as Martin led her down a corridor, past the open plan living area, and into a large softly-lit and softly-furnished bedroom, with a beautifully-laid king-size bed. She went to undress but he pushed her gently back down onto the smooth, beige bed cover. "No, leave your clothes on. I like the look."

Sophie felt a rush of heat as she laid back. She had wanted this for so long; to be wanted, to be desired, to have someone hungry for her. Closing her eyes, she felt him explore her body with his hands, stroking her all over, his fingers working their magic on her. The alcohol had lowered her inhibitions and she wanted more. As she arched her back, he switched to exploring her exposed skin with his mouth and Sophie felt her jeggings being slowly pulled down over her thighs. *I'm not going to last long*, she thought, before feeling a sudden, euphoric rush; a thousand tiny pin pricks all over her body. Sophie let out a deep, long sigh.

Martin smiled. "Now you can get undressed." He began to take off his tight jeans revealing his toned body, and when he turned, she could see

he was ready for her. Sophie slowly pulled off her boots and threw them off the bed, then slipped off her jeggings before unbuttoning and removing her blouse. “Roll over,” he commanded. Sophie did as she was told. She felt Martin expertly unclip her bra and gently slide it over her shoulders, as he kissed the back of her neck, then moving his kisses down her spine. He rolled her back over and admired her body, bathed in the soft light from the bedside lamp. “Beautiful,” he said. *Yes, you are,* thought Sophie. The night had only just begun.

...

When Sophie entered the flat, she noticed Clare was sitting on the sofa with a book. “You’re up late.”

Clare continued staring at the page. “Where the fuck have you been?” She turned and glared at Sophie. “I’ve been texting and calling you for hours!”

“What, are you my mother now?” Sophie instantly regretted saying it. Clare was only concerned. “Clare, I’m sorry. My phone ran out of charge, and besides,” she smirked, “I wouldn’t have had time to look at it.”

Clare’s face softened and then her eyes grew wide. “What? You didn’t?”

“Well, that’d be telling wouldn’t it?”

Clare was gobsmacked. “Okay, game’s up. Tell me what you’ve done with the real Sophie Kingsman?”

“What, the timid, shy, doesn’t-even-go-to-first-base-on-the-first-date Sophie?”



“Yes, her!”

Sophie made a poor attempt at one of those sassy head-wagging finger-points. “That Sophie's long gone! N’night!” and she staggered to her bedroom to relive in her mind — and perhaps in touch — some of what she’d experienced that evening.

# *The Gecko Lounge's Bahama Mama*

Perfect for that special night out, blind date, or first date.

## **Ingredients (serves two)**

- 30ml Gosling's Black Seal Rum (40% proof)
- 30ml Coconut Rum
- 15ml Gosling's Black Seal 151 Rum (75.5% proof)
- 15ml Coffee Liqueur
- 30ml Lemon Juice
- 240ml Pineapple Juice

## **Step 1**

Combine all the ingredients in a cocktail shaker with ice and shake really well for two minutes.

## **Step 2**

Strain over fresh ice into your cocktail glass and garnish with a slice of orange and a cherry.

## **Step 3**

Repeat the process, because one will definitely not be enough!

# 6

Despite the old-fashioned units dating from the 1980s, the walls of Gwen's small kitchen had been recently painted in a light shade of magnolia. Bright LED lighting had been installed under the cupboards and on the ceiling rose, turning what would have once been a dingy space into a light and bright workplace. The surfaces were spotlessly clean, and two large, terracotta floor tiles sat on the formica worktops either side of the electric oven to protect them from hot pans and dishes. There was a newish-looking Bosch fridge-freezer, and on one surface stood a bright-red Kitchen Aid mixer. The rest of the surfaces were clear of clutter as Gwen kept all her utensils, boards, and other kitchenware in under-the-counter drawers. There was a small table against one wall with two wooden chairs and this is where Gwen would sit, doing the crossword, whilst waiting for cakes and other goodies to set or cook.

Sophie stood clutching a bowl filled with cake mix. She took a wooden spoon from a drawer and had just plunged it into the mixture when her phone, lying on the counter, buzzed. She glanced down. *I had a great time last night. Same again next Tuesday? M. X.* Her heart did a cartwheel. She didn't remember giving Martin her number, but she did remember how he made her feel. Sophie dropped the bowl onto the work top, picked up her phone, and quickly tapped a reply. *Yes. See you there! S. X.*

Smiling to herself she put her phone back on the counter, tucked the bowl back under her left arm, and started to vigorously stir the sponge

mix with a wooden spoon. She stopped when she felt Gwen's hand on her arm.

"Go gently," instructed Gwen. "Slow down. It's all about the air. You want your mixture to be as light and airy as possible but with no large air bubbles. Here, put the bowl on the counter and pass me that spoon." She took the spoon from Sophie, licked it, and tossed it into the sink. "The ingredients need to be caressed, not beaten into submission. Try this." She plucked a flexible silicone spatula from a drawer and handed it to Sophie. "Now, try to fold the ingredients together. Slide the spatula to the bottom of the bowl and slowly lift and turn it over. The lighter your touch, the lighter the cake. As Phil Collins said, you can't hurry love."

Sophie smiled. "So less BDSM and more romance?"

"Something like that." Gwen laughed, "and stop as soon as the ingredients are fully mixed."

Sophie slowed down, following Gwen's instructions, and as she did so, she felt her shoulders drop and herself beginning to relax. The gentle folding motion was soothing and deeply satisfying.

Gwen inspected the bowl. "There, it looks just about perfect to me. Now, let's pour the mix into our two tins. I've cut some greaseproof paper circles and popped them in the bottom."

Sophie looked into the two cake tins. "What are they for?"

"It'll make the cakes easier to pop out when they're done."

"Won't they catch fire in the oven?"

"No dear, they'll be fine."

Sophie blushed. "Oh good. It's just that I had an experience once with...oh, never mind."

Gwen slid the tins towards Sophie, who began to pour in the mixture from the bowl, gently coaxing it out with the spatula. Gwen nodded. “That’s it, the same amount in each tin.” Sophie placed the empty bowl back on the counter. “Now, give each tin a good hard rap on the counter top. That’ll pop any remaining large air bubbles.”

Sophie complied.

“Finally, the cake is going to rise in the middle which is great for the top layer, but not so great for the bottom layer, so in one of the tins, gently spread the mix so it has a slight dip in the middle. Hopefully it’ll then come out level.”

Sophie found this part a bit tricky, but when she stood back she could see the middle was lower than the edges. “It’s a bit messy isn’t it?”

“It’ll be fine. They look perfect and ready for the oven. It’ll be at temperature by now. Pop them in — both on the same rack so they cook at the same rate. Oh, and slide this pan of water on the bottom rack.” Gwen reached across the counter to a small saucepan that had a couple of inches of water in the bottom.

“What’s that for?”

“It’ll keep the inside of the oven moist and stop your cake from drying out.”

Sophie did as Gwen asked. “Your wish is my command, oh master!” She placed the two cake tins on the upper rack and the pan of water on the lower rack and closed the oven door.

Gwen nodded her approval. “We’ll set the oven timer for twenty-five minutes. You put the kettle on and I’ll wash the bowl.”

Sophie sat on the sofa with her feet tucked under her, as she caressed her mug of sweet tea, while Gwen sat opposite, squeezed into her armchair. Harvey was lying on his rug in his usual position — on his back, four legs sticking up, snoring away. Sophie looked up at the oil painting; a bowl of grapes on a table, with an assortment of other fruit around it. “The painting, is it a Bale?”

Gwen clicked her tongue. “That’s very perceptive of you.”

“My great aunt had one, very similar, in her house in East Sheen.”

Gwen scoffed. “Ugly thing isn’t it? Still, it fills a space on the wall.”

Sophie swallowed. *Crickey*. If she remembered correctly, when her great aunt died, the painting fetched several thousand pounds at Christie’s.

Gwen turned to Sophie. “So, tell me a bit about yourself. Your parents must be so proud of you, a writer. How exciting to have your words in print every week, being published...” Gwen stopped. Sophie’s face had fallen and she was staring down into her mug. “Oh, I’m sorry, pet. I was wittering on.” Gwen paused, then ventured, “It’s your parents isn’t it? You don’t need to tell me. I don’t want to pry.”

Sophie sniffed and looked up. Gwen’s face was filled with such compassion. “They both...” Sophie stopped and took a breath. “They both died in a car accident when I was seventeen. Six years ago.”

Gwen’s eyes filled and she whispered softly. “Oh pet.”

“It’s okay. I mean, it’s hard. Some days are harder than others.”

“Any brothers or sisters?”

“Yes. I mean no. Well, no, as in, I’m an only child. But there’s Clare. She’s been my best friend since, like, forever. Her mum and dad took me

in and well, they're my family. Clare's like a sister to me." Sophie finished the last of her tea in one final gulp and changed the subject. "So, how about you? You mentioned your late brother. Do you have any children?" Gwen sucked in a long breath and looked up as if recollecting; a painful memory bubbling to the surface. Sophie bit her lip. "Oh, I'm sorry. It's none of my business."

"Oh, it *is* your business," answered Gwen, snapping back to reality. She smiled. "You're a journalist. It's your job to ask questions." They both heard an old-fashioned buzzer coming from the kitchen and Harvey opened his eyes. "Saved by the bell. Come on, let's go and see how your cakes turned out."

Gwen passed a metal skewer to Sophie. "Slide it in and out. If it comes out dry then you know your cake is cooked all the way through."

Sophie raised her eyebrows but kept her thoughts to herself. She did as Gwen had asked and inspected the skewer. "It's clean!" With guidance from Gwen, she carefully turned the two layers out onto a large baking rack to cool.

"See how Vicky's nice and raised on the top. And Tory, well, she's just perfectly level. Well done!"

Sophie looked confused. "Vicky? Tory?"

Gwen laughed, "Yes, what else would the layers of a Victoria sponge be called? Vicky's on top and Tory's on the bottom."

Sophie raised her eyebrows again, never one to miss a good innuendo.

Gwen tutted. “It’s something I learned in France,” she said with mock seriousness.

Sophie cocked her head to one side and rolled her eyes as if to say, *Really?*

Gwen put her hands on her hips. “Oh, not being a lesbian, you silly sausage. Naming cakes! Oh my goodness, you do make me get my words in a pickle,” and the two women laughed.

...

The Victoria sponge cake turned out rather well; with the middle filled with lashings of whipped double cream over a generous slather of home-made raspberry jam; topped with a light dusting of icing sugar. Sophie’s first cake, minus three slices, had been just as much of a hit in the office as the leftover coffee and walnut cake she had brought in the day before.

Each day, as cakes cooled and tea was supped, Gwen and Sophie talked more and more. Sophie decided not to ask further questions about Gwen’s past. If Gwen wanted to share, then that was up to Gwen. However, Sophie was more forthcoming about her own life. She told Gwen about her time at university, failed relationships, holidays she had taken, about Jeffrey and Jumoke, how she had ended up working for Jeffrey’s magazine, and also about the new romance in her life, Martin. Gwen talked mostly about baking and also about her time in London. She was a mine of information, and Sophie had begun writing everything down in a new writing pad. Each page was filled with that



day's cake recipe — ingredients, notes, and tips scrawled around the edges — and it dawned on Sophie that she was creating her own recipe book. She was also making a new special friend.

After three days of visits and baking, Gwen asked Sophie to arrive earlier than usual as they had something special to do that day. It was a Friday.

Gwen stood before Sophie in the kitchen and her demeanour was animated and alive. She was excitedly twitching and bouncing from foot to foot.

“Today we're baking muffins. Big muffins.” Gwen smirked, held her hands up and cupped them, fingers spread apart, to show just how big they were going to be.

Sophie giggled at the thought of big muffins. “I take it there's a special reason?”

“Oh yes! You'll see. Now, roll your sleeves up, we have work to do!”

The two women stood back and looked at the muffins; twenty-four large chocolate chip muffins and twenty-four large blueberry muffins. Each one baked in a muffin tray and encased in a carefully folded parchment cup, and the smell in the kitchen was divine. Outside the house, a car horn beeped twice and Gwen glanced towards the kitchen door. “Ah, that'll be the taxi. Help me get the muffins into these boxes.”

Sophie began carefully packing the muffins into the boxes. “Where are we going?”

Gwen refused to give up any further information. “I told you. You'll see.”

It was a very short ride from Gwen's house, over the great north-south divide — known as Battersea Bridge — to the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital. Gwen was panting as they entered the foyer and she waved at a porter who immediately brought over a wheelchair. Gwen gently shooed him away. "We can take it from here, love."

Sophie was awestruck by the bright, clinical interior that looked like something out of an H.G. Wells' science-fiction novel — with windowed stories rising high above her to a glass roof; sails and lights spanning the space, futuristic-looking escalators, lifts, colourful murals, and high-rise glass walkways criss-crossing from one side to the other.

Gwen coughed and Sophie came to. Seeing the wheelchair she took Gwen's arm and began to guide her towards it.

"Keep your hands off me young lady!" Gwen laughed. Then she thought for a moment, "Well, I suppose I have been finding it harder to get about recently, but I'm not old enough for one of these yet! It's for the cake boxes, unless you fancy carrying them all the way?"

Sophie apologised and laughed too, and they piled the boxes onto the wheelchair, made their way through the foyer, and towards the bank of lifts. They exited on the third floor, walked down two corridors until they came to Zenith Ward. Gwen pushed the buzzer by the door and waited. The door clicked and unlocked, and with Gwen holding the door open, Sophie pushed the wheelchair into the ward corridor.

Fun pictures and zig-zag lines and patterns in bright colours adorned the walls and Sophie could hear a background buzz of music, and of children chatting and laughing. When they came to the nurses' station a

male nurse saw Gwen and his face lit up. “Gwen!” He quickly walked around to the front of the desk and looked at Sophie. “And what delights have you brought us today?”

Sophie blushed.

The nurse quickly looked back to Gwen. “I mean food...” He stuttered. “Cake!”

Gwen looked at Sophie. “I’ve brought you a muffin!” She sniggered, the nurse blushed, and Sophie glared at Gwen. “Actually, boxes of them.”

The nurse, whose name tag read, *Damon*, regained his composure. “She’s wicked, this one. You’d better be careful.”

Sophie smiled and nodded. “Don’t I know it!”

He held out a hand. “Damon.”

Sophie took it. “Sophie.”

Damon smiled, exposing a perfectly white, toothy grin. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too.”

Damon turned to Gwen. “Will you stay, just this once? The kids would love to meet you.”

Gwen shook her head. “Oh no pet. Gotta go. Things to do. You know how it is.”

Damon hugged the old woman. “Okay, well, thank you. They’ll love the buns. See you next time.”

After they said their goodbyes, Sophie and Gwen made their way back down to the entrance of the hospital. Sophie couldn’t help but admire

the space and the staff, and deep down she felt proud of being there, of her country, and of the National Health Service. It was truly inspiring.

As they walked through the automatic doors back into the fresh air, Gwen stopped and took in a deep breath. “Do you mind if we sit for a bit?”

The two made their way to a small garden area and sat on a stone bench. Gwen felt in her pockets and pulled out a parchment-wrapped packet from each. “Blueberry or chocolate?”

“Blueberry,” answered Sophie, and they sat in the sunshine unwrapping their muffins.

Gwen looked down at her muffin, then she looked directly ahead. “I did have a child.” She sighed. “A son. Colin. He died when he was nine years old. Cancer. I’m not good with hospitals. I’m sorry.”

Sophie put her right arm around her new friend and squeezed. Then she held up her muffin in her left hand. “Cheers.” Gwen lifted hers and they tapped muffins in the air.

Gwen dabbed her eyes with the back of her hand, let out a long sigh of relief and looked at Sophie. She squeezed Sophie’s knee. “Cheers back at you.”

# *Gwen's Chocolate Muffin Recipe*

Ideal for bringing a smile to carers, nurses, and patients. Just what the doctor ordered!

## **Ingredients (makes 12)**

- 250g plain flour (you can use self-raising flour, but omit the baking powder)
- 1 tsp baking powder
- ½ tsp bicarbonate of soda
- ½ tsp salt
- 4 tbsp cocoa powder
- 140g granulated sugar
- 1 large egg
- 240ml milk
- 90g melted butter
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 90g chocolate chips (Gwen uses a mixture of white and milk chocolate)

## **Step 1**

Heat a fan oven to 190°C and prepare the muffin tins.

## **Step 2**

Sieve the flour, baking powder, bicarbonate of soda, salt and cocoa into a large mixing bowl, then mix in the sugar.

### **Step 3**

Use a separate bowl to beat together the egg, milk, butter and vanilla, then fold this into the dry ingredients. (You can add the chocolate chips at this point, or save them for the tops!)

### **Step 4**

Fill the muffin cups, allowing space for them to rise. Top with chocolate chips now if you don't want them inside the cakes, before baking for 25 minutes.

# 7

As soon as Sophie was through Gwen's front door she turned to the seasoned baker. "Gwen, you know how they say that food is the way to a man's heart or something?"

Gwen rolled her eyes and closed the front door. "Morning."

Sophie looked sheepish. "Um, hi. Sorry."

Gwen stood in the narrow hallway, bemused. "The way to a man's heart is through his stomach?"

"Yes! Well, I have my second date with Martin tonight and, I thought, perhaps, we could bake something special? Something, I dunno, sexy?"

Gwen thought for a moment. "Sexy? Like a cake in the shape of a p..."

"No!" Sophie pursed her lips and glared at Gwen in mock shock, before laughing. "I can't believe you would suggest such a thing!"

Gwen smirked. "I was going to say pastry." Gwen scratched her chin and thought for a moment. "Perhaps it's time to turn our hand to something different?"

"What are you thinking?"

"Chou à la crème!"

Sophie tilted her head to one side, raised her eyebrows, and shrugged her shoulders. "Okay?"

"Profiteroles. It'll be a good opportunity to learn how to make choux pastry. And there's not much out there more sexy than cream." Gwen quietened her voice to a whisper and leaned in towards Sophie. "Although I did once have the most fabulous time with a French farmer called Mélanie and some fresh yoghurt..."

“Gwen!” Sophie laughed again. “Behave!”

Gwen rolled her eyes again, and grumbled. “Oh all right then, let’s get on with it,”

Sophie followed the old woman as she waddled towards the kitchen.

...

The whole living area of Sophie and Clare’s flat was a single, open-plan room. At one end was the kitchen, divided from the sitting area by a white counter with two bar stools. The sitting area consisted of a blue two-seater sofa, a turquoise bean bag, and a pine coffee table. Mounted on the wall at the opposite end of the room to the kitchen was a television, and to the right of it was the front door. On one wall, three doors led off to two tiny bedrooms and a shared bathroom. On the opposite wall was a small window with blue curtains, and on each side of the window were mounted some stylish black-and-white photo prints in pine frames.

The whole flat was small but modern. When the girls moved in they had made a pact that all personal belongings stayed in the bedrooms. This kept the living area clean, tidy, and free from debris. The bedrooms, however, were nobody else’s business but their own.

Clare, greedily looked at the white cardboard box that Sophie had set on the kitchen counter. “Ooh what’s in it?”

Sophie was in her bedroom dumping her bag. “Nothing for you!” she barked.



Clare slowly lifted the lid. “Profiteroles! Yummy!”

Sophie returned to the counter. “Oi! Get your mitts off, they’re not for you.” She gently slapped Clare’s hand and Clare let go of the lid. “They’re for Martin.”

Clare pouted her lower lip. “You’re seeing him tonight?”

“Yes. And they’re a special treat.”

“He’s a lucky guy!” Clare reluctantly peeled her eyes away from the box. “Michael took me to *Le Petit Ferme* last night. We had a wonderful dinner, although he does rather peck at his food. He says he doesn’t want to feel bloated for...you know what!”

Sophie rolled her eyes. “And did you get *you know what?*”

“You know it! He’s insatiable. Then again, so am I.” Clare wiggled her eyebrows. “Hey, we should have a foursome soon. It’d be fun!”

Sophie looked surprised, then thought for a moment, “I’m not sure it’s my scene. Wouldn’t it feel a bit weird?” She shrugged her shoulders. “Although the idea of swinging has crossed my mind in the past. I’ve always wondered what it would be like, you know, to...”

Clare stared at her friend wide-eyed. “Have dinner together? As a four?”

“Oh.” Sophie shifted uncomfortably, bit her lip, and then gave a fake laugh. “Got you there didn’t I?” Clare rolled her eyes as Sophie quickly changed the subject and headed for the bathroom. “Anyway, please can you put the box in the fridge for me,” she called over her shoulder, “I’m gonna take a shower.”

Sophie knew Clare wouldn’t be able to resist at least one profiterole, and that was fine. Asking her to put them in the fridge was her way of

giving Clare permission without actually giving her permission. And besides, there were plenty in the box for Martin.

Sophie stood in the steam-filled bathroom, and while she rubbed her hair with her towel, she mused about her plans for that evening. She hadn't thought her first date with Martin would have gone so far, but this time she'd be ready. She wanted to look sexy but not slutty; she loved the way his eyes greedily scanned her body, and so decided she would wear her short black, strappy cocktail dress. She'd never worn it before and it had been stuck in her cupboard for years, although to compliment it she'd have to convince Clare to let her borrow her Louboutin heels. Tonight, there'd be a feast for Martin's eyes *and* for his stomach, and she couldn't wait.

Clare was sitting on the sofa in her adult-size Winnie-the-Pooh onesie, watching Modern Family on Netflix, her legs tucked under her, and a bowl of microwave popcorn on the cushion beside her. She had agreed to let Sophie wear the heels and told Sophie to help herself to them.

When Sophie stepped out from her room and walked between her and the screen, Clare's mouth fell open and she stared at her friend in disbelief. Sophie gave Clare a single twirl. "Well? What do you think?"

"Holy shit Soph! Look at you! You're making *me* horny!"

Sophie put her hands on her hips and put on a snooty voice. "Gross!"

"Seriously girl, you look absolutely stunning."

"Why thank you!" Sophie held the hems of her short, tight dress, and attempted a wobbly curtsy which made Clare giggle. "Right, I must dash.

My Uber will be waiting for me. Don't wait up!" She walked to the fridge and took out the box of profiteroles. Carefully taking one out, she then walked back to the sofa which was facing away from her. She leaned over and popped the delicate pastry into Clare's mouth before going back to close the box.

Clare tried to speak. "Dglshmuss!"

With a contented sigh Sophie closed the box and carried it as she left the flat, heading for her second date with Martin.

...

Sophie and Martin sat, again, at the bar at The Gecko Lounge, and Sophie was right, Martin couldn't keep his eyes off her. While the bartender was fetching drinks, Martin looked at Sophie and then at the box sitting on the bar. "A present? For me?"

"Yes." Sophie slid the white box along the bar towards him. Martin opened it. "Oh, wow! Profiteroles. That's lovely, thank you. We'll have one later." He closed the box again.

Sophie couldn't help but look disappointed. She desperately wanted him to try one but didn't want to come across as weird or too eager, and then she realised how stupid she had been. Of course; he worked out; he watched his diet. *Oh well, it doesn't matter, they're just profiteroles.*

Martin leant over and picked up something from the floor. "And I have something for you." As he sat up, he presented Sophie with an elegant bunch of dark red roses.

Sophie gasped. “Oh thank you, they’re beautiful.” She couldn’t remember the last time anyone had bought her flowers. This Martin really was too good to be true.

Martin put his hands on the edge of the bar and looked straight ahead, bashfully avoiding eye contact. “I hope you don’t think I’m being too forward, but I’ve not stopped thinking about the last time we met. You know, how we...”

Sophie looked at him and glanced down at his bulging crotch. It was all she could do not to unzip him right there and then. “Neither have I! It was...”

Martin turned, looked at her, and smiled. “Yes it was! So I was thinking...I have a bottle of wine at my flat. Perhaps we could order a take-out and...”

Sophie beamed. “Perfect!” The couple exchanged glances and slipped off their barstools. Sophie grabbed the cake box and Martin picked up the flowers and his jacket. Without looking back they left the Gecko Lounge to hail a taxi. The bartender stood at the bar, looking after them, holding two gin and tonics. He smiled to himself, shrugged his shoulders, and took a sip of one.

...

As soon as they stepped inside Martin’s townhouse apartment, they dumped their belongings on the hall table and started kissing. Martin caressed Sophie’s neck as she grabbed his crotch and she felt him swell beneath his trousers. He turned her around, pushed her gently against

the wall, unzipped her dress, pushed off the straps, and let it fall to the ground. He whistled gently seeing that she wasn't wearing any underwear, kissed the back of her neck and spun her around. Sophie carefully stepped out of the dress. She would normally feel totally embarrassed but she felt so aroused and here was a man who wanted her; was hungry for her. He looked her up and down. Her soft, smooth neck. Her pert nipples erect. "Heels on or off?" she asked.

"On," he whispered, and Sophie took his hand and led him down the corridor to the bedroom, the borrowed Louboutin heels clicking seductively on the wooden floor.

When they got to the bedroom, Martin said he needed to use the en-suite and that he wouldn't be long, so Sophie sat on the edge of the bed and smiled to herself. *Woah! Get me! I feel like I'm in a movie.* Then she heard a low, long growl from her stomach, and she realised she was starving. Her and Martin were going to order a take-out but were too hungry for each other and hadn't got round to it yet. Then her stomach did it again. It growled. *Oh God, this isn't romantic!* She looked at the closed bathroom door and at the bedroom door.

She could do this.

She'd been desperate to try one of the profiteroles but had saved them until she was with Martin. She could quickly nip out and eat one while there was still time.

Sophie slipped off her shoes and padded back into the hall. She opened the box, took a profiterole and popped it in her mouth. It was heavenly. The choux pastry had just the right amount of bite and the Chantilly cream oozed into her mouth. *Just another one.* She took a

second, then she looked at the box and thought, *sod it*, and took the whole box back with her into the bedroom. She placed the box on the bed and slipped her feet back into the patent leather heels just as the bathroom door opened. She quickly sat down on the edge of the bed and pushed the box behind her so Martin wouldn't see. He was naked and strode directly towards her, pushed her back onto the bed, and leant over her propping himself up on his arms. "No!" squealed Sophie as she felt the box fold and the profiteroles crush and splatter all over her back and onto the bed clothes.

Martin looked at her, puzzled. "What's the matter?"

Sophie blushed. "I've, erm, had an accident."

"Oh?" Martin looked worried as he pushed himself off the bed and stood up.

Sophie looked horrified. "Oh no! Not that kind of accident." She arched her back and pulled out the crushed box from underneath her.

Martin stared at her for a moment before smiling. "Ah, I see the problem."

"I'm so sorry." Sophie couldn't hold her back off the bed any more and she slumped back down onto the mess. She felt utterly embarrassed and very exposed lying there, naked, with her feet dangling over the edge of the bed. "God, I'm such a clutz. Let's get this cleared up."

Martin put on a concerned look. "Let me help." Sophie held out her hand to be pulled up, but instead of helping her up, Martin pushed down her arm and rolled her over so she was leaning over the edge of the bed. He looked at her cream-covered back. "Mmmm, profiteroles, my favourite," and he began to trace the cream from her lower back with his

fingers down, down, and down. And then she felt his tongue licking and kissing its way down her back and between her legs.

*Wow! No-one's ever done that to me before,* she thought as he pushed her legs further apart. She felt him bury himself into her and felt his hands pushing more cream between her legs. *Oh my God – baking and sex. I'm in heaven.*

...

For the whole morning, as she bustled around the office, Sophie had been suspiciously quiet and had worn a sly grin on her face. Clare was determined to hold out and wait for Sophie to cave, however, it was just too much. Clare had to know. She stomped around to Sophie's desk. "So?"

Sophie spun around in her swivel chair, looked up, and narrowed her eyes mischievously. "So what?"

Clare sighed in exasperation. "So, so, so, so, so, so? Did he?"

"What?"

Clare let out a little wail. "Did he like the profiteroles?"

Sophie enjoyed tantalising her friend. "Let's just say he...liked the way they were served." Clare's eyes were out on stalks. It felt so good for the shoe to be on the other foot for a change. Sophie Kingsman had pulled and she couldn't be happier.

Clare smiled and stared at Sophie, impressed, as she let her mind wander. "You know the guys in the office aren't going to be happy with no cake this morning?"

“I’m sure they’ll live. There’s just over a week to go before the competition. Plenty of time for them to sample more wares from,” Sophie attempted a French accent, “*Pâtisserie Sophie.*” She sighed. “You know, Clare, I don’t think I’ve ever been happier since, you know, this baking thing. I love it. I don’t just mean I love it. I *love* it. It’s like a part of me I never knew existed.”

Clare looked down at her friend. “And we love you too Sophie Kingsman!” She paused for a moment before adding, “but only if you keep bringing us cake!”

“Deal!” said Sophie, and the two best friends, who were practically sisters, laughed.



# *Chou à la crème*

Otherwise known as Profiteroles. You can also serve these with a drizzle of chocolate sauce on top, but if you do, they may be too messy to use in the bedroom.

## **Ingredients - Choux pastry shells (makes 40+)**

- 100g unsalted butter
- 1 cup water
- 1 cup plain flour
- 4 large eggs
- Pinch salt

## **Ingredients - Chantilly cream filling**

- vanilla pod
- 1 cup double cream
- 2 tablespoons caster sugar
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract

## **Step 1 (Choux pastry shells)**

Melt the butter in a saucepan then add the water and bring to the boil.

## **Step 2**

Simmer the liquid and slowly add the salt and flour, stirring well until a dough forms. Remove from the heat and allow to cool.

## **Step 3**

Preheat a fan oven to 200°C and grease 3 baking trays.

## **Step 4**

Slowly add the eggs to the cooled dough and beat until thoroughly combined. Spoon into a piping bag with a round tip.

## **Step 5**

Pipe balls of the dough onto the greased trays. Try to make them all the same size and leave space between them. Use a damp finger to make the tops smooth.

## **Step 6**

Bake for 15 minutes, then remove from the oven. Reduce the temperature to 160°C and carefully make holes in the balls with a sharp knife. If they collapse, bake them a little more before making the holes.

## **Step 7**

Bake the shells for 5 more minutes then allow to cool.

## **Step 8 (Chantilly cream filling)**

Scrape the seeds from the vanilla pod into a bowl and pour the cream over the top.

## **Step 9**

Add the sugar and vanilla extract then whisk until soft peaks form. Chill the cream before spooning into the cooled choux pastry shells.

# 8

The big day arrived, and every morning over the past week and a bit, Sophie had popped into the *Staying In* office to drop off cake and give a quick briefing to Jeffrey, before heading back to walk from Clapham station to Gwen's house. If you'd asked her three weeks ago whether she'd be ready for a baking competition, she'd have laughed so hard you'd have had to pick her up off the floor and sew her up. However, this morning, in the bright sunshine, she felt refreshed and ready.

She'd had a third date with Martin. It hadn't quite been the debauched romp of the first two dates but had been great fun. Wine. Takeout. Sex. They texted every day and Sophie wondered if she could be falling in love. Her phone buzzed in her pocket.

*Hey babe. Good luck! Sorry I can't see you tonight but it will mean we get to spend the whole day together tomorrow. M. x*

Poor Martin. He had a huge contract that needed to be signed first thing Monday morning, and he was going to spend the whole of Saturday working on it. Then, with both his work and her competition out of the way, they could have a Sunday together.

Sophie wondered whether they should take a long walk along the Thames — perhaps dinner on a park bench with food from one of the many street kiosks? Tonight, however, after the competition, she was going to take things to the next level and surprise him with a take-out, and then invite him to meet her family — Jeffrey, Jumoke, and of course, Clare. She felt nervous at the prospect. Finally, a bloke she could bring home, but first, she had to get the competition out of the way.

Sophie felt the first pangs of butterflies as she walked across the grass and approached the marquee in Battersea Park. She wouldn't be able to speak to Gwen until after the judging, and this added to her nervousness.

Gwen had briefed her on how the competition worked. The competitors had three hours to prepare a cake, and the organisers gave each competitor an identical box of ingredients and the title of the cake. The rest was up to the baker — to choose both the quantities and the method. Once the three hours were up, the competitors placed their cake on a stand at which point it was assigned a number and placed on a judging table. The bakers sat and watched while the three judges sampled and scored each cake in turn, and when the judges had conferred, and the scoring was complete, the cakes were then announced in reverse order with the winner announced last of all.

The large, white marquee was open at four sides with a wooden, suspended floor, and inside were eight kitchen workstations, equally spaced in four rows of two. The workstations faced a raised platform on which was a long table covered in a white tablecloth with a row of eight empty cake stands. Each workstation consisted of an oven bordered by two small work surfaces, and on one sat the hidden box of ingredients. Underneath one of the work surfaces was an assortment of bowls and utensils, and under the other stood a mixer and an electric whisk, should the contestants wish to use them.

Sophie took up her place at her station. Around her, a dozen other contestants stood at theirs, and they looked like a formidable bunch.

Most of them were older than her and most of them were women. Sophie hated to stereotype but they all seemed to be a tad portly — to put it mildly — and she giggled to herself. Clearly they all liked their cake a bit too much. A man behind her, with a curly handle-bar moustache gave her a wink and Sophie winked back. In front of her, the box of ingredients was covered with a white linen cloth. She wondered what the competition cake would be — probably something tricky, like a cinnamon bundt cake, or perhaps an angel cake of some type.

There was a loud *thunk* from the PA system and the host of the event, and lead judge, Mrs. Marjory Hepworth, standing behind the top table, welcomed all the competitors. While she was speaking, Sophie was distracted by movement behind a low rope cordon outside and to her right.

It was Clare.

She was frantically waving and blowing kisses, with Jeffrey and Jumoke by her side, both smiling and waving. Sophie was waving back when a loud cough from the tannoy brought her back to attention. Mrs. Marjory Hepworth was glaring at her. The host continued to ramble on about decorum (stressing the word 'decorum' with a pointed glance towards Sophie), and the importance of keeping the tradition of afternoon tea alive, saying it was the 'backbone' of British Society. Finally, she began to count down from ten. When she got to *one* an air horn blasted. Here goes, thought Sophie. She lifted the cloth off the box of ingredients and read the card. It read: *Victoria Sponge*. Yes! thought Sophie, feeling confident. I can do this!

With ten minutes still to go, Sophie's Victoria Sponge sat magnificently on its cake stand. It was nothing short of majestic. She'd nailed it and her face beamed with pride and satisfaction. The other competitors saw her effort and nodded admiringly. Inwardly, she thanked God for this moment; for looking down on her and smiling.

Today, she had done something on her own. No-one else had helped her. She did this. She did. Sophie Kingsman. She even giggled and said thank you to Vicky and Tory for playing their part and behaving.

Clare and her parents — it felt good to call them that — had returned and were waving. The air-horn blew and just as it did so, the contestant with the curly handlebar moustache started shouting obscenities. He threw his cake down onto the floor and began stamping on it. Some of the organisers rushed in and took hold of him, leading him away as he sobbed uncontrollably. *Bloody hell*, thought Sophie, *it's only a sodding cake*.

After all the dramatics, she was assigned a number — lucky number seven no less — and her cake was carried to the judging table at the front of the marquee. The contestants stood behind their stations to watch the judges sample their work. The crowd had pressed in on both sides against the rope to watch the proceedings, and Sophie spotted Clare who gave her a thumbs up and Sophie grinned in return.

The judges emerged from a nearby tent, clipboards in hand, and were led by Mrs. Hepworth to the table. She was followed by a man who looked like a Chelsea pensioner, complete with scarlet coat and black tricorne hat. Behind him was Gwen. Sophie resisted the urge to wave at

Gwen, who looked particularly smart in a jade green two piece outfit and matching hat.

The judges took their time as they edged along the table. As each cake was carefully sliced and placed onto three small plates, the judges held them up to the light, and they sniffed and prodded them before finally tasting them. They nodded. They whispered. They scribbled on their notepads. Eventually, they came to cake number seven, Sophie's cake.

The judges stood back and admired its perfect symmetry, its lavish cream, and delicate dusting. Sophie held her breath as one of the judges sliced into it and served three helpings, one for each of them. She could hear them murmur in appreciation. Then the three judges in unison placed a large forkful of the cake in each of their mouths. Instantly, Sophie knew something was wrong. All three stood motionless. The Chelsea Pensioner stopped chewing and turned to look at Mrs. Hepworth, whose eyes and cheeks began to bulge. Gwen put her hand to her mouth and the colour drained from her face.

Then all hell broke loose.

The first one, Mrs. Hepworth, turned, gagged, and threw up on the floor. The Chelsea Pensioner started flapping his hands, waving for someone to bring him a napkin. Gwen. Dear Gwen, looked up and directly at Sophie, her eyes wide, willing for it not to be Sophie's cake.

Sophie had gone bright red. Her eyes welled up and her lips trembled. She could only nod as she watched Gwen stoically swallow her cake. The three judges gathered themselves and there was much heated murmuring and scribbling of notes. The other contestants next to her

were turning to each other and murmuring. Gwen just looked sadly at Sophie and shook her head.

*What went wrong?* thought Sophie as she wracked her brain. She went over her baking again and again in her mind. Everything was perfect, no, it was better than perfect. She mopped her brow on her sleeve. Perhaps the ground would swallow her up or she would wake up and discover it was all a bad dream.

Eventually, all the cakes were judged and Mrs. Marjory Hepworth took the microphone. “Well, what an extraordinary range of cakes. I’d like to take this opportunity to thank my two guest judges, Colonel Horton and Ms. Humphrey, who you all know well.” There was a ripple of applause from the audience. Then the moment Sophie dreaded arrived. “The cakes will be announced in reverse order with the winner announced last of all. So, in last place, would the baker of cake number seven please step forward.”

Sophie, trembling, walked from her station to stand in front of the platform. There was another murmur from the crowd. Sophie didn’t dare look at Clare or Jeffrey or Jumoke. She didn’t want to look at Gwen either.

“Baker Seven, I’m afraid I’ve never tasted anything so shocking in all my life. It appears, my dear, that you used salt in your cake mix instead of sugar.” There was a gasp from the crowd. She continued, “I wrote only one word on my notepad. Disgusting.” Mrs. Hepworth then raised her voice. “It was DISGUSTING!”



The humiliation was too much to bear. Sophie felt her cheeks burning as everyone stared at her, then all she could do was turn and run. She fled past back, past the other contestants, through the rear of the marquee, and she ran, and ran, and ran.

# *Mrs Braithwaite's Victoria Sponge*

The Winning Cake at the Battersea Bake-off.

## **Ingredients**

- 4 large eggs
- 230g caster sugar, plus a little extra for dusting the finished cake
- 230g self-raising flour
- 230g butter plus a little extra to grease the tins
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- Raspberry jam (seedless is better)
- 300ml whipping cream

## **Step 1**

Preheat the fan oven to 160°C, then grease and line two 20cm cake tins.

## **Step 2**

Combine the sugar and flour in a bowl, before adding the butter, vanilla extract and beaten eggs.

## **Step 3**

Mix together until smooth, then divide between the two tins and bake the cakes for 25 minutes.

## **Step 4**

Once cooled, place one cake on a plate and top it with lots of jam then whipped cream before placing the second cake on top. Finish with a sprinkle of caster sugar.

# 9

Sophie ran with tears streaming down her cheeks. She'd let Gwen down. She'd let Jeffery and Jumoke down. She'd let Clare down. And she'd let herself down.

*I am so fucking useless.*

She reached the edge of Battersea Park which bordered the Thames, crossed over a paved walkway, and hung over the ornate, metal railings.

Sophie screamed.

Deep down she knew it was just a stupid, sodding cake, but she so wanted to show everyone that she could do something, anything, and not screw it up. And now, on top of it all, she'd run away like a little baby, unable to laugh it off. Her, and handlebar-moustache-man had more in common than she'd thought. That snotty woman. She was just cruel. Then again, Sophie *had* made her throw up. At least the memory of that brought some sense of comfort. *Silly cow*. She couldn't go back there. Not now.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. Someone was calling, and without looking at the screen, she switched it off — she just wanted to be left alone right now and sort her head out. The evening was still warm so she decided she'd walk for a bit and then head back to the flat. Perhaps she and Clare could both get drunk and binge on some comfort food — anything but stupid cake. Then she remembered about Martin, and how she had planned to surprise him with a takeout and wine. Well, he could wait — it's not like they had planned to meet up.

Sophie headed east and wandered along the wide promenade, occasionally brushing her hand along the granite wall or red railings. The tide was out and she could see the shore, exposed, the carpet of stones interspersed with chunks of brick, tile, and scrap metal. Joggers ran past, one pushing a trendy three-wheeled buggy, and a barge coasted up the centre of the river. Sophie wondered what a barge might be carrying — after all, this was the Twenty-First Century. She walked through the canopy of majestic horse-chestnut and sycamore trees, out of the east end of the park and onto the noisy Chelsea Bridge with its white and red suspension columns. She made her way to the centre of the bridge and stood by the railings looking towards the distant Albert Bridge. She loved the river; how it seemed to relentlessly travel onwards day and night; wide, powerful, and free. She longed for it to carry her away to somewhere new, somewhere she could start again, and where the painful memories could be washed away.

Turning around, and looking across the road to the other side of the bridge, she spied the old power station, now a bustling development of bars, restaurants, and shops. She'd grown up with the four enormous cooling towers sticking up, an iconic landmark on the horizon, and yet now they reminded her of something. At first, she couldn't pinpoint what it was, and then it struck her. Harvey! It reminded her of Harvey lying on his back with his feet stuck up in the air. She'd miss that fat, horny, lazy dog. Actually, she'd really miss Gwen and the time they'd spent together.

Sophie looked down and west up the river. Tugs and leisure boats passed directly underneath her, and she imagined what it would be like

to simply jump aboard and leave this life behind. Yet, things weren't so bad. There was so much good about her life. She had a job. She had a bestie. And now she had a new man.

Sophie continued her walk across the bridge, then turned left onto the shade of the Chelsea Embankment. It felt good to put some distance between her and the park, the impenetrable barrier of the river affording her shelter and protection. When she reached the Albert Bridge she marvelled at its ornate turrets and decoration. It felt almost delicate compared with the stocky Battersea Bridge or the poorer cousin she had previously crossed. Sophie crossed back over again to the south bank and made her way past the west end of Battersea Park, hardly daring to look through the gaps in the trees, until she eventually crossed the railway line and into Clapham. Her whole body was aching, especially her legs, but she had begun to gain some perspective. The tears had stopped flowing, and despite feeling tired, her head was feeling clearer.

By the time Sophie arrived home it wasn't dark but it was feeling chilly. The walk had done her the world of good, and as she entered the flat she called out. "Clare!"

Clare emerged from her bedroom. "Soph! Thank God." She rushed over to Sophie and placed her hands on Sophie's shoulders. "You scared the fucking daylight out of me." She pulled Sophie close to her. "Oh hun, come here."

Sophie returned the hug and began to cry, then sniffing, she pulled herself together. "Hey, it's okay. I'm okay."

Clare pulled herself away from the hug and slid her hands down Sophie's arms to take Sophie's hands in hers. She looked Sophie in the eye. "I bloody love you. Shall we get pissed? I mean, properly rat-arsed?" She glanced back towards the kitchen. "We've got prosecco in the fridge. We can start with that. I just need to make a quick phone call."

"Oh, you weren't going out were you?"

"Yeah, I was going to go on a date tonight but this...you...are more important."

"Oh no, don't cancel. You don't need to do that! Please, not on my account. I'm fine. Really, I am." Sophie let go of Clare's hands. "I just want a hot bath and an early night."

"Well, perhaps I can just keep you company?"

Sophie glanced down at what Clare was wearing. "No, you go. Look, you're all dressed to impress!" It was true. Clare looked stunning. Her curves stretched the tight, midnight-blue dress in all the right places. "Go on. Knock him dead. It'd only make me feel worse if I knew you'd cancelled your evening just for me."

"Okay, as long as you're sure." Clare paused and looked at her friend, her face full of concern. "Call me if you change your mind or you need anything."

"I will. I promise."

"Can you believe that pompous bitch?" Clare put on her plummiest voice. "Disgusting!" She then put her hand to her mouth and completed her impersonation with a flourish of gagging noises before pretending to yack up behind the sofa. "I appear to have fertilized Colonel Horton's prize petunias!"

Clare left the flat, wearing the same incredibly high Louboutin heels that Sophie had borrowed for her date with Martin. Sophie was on her own again. She remembered she'd switched off her phone, and when she switched it on, it pinged repeatedly, as a barrage of messages and missed call notifications popped up. One text message was from Martin.

*Hey babe. How did it go? Still slaving over this contract. Should have it done by the early hours. See you tomorrow when I'll be ALL YOURS. Love, M. X*

Sophie read the message and read it again. He had used the word *love*, and despite feeling emotionally drained by the events of the day, she felt a swell in her heart. She didn't have the energy to read through all the other messages, most of which were from Clare, when the phone began ringing in her hand. It was Jeffery.

"Sophie? It's me, Jeffrey. I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine, thanks. I've just seen Clare. I'm gonna rest up tonight."

"About the article. Don't worry about it. We won't go to print. We'll find you a different story to cover."

For a moment, Sophie held the phone in silence. She'd forgotten about the article. *Great. Not only have I bombed out of the competition, I've now totally wasted the past three weeks.* "It's okay," she replied.

"We love you Soph. Jumoke says she loves you. We'll call you tomorrow. Sleep well."

"Thanks J...dad. Bye."

"Bye, love."

Sophie ended the call. As she stood there, she looked around the empty flat. She re-read the message from Martin. *Fuck it*, she thought. She'd had a shitty day. She needed some fun. Martin was home alone. Surely he could take some time off to console his girlfriend? She'd surprise him. She'd dress to kill and put on some make-up. On her way to his apartment she'd pick up an Indian takeaway from Lal Qilla and some wine. She'd be irresistible and he wouldn't be able to say no. Today wouldn't be a total washout after all.

Sophie stood, shivering, on the doorstep of Martin's townhouse. With a bottle of wine tucked under her left arm, she put the paper bag of take-out on the ground and rang the buzzer to his apartment. She waited, but there was no reply. She pressed it again and waited some more. Still no reply. *He must've gone to bed*, she thought. *I know what will wake him up!* and she rang the bell a third time. Still no reply. What to do? Then she remembered. The keysafe. What was the code? Oh yes, easy to remember, the first four digits of her first family phone number, 3485. She tapped in the code and the box opened revealing a set of keys. *Perfect!* she thought, and let herself into the townhouse, picking up the bag of food as she stepped inside.

She made her way upstairs to Martin's apartment and let herself in. The interior was dark. She switched on the lights and called out. "Martin?" but there was no reply. She moved quickly from room to room and it became apparent that he'd nipped out. Sophie put her plan into action.



First she wedged the door of the apartment open, nipped downstairs, and replaced the key in the key safe — he'd need that to let himself in. Back in the apartment, she closed the front door, then laid the table in the open-plan dining and living area. She searched for and found candles, napkins, and two wine glasses. She warmed plates in the oven and dished out their food, a chicken biryani for her and a lamb bhuna for him, then put them back in the oven, along with a garlic naan bread. She placed individual kulfis on plates and popped them in the fridge. Finally, she opened the bottle of red, a Sonoma County pinot noir, and poured two glasses. *I'll give him something special to come home to*, she thought.

Sophie had just dimmed the lights, slipped off her shoes, and settled herself into a chair at the dining table when she heard the door unlock. Sophie smiled, then she stopped and listened. There was a bustling and rustling sound coming from the hallway. The door burst open and a couple spilled into the room. They were kissing and fondling each other, and beginning to strip off each other's clothes. "God, you're gorgeous," said a voice, "I need to see you as well as feel you." It was Martin. He groped for the light switch, then the two love birds moved from the hallway and into the open plan living area. They were all over each other, but then stopped, frozen, when they saw Sophie sitting at the dining table, staring at them, wide-eyed.

"Sophie," Martin said.

"Oh God...Sophie," echoed Clare.

# *Lal Qilla's Kulfi Dessert*

## **Ingredients**

- 2 cups double cream
- pinch saffron threads
- 400ml sweetened condensed milk
- 1 teaspoon cardamom powder
- 50g chopped raw pistachios

## **Step 1**

Place 1 cup of the double cream in a pan with the saffron. Stir and heat gently, until it starts to boil. Let the cream cool before chilling in the fridge.

## **Step 2**

Put the remaining cup of double cream in a bowl and whisk in the cold saffron cream, until soft peaks form.

## **Step 3**

Add the sweetened condensed milk, cardamom powder and half of the chopped pistachios. Whisk until combined.

## **Step 4**

Sprinkle the remaining pistachios into the bottom of some small paper cups or ice lolly molds, before spooning the mixture on top and freezing.

## **Step 5**

Turn the kulfi out to serve with the pistachios sprinkled on top.

# 10

Sophie saw red. She snatched her purse from the table, knocking her wine flying, and fled barefoot, rushing to get past Clare and Martin and make it out of the door.

Once outside the apartment, she ran down the stairwell and heard Clare shout after her, “Sophie!” She could hear Clare’s heels clicking behind her at the top of the stairs and Clare shouting again, “Sophie! Fuck!” Sophie burst through the front door and out onto the street, the door slamming behind her. She turned left, pushed back the tears, and ran. Thank God there was a taxi rank just yards ahead. *Of course*, she thought, *Martin’s apartment is right next to Waterloo Station*. She jumped into the back of the nearest black cab. “Clapham, Briar Road!”

The cabbie, looking in his rear view mirror, could see that Sophie was in distress. As he pulled out into the traffic he asked, “You alright my dear?”

Sophie fixed her cold, steely eyes on the road ahead. “I will be.” *I fucking will be.*

Sophie instructed the cabbie to wait for her as she ran up to her flat and into her bedroom. She pulled on a pair of pumps and stuffed some of her belongings into a black gym bag. She swept the contents from the top of her dresser into the bag, and then went into the bathroom and did the same. Her thoughts were a mess. *I’ve lost my boyfriend, my job, my flat, and now my best friend. Fuck my life.* She sniffed, took a lungful of air, and wiped her eyes. No way was she going to waste any more

tears — not on Clare, not on anyone. Life had screwed her over, once again. Right now, she just had to get away and escape.

Before she left the flat for the last time, she took Clare's red lipstick from the bathroom — Clare's favourite one — and went into the kitchen. She scrawled on the white fridge. *I resign. You can tell JJ. Don't come after me.* She looked at the writing for a moment before adding the word *BITCH* in capital letters, snapping the lipstick which she let fall to the floor. *Fuck them. Fuck them all,* she thought, as she grabbed her bag and left the flat, leaving the front door wide open.

The cabbie turned to look at Sophie “Where to my dear?”

“Just drive,” replied Sophie. She felt nauseous and then it all came crashing down. She clutched the door handle for support, let out a long wail and began to sob. Where could she go? She had no-one and nothing left. She couldn't go to her flat. She couldn't go to Jumoke and Jeffery's house. She was screwed.

The driver headed up the A3220, the blurred multicoloured lights flickering past in the darkness. “Are you sure I can't take you somewhere?”

Sophie sobbed. “Just keep going.” Her phone began to buzz. She looked down at the caller ID. It was Clare. “Stop the car!”

“What? We can't we're on the...”

“Stop the car. NOW!” The taxi jerked to a halt and Sophie got out. They were on Battersea Bridge. She crossed over to the railings. “Fuck off bitch,” she shouted as she threw the phone as far as she could into the

darkness over the river. She then felt two strong arms around her. “Get off me!”

“I’m sorry miss. You’re not going to... you know...jump are you?”

Sophie turned to look at the cabbie. He was in his late 50s and looked kind and scared. Sophie collected herself, her voice small and quiet. “Oh God. No. No. No, I’m not.”

“Come on then, it’s a bit nippy out here.” The driver gently guided Sophie into the back of the cab, its hazard lights flashing by the roadside. When she was safely seated, he took a thermos of tea, poured half a cup, and handed it to her. “It’s chai. I hope that’s okay?” He smiled. “Saira says I have a sweet tooth.”

Sophie took a sip of the chai latte — it tasted grim and was sickly sweet. Still, it worked its magic and it began to sooth her nerves. She glanced out of the window. Even from the inside of the taxi she could just see the lights flashing on the top of the old power station chimneys. The cabbie followed her gaze. “Not quite the Blackpool illuminations. Reminds me of the lights Saira and I had at our wedding.”

“Now,” he turned to look back at Sophie, “where can I take you?”

She took her eyes away from the four towers. There was only one place Sophie could think of going. “Turn us around. Number 7, Trimm Street, Battersea, please.”

# *Darpan's Chai Latte Recipe*

Actually it's Darpan's wife, Saira's recipe. Darpan is a great driver but not particularly great in the kitchen! The chai will keep in the fridge for a week or so. Reheat it in a pan, and if the flavour becomes too intense add a little more water to taste. Serve as a mid-afternoon refreshment or near midnight in the back of black taxi cab on Battersea bridge.

## **Ingredients - Chai Tea (serves four)**

- 2 cups water
- 2 black tea bags
- 2 whole cloves
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- 1/2 tsp ground ginger
- 1/2 tsp ground cardamom
- 1/2 tsp ground nutmeg
- 1/2 tsp ground allspice
- 2 tbsp honey

## **Ingredients - Latte**

- 1 cup whole milk
- 1 tbsp honey
- pinch ground cinnamon

## **Step 1 (Chai)**

Put the water and spices in a pan, and bring to the boil, whisking well. Once boiled, take off the heat and leave the spices to infuse for 5 minutes.

## **Step 2**

Put back on the heat and add the honey and black tea bags. Bring back to the boil, take off the heat and leave for another few minutes.

## **Step 3**

Strain through a fine sieve to remove the tea bags and spices.

## **Step 4 (Latte)**

Simmer the milk, honey and cinnamon for two minutes without over boiling, then remove from the heat and blend the milk until frothy.

## **Step 5**

Half fill a cup with the chai and add the warm, frothy milk.

## **Step 6**

Sprinkle the top of the chai latte with a dusting of cinnamon before serving.

# 11

Sophie hated ringing Gwen's doorbell so late in the evening, but she had no choice. Parked on the road outside Number 7 Trimm Street, the cabbie watched and waited. Sophie rang the bell a second time and, after a moment, a light came on in the hallway behind the closed door. The door opened on its chain. "Who is it?"

"It's me, Sophie."

The door closed again, the chain clinked off, and then it swung open. Silhouetted in the light of the doorway, Gwen stood dressed in a garish, floral, quilted bathrobe, with Harvey standing, expectantly, beside her. When the dog saw Sophie, he wagged his tail and drooled.

Gwen leaned forward slightly. She could see Sophie's ashen face and where her make-up had smudged and run. "Sophie, what's wrong?"

Sophie fell into Gwen's soft folds, sniffing loudly, as Gwen wrapped her arms around her. Sophie then remembered the cabbie. She headed back down the tiled path and leaned in the window. "How much do I owe you?"

The cabbie smiled softly. "Oh, nothing my dear. You look like you've had a hell of a night. I'll be off now."

Sophie couldn't let him leave, not without giving him something. "No, wait! Please wait." She ran back down the path to Gwen. "I don't suppose you have some cake I could give to the taxi driver do you? I know, it sounds like an odd thing to do, but he's been so kind."

Gwen smiled. "Of course. There's a sticky ginger cake in the blue tin."



Sophie squeezed past the old woman and headed down the passageway towards the kitchen. Gwen, whose eyes were adjusting to the dark, spied the cabbie and gave him a little wave, which he returned.

Sophie quickly returned with the foil-wrapped cake, and passed it to him through the open taxi window. “Thank you for everything,” she said, as he took the cake.

“You are most welcome.” He gave a small nod and then a short wave as the taxi pulled away down the street.

Sophie returned to the doorway. Gwen rested her hand on Sophie’s arm. “Come on in, pet, and tell me everything.” She glanced down at Sophie’s holdall. “I think this situation calls for something special.”

Sophie picked up her bag and followed the old woman into the house, pulling the door closed behind her, with Harvey waddling along after them.

When they were settled in their usual seats, nursing mugs of tea, Gwen, who was panting and a bit out of breath, asked, “Would you mind cutting three slices?”

Sophie hadn’t eaten anything all day and she was famished. She looked hungrily at the red velvet cake with its chocolate layers and ermine icing. *Thank God it’s not Victoria Sponge.*

Gwen nodded at the cake slice, encouraging Sophie to pick it up. “I baked this to celebrate a lady’s ninetieth at the Carmelite Nursing Home, but I think your need is greater, and besides, it’ll give me an excuse to bake another one tomorrow.”

Sophie cut into the cake and served three portions. Harvey sat, patiently, waiting for his slice to be placed on the floor. Instead of tucking in, however, he approached Sophie. *Here we go*, she thought glumly, but the old French bulldog simply nuzzled and rubbed his head against her calf. It was almost as if he was saying, *Glad to have you back – it'll be okay*, before he returned to his cake and started gulping it down.

Gwen let out a snort of surprise. “Well, well, well! I’ve never seen him do that before! I think he likes you.”

After they had filled their bellies with the divine cake, and Sophie had served them both a second slice — after all, it had definitely been a two-slice day — Gwen put down her fork. “It’s not just about the competition is it?” She looked at Sophie and tilted her head slightly to one side. “I’m listening, although I also have something important to tell you.”

Sophie drained her mug and placed it on the table. “No. It’s not just the competition. It’s worse. I’ve had the shittiest day ever. But before I tell you, we might as well talk about the cake. I have no idea how it happened. I...”

Gwen raised her hand up to stop her. “No. You wouldn’t. You see, there was no salt in your box. None of the contestants had salt. You were sabotaged.”

Sophie looked upwards, took in a deep breath, and shook her head. *Could today get any worse?* “What?”

“Oh,” Gwen sighed, “I should have warned you. That lot don’t play nice. They all look respectable, put on airs and graces and whatnot, but

my dear, how should I put it,” Gwen paused as she searched for a strong term to use. “You were pissed on from a great height.”

“Really? Oh.” Sophie slumped her shoulders and looked down. “I should have tasted the mix.”

“Well, yes, that would have helped, but you can’t blame yourself. This wasn’t your fault. I’ve lodged a complaint with that old ratbag, Hepworth. No doubt it was someone who knew I was coaching you; someone afraid of losing to my prodigy.” Gwen narrowed her eyes. “Mark my words, I’ll find out who did this.”

“If you don’t mind me asking,” said Sophie, looking up, “why didn’t you say anything at the time?”

“Oh, pet, I had no idea there wasn’t salt in your ingredient boxes. I thought it might have been a genuine mistake on your part, although I should have known better. You are, how do I put this — and I say this in all seriousness — a *very* talented baker. Trust me, Sophie, you have a gift; and I’m telling you this because I don’t want one silly little competition to put you off.” She leaned forward in her chair, fixing Sophie with her gaze. “Promise me you will *never* stop baking.”

Sophie had never seen Gwen quite so serious or urgent. It was true; she loved baking, and it felt like she’d found something, a connection deep within her; something special that she never wanted to let go of. “I promise,” she replied, and she meant it. Baking was in her blood.

Gwen visibly relaxed and sat back in her chair. “Now we’ve got that small matter out of the way, we need to talk about the really important thing — why you’re here.” Gwen looked directly at Sophie with such

compassion and reached out her plump wrinkled hand to Sophie who took it. “Can you tell me about it?”

Sophie held on to Gwen’s hand as she explained the events that had unfolded after she’d run away from the competition. She told Gwen about the article not being published, and how she’d discovered Clare had been seeing her boyfriend — now ex-boyfriend — Martin, behind her back; how they’d both lied to her and how she’d accidentally caught them both together.

She still couldn’t get over how Clare could be so cruel. It had happened once before, when they were still at school. Clare had been jealous of Sophie and always wanted what Sophie had. It was as if she had to prove she was as good as Sophie, despite Clare being the *gorgeous* one, and the one the guys and girls seemed to chase first.

She had caught Clare with her first real boyfriend, Brian Longman, in the ultimate cliché, literally, behind the bike sheds. Clare had vowed to never do it again, and had been so sorry at the time. It had taken Sophie months to get over the hurt and forgive her.

Gwen occasionally nodded and squeezed Sophie’s hand to reassure her she was listening and understood, and when Sophie had finished talking and wiped away her tears, Gwen asked, “Is there anything I can do for you, anything at all?”

“Well, may I stay here for a few nights, while I sort things out? I can’t go back to the flat and I’ve nowhere else to go.”

“Stay? Of course, pet, for as long as you like.”

“I do have some savings, I can pay you rent.”

“You will do no such thing! I won’t hear of it!” Gwen pursed her lips then relaxed them into a smile. “But, it will be lovely to have you here and, well, I have lots of things and people to bake for, if you’d like to help?”

Sophie thought for a second. She felt lucky to have Gwen as a friend, and baking was the only thing that seemed to take her mind away from all the awful events in her life. She smiled. “That’s so kind of you. I’d love to.” Sophie looked Gwen in the eye with such gratitude and love. “There is one other thing, if you don’t mind?”

“Yes, pet?”

“Please don’t let anyone know I’m here. I don’t want to see anyone. I’ll get in touch with Jeffrey and Jumoke when I’m ready. Is that okay?”

Gwen loosed her hand from Sophie’s and patted it. “Mum’s the word. You’re safe here, with me.” Harvey, his legs pointing skyward, made a particularly loud snort. Gwen rolled her eyes and nodded towards the dog. “And you’re reasonably safe with lover-boy over there!”

The two women laughed.

“Right, let me show you to your room. I might need some help with the bedding, and for that matter, some help getting out of this chair. I swear it’s shrinking!”

Sophie got up, and then helped Gwen up. She hugged the old woman, held her tight, and gave her a long kiss on the cheek. “Thank you,” she whispered into Gwen’s ear, “Thank you for everything.”

# 12

Sophie began to wake from a deep sleep. She was having the most relaxing dream where she and Clare were holding hands and jumping and bouncing on a bed made of light, airy sponge cake. She felt warm and relaxed, but then the dream was hijacked by reality. The events of the previous day came flooding in, unbidden — the grief jolting her awake, and sending a cold shiver of sweat coursing over her body.

She opened her eyes and her lungs filled with the smell of old books, musty blankets, and polished wood. She was in the spare room of Gwen's house. There was another smell too, actually two smells: the smell of fresh coffee, and the irresistible smell of something baking.

Sophie reached for her phone on the bedside table, but couldn't find it, then she remembered throwing it off the bridge. She groaned and looked at her watch. It read, *11.38am. Flip!* she thought, *I've slept for nearly eleven hours straight!* She pushed back the blankets, swung her legs over the side of the bed and pulled on some black leggings and a white T-shirt; no need for undies or a bra, not here; and made her way downstairs to the kitchen.

Gwen was sitting at the kitchen table, her massive frame enveloping the small wooden chair. Her half moon reading glasses were perched on the end of her nose, and tapping a pen between her teeth she held a folded newspaper open at the crossword page. She turned and looked up at Sophie, smiled, then raised a finger in the air as if to say, *wait*. Sophie stood, waiting, then the oven timer buzzed. Gwen nodded towards the oven and Sophie obeyed, grabbing the oven gloves from the

warming rail and opening the oven door. A warm blast of pastry-scented air blew into her face as she pulled out a tray of golden, flaky croissants. Gwen looked at the pastries then at Sophie. “Perfect timing! I hope you slept well, and you’re hungry.”

“Slept well?” Sophie yawned. “I was out for the count and I’ve only just woken up.” She placed the baking tray on one of the large tiles that lay on the counter.

“You needed it, pet.” Gwen nodded towards the tea pot. “If you don’t mind, would you pour some water into the pot – the kettle’s not long boiled. There’s also coffee in the machine if you want it. I’m a creature of habit so I’ll have tea, but for some reason, croissants work much better with coffee.”

Sophie poured the hot water into the teapot and placed it on the table. She fetched two mugs, milk from the fridge, and placed them next to the teapot. Finally, she placed four of the hot croissants on two plates and set them down. Gwen pulled out the drawer from underneath the kitchen table and selected a spoon and a knife.

Sophie picked up a mug and went to the filter coffee machine “Actually, I will have coffee, after all. I need something to get me going.” She poured herself a large mugful of steaming black coffee, while Gwen heaped sugars into her mug of milky tea.

Gwen stirred her tea and set the spoon on the table. “You are a darling, thank you. I’m finding it more and more difficult to get up these days.”

“That’s okay.” Sophie sat down at the table. “It’s what I’m here for. So, how did you get on with the crossword?”

“Bloody useless. I’m stuck on about a dozen clues, and it’s only the quick one in the local rag!” Gwen picked up the paper. “For example, seven across. Four letters. Jack’s pie filling.”

“Plum?”

“Plum! Yes! Silly me. I should know that.” The old woman chuckled to herself and put the paper back down on the table. “Oh well, perhaps I’m not cut out for crosswords.” She glanced at the warm croissants on Sophie’s plate. “Go on, try one.”

Sophie broke open her croissant; crispy, soft, and buttery; steam rising from the interior. She took the knife and spread on some salted butter, then took a bite. It was as if a piece of rural France had landed in this 1980s style, English town kitchen. “Mmmmm!”

Gwen grinned and leant forwards slightly. “I’ll show you how to make them. Time consuming, but totally worth it.”

The two women ate in silence, and when Sophie had finished picking up every flake of pastry with a damp finger, and poured herself a second coffee, Gwen asked, “Is there anything you need?”

Sophie licked her lips. “I’m worried I’ve not got everything. I packed in such a hurry. I just swept everything off the counters and whatever clothes I could manage to fit in a single bag. I feel so stupid, and now I can’t go back for the rest of it. One day, though, I’ll have to. I left my passport and other important bits in my bedroom drawer.”

“I’m sure they’ll be safe.” Gwen thought for a moment. “Perhaps I could get them for you?”

“No, no. Clare owes me. She’ll make sure they’re safe until I’m ready to get them — that’s if I can ever pluck up the courage to go back there.”



“If it’s any consolation, I’ve been there, pet. I did the same once. I ran away from a painful situation. One day I’ll tell you all about it. Perhaps over a rum cake and a glass of...”

“Rum?”

Gwen laughed. “Yes!” She sighed and looked Sophie in the eye. “Seriously though, pet, you did the right thing.”

“But what am I going to do?” Sophie groaned. “I have no job and my savings won’t last forever. I’d better start looking for something. Can you pass the paper?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about that.” Gwen rubbed her chin. “I’ve been up since 5am. Old habits die hard.” She sighed. “So, I get asked to bake birthday cakes — lots of birthday cakes. Actually, not just birthday cakes but wedding cakes, anniversary cakes, party cakes, and all sorts — too many for me to cope with. It’s all the success with *The Battersea Bake Off*, you see. Whenever someone wants a cake they get in touch and I find it difficult to say no.”

Sophie could sense where this was going.

“And it’s all getting a bit much now. I can hardly roll out pastry without getting out of breath. So, I thought, perhaps, you might be willing to take it on? You could be my business partner, so to speak?”

Sophie put down her mug. “Me?”

“Yes, you! I’m not asking bloody Harvey am I? He’d eat all the wares!” The two women laughed.

“Well.” Sophie thought for a moment then spoke slowly. “I do *love* baking, and I’ve loved spending the last three weeks with you.” She

paused, then held out her hand, putting on her best, cheesy, Wild West American accent. “It’s a deal, partner!”

Gwen vigorously shook Sophie’s hand. “Yee haw!” she shouted, then began to cough. Sophie leant over and patted her gently on the back. When she’d finished coughing, she looked up at Sophie with a cheeky grin. “Perhaps less of the yee hawing in future.”

Sophie smiled. “Yes, probably for the best.”

“Now, this afternoon,” Gwen ordered in a commanding voice, “you’re going to make a Victoria Sponge while I make another red velvet cake for those Carmelite nuns. You have some demons to exorcise!”

Sophie wasn’t sure and bit her lip. “Really?”

“Yes! You need to get your confidence back. I’ll clear this lot up and you get cracking. You know what to do.”

Sophie spent the afternoon making the layers of her sponge, cooling them, whipping cream, and adding jam. Finally, her dusted cake stood on a cake stand on the kitchen table. Gwen ceremoniously cut a slice, placed it on a plate, then took a fork to taste it. She placed a forkful in her mouth, chewed, swallowed, then screwed up her face. She put on a plummy voice and said, “Disgusting...ly good!” She beamed and Sophie beamed back. “Better than Mrs. Braithwaite’s second-class effort. But to be sure, I think I need to finish this slice, oh, and cut one for yourself and his Highness, Porky Paws.” Gwen nodded towards Harvey who had magically appeared in the kitchen, and sat, looking up longingly, rapidly switching his gaze between the cake, Gwen, and Sophie.

...

For the next three weeks, Gwen and Sophie baked. They got up early; far earlier than Sophie was used to. Sophie would take Gwen a cup of sweet tea in bed, while her own coffee filtered into the jug. Then, when Gwen arrived in the kitchen, they got stuck into whatever freshly baked goodies were required that day. The business kept Sophie's mind from Clare and Martin, *The Battersea Bake Off*, and her failed journalistic career.

Sophie had cancelled her phone contract and had walked to the nearest shop to purchase a new phone, before organising a new contract and a new number. It took her a couple of minutes to log in, access her email, and delete her messages without reading them, and she didn't bother to install her social media apps, let alone access them. She just wanted to shut everyone out, despite feeling guilty — particularly about JJ. She penned a postcard — one she had plucked from a stand outside a newsagent that featured the guards at Buckingham Palace — and borrowing a stamp from Gwen, she posted it to Jeffrey at the *Staying In* offices. It simply read that she was well and okay and that she loved them and needed some time out — to be on her own, for a while.

With her new phone, to save her or Gwen having to go to the shops, Sophie ordered the required ingredients online, arranging for them to be delivered to Trimm Street on a near daily basis.

The bakers rarely stopped for anything to eat as they were constantly sampling their wares, and each afternoon they would sit, chat, drink tea, and eat cake. Sophie would order them both a take-out each night and Gwen was slowly working through Lal Qilla's menu, having discovered a newfound love of Indian food.

Sophie was worried she would pile on the pounds, and although her jeans did feel a bit tighter than usual, she figured that the hours spent on her feet and the work with her hands meant she was doing more exercise than she'd ever done before.

As they went along, Sophie carefully transcribed each new recipe in her book, making note of any, what she called, *Gwenisms*, which she underlined to try and help her remember them.

"How come you don't have a recipe book?" she asked Gwen one day, when they were drying up the last of the utensils and bowls after making, not one, but three different birthday cakes for three different customers.

"Oh, I do!" Gwen stopped, dropped her eyes, and looked wistful. "I mean, I did have a book, full of the most marvelous pastries and cakes — delicacies that your average Londoner would never have heard of. These days, for this kind of simple cake-making, it's all up here." Gwen tapped the side of her head with her index finger.

"Simple?" Sophie widened her eyes, her mouth dropping open. "Macarons are not simple!"

Gwen laughed. "Perhaps not, pet, perhaps not."

"So, what happened to your recipe book?"

Gwen sighed. "Left behind in another life, pet."

After a moment of silence, Sophie chewed her cheek and spoke quietly. “Gwen, can I ask you, has anyone, you know, tried to contact me here?”

Gwen looked her directly in the eye and rested her hand on Sophie’s shoulder. “Pet, if they had, I wouldn’t tell you — unless, you change your mind and you want to know.”

Sophie thought for a moment then gave Gwen a tight hug. “No. No, I don’t. Thank you.”

At five a.m. Sophie’s alarm went off, waking her immediately. How different her life was compared to when she worked at the magazine. Sophie was often asleep by nine p.m. each night, after a shower, which had to take place in the bath using a shower head with rubber hoses attached to each bath tap, she was so exhausted. Most nights in her old life she didn’t go *out* until nine p.m.!

Sophie dressed, padded downstairs, put the kettle on, and dropped a tea bag into Gwen’s mug. She’d managed to whittle Gwen down to just one and half teaspoonfuls of sugar per cup, and if Gwen had noticed, she hadn’t said anything.

Sophie carried the mug of tea up the stairs and knocked on Gwen’s door but there was no reply. *Odd*, thought Sophie, and she knocked again. Nothing. Gwen must have slept through her alarm so Sophie quietly, and slowly opened the door. The room was dark but Sophie could make out the blue pre-dawn light through a crack in the curtains. In the dim light, Sophie went over to Gwen’s bed and placed the mug on

her bedside table. Gwen was lying on her side all huddled in her quilted blanket. “Gwen,” whispered Sophie, gently rocking Gwen’s shoulder through the thick layers. Sophie sat on the edge of the bed. “Gwen, it’s morning. I’ve brought you your tea.” Gwen remained silent. “Gwen?” Sophie rocked Gwen again. Nothing. Sophie got up, went to the curtains and parted them. The room was bathed in just enough light to see clearly. “Gwen!” Sophie called a bit louder. “Gwen!” She went over and rocked her friend again. “Gwen! Wake up! Gwen!” Gwen’s eyes remained closed. Her palid face looked peaceful; at rest. “Oh my God, Gwen!” and from the bottom of the stairs Harvey let out a mournful howl.

*Dear Sophie*

*If you are reading this then the worst has happened. I do hope it was quick and not drawn out. You know how I would hate to be a burden to anyone!*

*To be honest, I have been living on borrowed time. What with my weight, my lifestyle, and a pre-existing heart condition, it was a matter of when, not if.*

*So, I have finally popped my clogs eh? It feels very strange writing this. You have gone to bed and I am lying in mine with a tray and my writing pad. We've had the most wonderful day. Who would have thought you could bake and decorate three completely different birthday cakes without even breaking your stride!*

*You have come such a long way and I owe you a debt of gratitude. You have given me a new lease of life! Okay, so now it has ended, but you know what I mean. The last few weeks have been some of the best of my life. You have been the finest company and have become a true friend. You are a talented baker, Sophie, and have the makings of a fine Pâtissière! You have all the tools at your disposal, so now do something with them!*

*There is only one thing I ask, and I don't know who else to approach. Harvey. Please look after my overweight, lazy, sex-starved pooch! He loves you. As do I.*

*Your overweight, lazy, sex-starved friend,*

*Gwen*

*P.S. I hope they have ovens in heaven? Plenty of heat in the 'down below' place, but I am planning on heading upstairs! The BIG MAN better have a BIG appetite, and like cake, because I am planning all sorts!!*



# 13

Sophie sat alone in the front pew of the old chapel at Wandsworth Crematorium. The small worship space was very plain with white lime-washed walls, two rows of dark oak pews, and dark oak rafters rising to an apex. At the front was a plinth with an open curtain rail that surrounded it, and to the left of the plinth, a small wooden lectern. There was an exit door on the right hand wall, and at the rear, by the entrance, was an organ, but there was no organist and the chapel was silent. Despite it being warm enough, Sophie felt cold and numb, playing over the events of the past week in her mind.

In some ways it had been very easy. She had made sure Gwen's room was tidy, opened a window to let in some fresh air, and sat with her until the doorbell had rung. The two female paramedics, sporting their green uniforms, had been gentle with Gwen, before loading her into their ambulance. One of them, with beaded dreadlocks and a nose-piercing, had given Sophie a long hug.

Sophie couldn't remember everything she'd done for the rest of that day. She'd tidied and cleaned. She'd sat and stroked Harvey. She'd cleaned some more, and she'd gone to bed feeling numb. The following day, Sophie got up, and not knowing what else to do, began to fill that day's orders: a Golden Wedding anniversary cake, and a multilayered rainbow cake for a girl's sixteenth birthday. And now, almost a week later, Gwen's coffin lay on the plinth in front of her, and she felt her eyes well with tears.

Gwen's solicitor had taken care of everything. Mr. Harris looked like he should have retired long ago, and despite being a bit hunched over, he had bright eyes and a keen mind. When he phoned the house, Sophie had been surprised to learn that he knew all about Gwen's new baking partner and tenant. Although the solicitor was kind, he kept details about Gwen's estate to a minimum. The only thing he did tell her was that the presumed cause of death had been heart failure, and that given Gwen's poor health and lifestyle, there wouldn't be an inquest. He said he'd hand deliver a letter later in the day, which he did, and then he'd be in touch about the funeral arrangements.

In the meantime, Sophie continued to fulfil all Gwen's existing orders, but decided not to take any new orders, telling the disappointed customers on the end of the phone that the business had closed. She hadn't been able to bring herself to say that Gwen had died, and that her own life, again, had come crashing down.

Sophie looked around. Yes, she was early, but surely there should be more people attending? She heard the door of the chapel open and turned to see a woman enter. Despite it being almost summer, the woman wore a long beige coat and a hat. She took a seat, gingerly, at the back, neatly folding her hands in her lap. Sophie smiled at the newcomer, who returned with a quick smile and a nod of the head. While Sophie's head was still turned, the door opened again and the minister and Mr. Harris entered. The minister, dressed in a black cassock, white surplice and purple stole, continued to the lectern at the front of the chapel, while Mr. Harris greeted the woman at the back, before proceeding down the aisle to greet Sophie.

“Sophie, welcome!” Mr. Harris held out a hand and then clasped Sophie’s outstretched hand in both his own. “It’s just us. I know it feels wrong, but it’s what Gwen wanted. No obituaries in the paper. No announcements. No flowers. No fuss.”

Sophie shrugged, and Mr. Harris took a seat next to her.

The minister cleared his throat, made eye contact with the three mourners, before beginning. “Good morning. We are gathered here today...”

Sophie placed her hands firmly on the pew each side of her. “No! Stop!” She couldn’t believe what she was doing. She wasn’t sure if it was anger spilling over or what it was, but this was not how Gwen was going to be sent off. The minister stared at her expectantly and she lowered her voice. “Sorry.” She took a deep breath and stood up. “Sorry, but can we please do things differently?”

The minister hesitated, looked at Mr. Harris for confirmation, before smiling. “Yes, of course.”

Sophie turned to Mr. Harris, who nodded. Sophie took another deep breath, then bent over and from under her seat produced a large round parcel wrapped in silver foil. “I brought this for after, but...” She looked around for somewhere to rest the parcel, but there was no flat surface available. As there were no flowers on the coffin, she walked over to it and placed the cake on the lid. She carefully unwrapped the foil to reveal a large red velvet cake on a plate, already sliced into eight pieces. “Please, join me.” She beckoned the other three to stand with her, around the coffin and the cake.

Sophie was about to speak again when there was a bang from the side door, and a woman backed into the room holding a dustpan and brush in one hand, and a bucket filled with cleaning products in the other. The four mourners watched her as she turned around and saw them standing at the front. She visibly jumped and her face widened with shock. “Oh my God!” she said in a thick Cockney accent, “I’m so sorry. Must’ve got my timings wrong. I’m so sorry!”

She was about to turn and to exit through the same door when Sophie called out to her. “Wait! Excuse me. Um...do you like cake?”

The woman looked confused, but with them all staring at her, she felt she had to answer. She grinned. “Yeah, love it.”

Sophie smiled. “Great. Please come and join us.”

The woman put down the bucket and the dustpan on the end of the nearest pew, and tentatively walked over to join the group. Sophie continued to smile at the woman. “It’s what Gwen here would have wanted.” The woman in the beige coat also smiled and nodded, and all five turned again to look at the coffin and the cake.

Sophie wasn’t sure what to do next and she looked expectantly at the minister, who understood.

“Perhaps we could all say something about Gwen? Just a few words each? I’ll start if I may.” The minister looked directly at the coffin. “Gwendoline Mary Humphrey was seventy four years old and clearly a very private person. Of course, she was a bit of a celebrity in these parts, and although I never met her in person, I did once have the pleasure of eating one of her cakes when I took a service for the residents at the Carmelite Nursing Home, for whom I understand she baked on a regular

basis. I believe it was a ginger cake, as I recall. The residents and staff had asked me to be quick with the service, and at the time I thought it was because...well...they couldn't cope with anything longer than ten minutes, but in retrospect, I suspect it was because they were looking forward to their slice of cake!"

The others all murmured and nodded, then Mr. Harris spoke. "I have been Miss Humphrey's solicitor for as long as I have been practicing. She first contacted me on her return to England, all those years ago. Anyway, I'm sad to see her go. She always looked out for those who needed help and now she's been as generous in death as she was in life."

Sophie thought that was an odd thing to say, but then the woman in the beige coat spoke. She looked to be in her fifties, however, Sophie could tell she was in her mid sixties. She was petite and had olive tanned skin and, under the hat, short, dark, almost black hair. She really was quite stunning. She spoke in a soft French accent. "My name is M $\acute{e}$ l." She swallowed and took a handkerchief from her handbag and held it to her eyes, then nose, before continuing, "and...Gwen, I love you with all my heart."

Sophie, who was standing to her left, put her right arm around the woman and gave her a squeeze. "Thank you. I guess it's my turn." She looked at the coffin. "Gwen. Dear Gwen. You gave me the greatest gift and I will always be thankful. You also gave me your friendship. I'll miss you."

The five stood in silence and then the cleaner spoke. "I didn't know Gwen, but that cake looks bloody delicious!" Despite themselves, the group laughed through their tears.

There was a loud bang from the entrance doors, and they turned to see Damon, the nurse from the children's ward at the hospital, enter the chapel. He was dressed in blue scrubs with his ID and cards flapping from a red lanyard. He stopped at the end of the aisle. "I'm so sorry I'm late."

Sophie's face lit up. "No, it's okay. Come on down. Join us. You're just in time."

Damon walked to the front. The five made room for him to join their circle. He looked awkward, keeping his eyes low, as if he didn't want to look at the coffin. Sophie forced a smile to welcome him, reaching out to gently take his hand. "We've all just said something about Gwen. You can say something if you like?"

"Oh...um...right," said Damon, who shifted from foot to foot and glanced up. "I suppose you've all said what bloody... Oh shit, sorry for swearing, what...um...nice cake she made, right? Okay, so...um...thanks Gwen. You were an utter star."

"An utter star," repeated Sophie.

"An utter star," echoed the others, toasting their departed friend.

The minister concluded. "Thank you all for coming. I'm afraid there's another party waiting in the foyer. Can I suggest that, as there's only a few of you, rather than going into the reception area, that you go into the vestry. It's quite large enough, and it's not being used. There are chairs and you can sit in there together?"

Mr. Harris looked around at the others and nodded. "Sounds like a plan. I do need to speak with you all."

The cleaner began to back away. "I'll take my leave then. Thank you."

Sophie reached for the plate. “Please, take a slice of cake with you.” She looked at the minister. “And you too.”

Before they filed out of the chapel, Sophie lifted three slices of cake onto serviettes. She gave one to the cleaner, another to the minister, and the third, she laid back down carefully on the wooden lid. “This one’s for you.” Sophie sighed. “Bye, Gwen.”

# *Red Velvet Cake*

The Late Gwendoline Humphrey's Red Velvet Cake. Perfect for Carmelite Nuns or at a wake, following the death of a dear friend.

## **Ingredients**

- 340g plain flour
- 60g cornflour
- 2 tbsp (10g) cocoa powder
- 1 tsp (5g) bicarbonate of soda
- Pinch of salt
- 115g unsalted butter
- 330g caster sugar
- 2 large eggs
- 250ml vegetable oil
- 1 tsp white vinegar
- 2 tsp vanilla extract
- 250ml buttermilk
- 1 tbsp red food gel (not the liquid, as this will be too pale)

## **Frosting**

- 400g Philadelphia Cream Cheese, block
- 115g unsalted butter softened
- 1 1/2 tsp vanilla extract
- 450g icing sugar

## **Step 1**

Preheat the oven to 180°C and grease two 21cm round cake tins, before sifting the dry ingredients and mixing them together in a bowl.



## **Step 2**

Beat the butter and sugar together until smooth, then add the eggs and keep beating until the mixture is smooth.

## **Step 3**

Slowly add the vegetable oil, vinegar, vanilla, buttermilk and red food gel and continue to beat until smooth. This is where you need to check that the colour is intense enough for you, as it will depend on the brand of food colouring used.

## **Step 4**

Mix in the dry ingredients until smooth, but do not overbeat at this stage, then split the batter between the two cake tins and bake for 25 minutes.

## **Step 5**

Beat together the cream cheese, butter and vanilla then add the icing sugar and continue to beat until the frosting is light and fluffy, before frosting the cooled cake.

# 14

Sophie, Mr Harris, M el, and Damon, sat on four wooden chairs in the small chapel vestry. They were surrounded by wood panelled cupboards, and shelves filled with tatty-looking liturgical books and sheet music. Various robes and stoles hung in an open closet. Two brass candlesticks sat on an oak desk and a carved wooden cross hung on one wall. Sunlight filtered through a small, leaded window. Through the closed door they could hear the faint sound of organ music as the next service began in the chapel. They each held in their laps the remains of a slice of red velvet cake on a white serviette. There was just one slice left on the plate and Sophie knew who she was keeping that for.

Mr. Harris dabbed his mouth on a white handkerchief. “Ms. Humphrey’s recipe?”

Sophie nodded. “Yes.” She hadn’t felt at all like eating the cake, but had stoically made her way through most of it.

Damon smacked his lips after making short work of his slice. “It was real good.”

“Thank you,” replied Sophie, as she forced the last of the cake down.

Mr. Harris balled up his serviette. “Well, as you’re all here, I don’t know if you’ve previously met each other?”

“Damon and I, we met at the hospital,” offered Sophie. She turned to M el and extended a hand. “I’m Sophie. Pleased to meet you.”

M el took Sophie’s hand. “Enchant e. I expect you are wondering who I am and why I am here?” The others all looked at her expectantly. “Well, I

suppose, now she is gone, it does not matter any more? Gwen and I, we were...” Mél struggled to find the right words. “She was my first love.”

Mél’ clearly felt uncomfortable so Sophie asked, “Mél is short for Mélanie isn’t it?”

Mél looked inquisitively at Sophie. “Why, yes, it is.”

“I remember. She mentioned you once, only in passing. You owned a farm?”

Mél looked down. “Oui, my parents did. A dairy farm. We met when she was working in France and we became close. You have to understand, it was a different time. What we were, it was not allowed. Then, a terrible thing happened to her, something of which I cannot speak, and she discovered she was with child. She had to leave France and go back to England. I could not leave the farm. I lost her. Then, time passed. I got married and now I have my own children and grandchildren. But Gwen, I will never forget her.” Mél’s eyes filled with tears and Sophie felt for her.

“She was my good friend too. I’m a journalist, or at least, I *was* a journalist. She taught me to bake.” Sophie felt her own relationship with Gwen sounded a bit lame compared to Mél’s, so she decided not to say any more about herself, “and this is Damon.” Sophie gestured towards the nurse.

Damon beamed a wide toothy grin that instantly lit up the room. “Nice to meet you Mél,” he suddenly looked serious; sad. “I’m sorry for your loss. I work at the hospital in one of the children’s wards. Gwen would bring the children,” Damon chuckled to himself, “well, actually, all of us: doctors, nurses, carers, cleaners — all of us — cakes every week. I

wouldn't have known about her...um...passing, if Mr. Harris here hadn't got in touch."

"Yes," said Mr Harris, "You see, Miss Humphrey had a son, Colin. He died of cancer, leukemia, when he was only nine years old. More than thirty-five years ago now." He paused. "I was going to invite each of you to my office, but, seeing as you're all here together, I might as well tell you now. You are all beneficiaries, in one way or another, named in Ms. Humphrey's will."

He turned to Damon. "She left her house to help fund the children's cancer ward at the Chelsea and Westminster hospital. Bless her, it was her brother's house that he left to her when he died. I'm not entirely sure she knew how much it was worth, but she knew it was worth a bob or two. I'm guessing, in this market, it will fetch well over a million pounds."

*Holy shit!* The three looked at each other, then back at Mr. Harris.

Damon's mouth dropped open and he stared at Mr. Harris, wide-eyed in disbelief. "You're kidding, right?"

"Not at all, young man! Of course, it will all be handled by the hospital lawyers, however, Miss Humphrey specifically asked me to find and tell you first. Her exact words were, now let me see, something along the lines of, and please excuse me, 'That will shut his cheeky gob up!'" Mr. Harris smiled before continuing, "She thought the world of you and all the staff there."

Damon stuttered, lost for words. "Well... I'll be...um..."

Mr. Harris chuckled. "I see it worked. But there's more." Mr. Harris smiled, his eyes sparkling. "There's something else. She obviously had a

soft spot for you. According to her will, she wants you, Damon, to have five percent of the net sale of the property.”

Damon was stunned into silence and his eyes were fixed and wide. Sophie smiled. She wasn't entirely sure what Damon was thinking. Was he just shocked, or mentally trying to work out how much five percent of a million pounds came to. Perhaps it was both!

Mr. Harris chuckled to himself before he turned to Sophie, then his expression grew serious, “which means, I'm afraid, Miss. Kingsman, that you won't be able to live in Gwen's house anymore.”

Sophie felt a little uncomfortable, but forced a smile. “Oh, that's okay. I mean, of course. I think it's wonderful, the money, the hospital.”

Mr. Harris, turned towards Mél, “Mrs. Derrien, Miss. Humphrey gave me this for you.” He put his balled serviette in the wastebasket, then set his briefcase on his lap, opened it, and pulled out a small, veneered, wooden box which he offered to Mél.

Mélanie gasped. She took the box, opened it, looked longingly at the contents, shut it again, then pulled out her handkerchief and sobbed into it. After a moment she composed herself. “I am sorry. I am okay. It is just... It is...”

*Woah, must be something super special.* Sophie reached out and put a hand on Mél's knee. “It's alright,” she comforted, “we understand.”

Mélanie looked at both Mr. Harris and Sophie. “Merci. Thank you. Thank you so much.” Her face had taken on new warmth and colour.

Mr. Harris turned to Sophie. “And you, Miss. Kingsman, Miss. Humphrey was extremely fond of you. There are two things: The first is that she's left you her cottage in Cornwall.”

Sophie sat in stunned silence, then screwed up her face, puzzled. “She’s what?”

“Her cottage in Cornwall.”

Sophie was confused. “I didn’t know she had a cottage in Cornwall?”

“Yes, it’s in a village called Tremellen, on the south coast. Of course, I can arrange, through an agent down there, to have the estate sold, and have the proceeds transferred into your account. We can thrash out all the details later.”

Sophie was still reeling from the news. “A cottage...in Cornwall?”

“Yes, and the other thing,” continued Mr. Harris, “It’s about Miss. Humphrey’s dog.”

“Harvey?”

“Yes. Miss Humphrey instructed that she would like you to look after him until a new permanent home is found for him. Miss. Humphrey has provided sufficient funds for his ongoing care.”

Sophie felt awkward about being asked and shifted uncomfortably in her chair. She remembered what Gwen had asked of her in her letter. “Oh, but I’ve never had a dog before. I’m not sure I’m the best person to look after him.”

“That’s perfectly alright. I understand. There are adequate kennels he can stay in until he’s found a new home. If you agree, I will organise for him to be collected tomorrow. Will he be okay with you tonight?”

“Oh, Yes. I can do that. She did ask me about him, in the letter...” Sophie was sure Gwen had wanted her to look after Harvey permanently, and she was relieved that it now appeared to be only a temporary situation.

“Very well,” said Mr. Harris, “I must get back to the office. I have a great deal to organise. Mrs. Derrien, before you go, would you mind just signing this to say you’ve received the box?” Mr. Harris placed a piece of paper and a fountain pen on the desk.

“Of course.” Mélanie signed the document and Mr. Harris scooped it back up, tucking both the paper and pen back in his briefcase, before clicking it shut.

He stood, as did the others. “Thank you,” said Mél, as Mr. Harris opened the door and held it for her. Sophie and Mélanie hugged then turning to look at the others in turn Mél said her goodbyes. “Goodbye Sophie. Goodbye Damon.”

Damon also said his goodbyes and, shaking his head, presumably in disbelief, followed Mélanie out of the vestry towards the chapel side exit. Mr. Harris continued to hold the door for Sophie who was just about to step through when she stopped and turned to him. “Mr. Harris? May I have a quick word?”

“Of course, how may I help?”

Sophie chewed her lip. She paused, then blurted out. “May I see the cottage in Cornwall? I mean, am I allowed to go there?”

The old lawyer smiled, gave Sophie a wink, and leant forward, conspiratorially. “I wondered if you might ask me that!” He laid his black, leather briefcase back on the desk and clicked it open again. From inside he produced a large bunch of assorted keys. “Here you go.” He placed the keys into Sophie’s hand. “The address is on the fob. I know we’ve not gone through any of the paperwork yet, but, well, as far as I’m concerned, the house is yours, and I will await your further instruction.”

Sophie looked down at the keys in her hand. *Me? A cottage? In Cornwall, she thought. I might have to look up Tremellen on Google Maps. For that matter, I might have to look up where Cornwall is too!*



# 15

It was bang on ten in the morning and as Sophie and Harvey stood in the entrance hall of Gwen's house, the doorbell rang for the second time. Sophie looked at Harvey, Harvey looked at Sophie, and then they both looked at the front door before Sophie opened it. On the threshold stood a tall, bearded man wearing grey overalls, brown leather gloves, and holding a dog lead made from thick blue rope. Behind him, parked on the curb, was a white van and written on the side of the van, in large, blue italics was, *Kev's Kennels - Let them stay while you're away!*

The man screwed up his nose, spat out his gum into the hydrangeas, and looked down at Sophie. "I'm here for Harvey Humphrey."

Sophie, feeling a little intimidated, looked at where the gum had flown and then down at Harvey, who was peering around her legs. "Right, yes."

There was an awkward pause before the man sneered, raised an eyebrow and spoke again. "Your dog?"

Sophie stuttered. "Yes...I mean, no." She sighed. "He belonged to the lady that lived here."

The man paused for a moment and looked Sophie up and down. "Figures. Right then." He bent down to talk to the dog. Harvey took a step back. "You're a fat bugger aren't you?" He looked up at Sophie. "What kind of dog is it?"

"Oh, I don't know. A French bulldog, I think?"

"Blimey," He stood up and shook his head. "Kev's missus'll put him on a special diet, no doubt."

“Special diet?”

“Yeh, for special cases like this.”

“Special cases?”

“Yeh, you know, like when there’s been neglect or something.”

“Neglect?” Sophie was starting to dislike this man.

“Yeah. Right, let’s get this fat bugger into the wagon.” He began to loop the rope around Harvey’s head while the dog just stood there, tail between his legs.

“No, stop!” Sophie grabbed hold of the rope. “I’ve changed my mind.”

“You what?”

“He’s not going. He’s going to stay with me.”

“Suit yourself.” He loosened the rope around Harvey’s head. Sophie let go of the rope, and he lifted it off the dog. He cursed under his breath. “Fucking waste of time.”

Sophie felt the heat rise under her collar, “Excuse me?” She looked him in the eye. “What did you just say?”

“I said, it’s a waste of my *fucking* time.”

That was it. Sophie let it fly, and she vented all the frustration and anger that had been welling up inside her. “Well, you’re a fucking waste of space. Now get out of my fucking garden, you piece of shit!” With that, she stepped back and slammed the door in his face.

Sophie stood shaking behind the closed door. She heard muttering, then a door slam, an engine start, and the sound of the van driving away. Harvey snorted and she looked down. He was staring at her intently, wagging his tail. She smiled. “Looks like it’s me and you from now on. Come on you fat bugger. I know what you need.”

...

Sophie sat alone at a table on the intercity train from London to Penzance, with Harvey laying at her feet. She rested her elbows on the table, chin in her hands, gazing out of the window.

There'd been very little to pack for her journey to Cornwall. She'd made one last tour of the house before the black cab arrived to transport her and Harvey to Paddington station. Before leaving, she'd stood in the kitchen and wondered what would happen to all the stuff, nearly all of it belonging to Gwen's late brother. No doubt Mr. Harris would organise a house clearing firm to come in and dispose of it all. In a way, Sophie didn't feel sentimental about it. It was just stuff. The only real thing of value in the house had departed, and everything else just felt lifeless without her. In the kitchen, a bowl was just a bowl; a wooden spoon was just a wooden spoon; the magic had gone.

When she left the house, she called Mr. Harris, and left a message on his answerphone to let him know that she'd kept Harvey, and that she'd posted the house keys back through the letterbox.

Sophie also felt relief that the responsibility wasn't hers. The only thing she'd taken with her from the house, apart from Harvey, was a frozen lemon drizzle cake, wrapped tightly in tin foil. It was the last cake that Gwen and she had made together; for an order that was never collected. And now, Sophie had unwrapped a corner of the foil and was picking at the cake, as she stared out of the window at the countryside hurtling past: fields and fences, trees and houses, a winding river, a lake,

bridges, a motorway, hedgerow after hedgerow. *What am I doing? Where am I going? Will I even find the place? And if I do find it, what will I do when I get there?* She was woken from her daydreaming by a loud commotion.

“Get off me ya flippin’ mutt!”

Sophie turned to see Harvey humping the trousered leg of the ticket collector.

Sophie lunged towards the aisle. “Oh my God. Harvey! Stop it!” She pulled his lead to drag him back under the table. *This is all I need, another argument.*

The ticket collector, a large woman stuffed into her blue uniform, huffed as Sophie got the dog under control. “He has quite an appetite.” She smirked. “I wish my husband had half his energy!”

Sophie sighed with relief and pulled her train ticket out of her purse. The ticket collector, satisfied, waved it away. “We’ll be arriving in Penzance at 15.07.” She pulled out a dog biscuit from her pocket. “Is it okay?”

Sophie smiled and nodded in reply. Harvey stuck his head out from under the table and greedily gobbled down the biscuit the ticket collector offered him.

Sophie looked up at the ticket collector, smiling. “Thank you.” The woman smiled in return and moved on.

Sophie wondered if she was doing the right thing. She’d cut her ties with everyone: her family, her friends, her job; and now she was sitting on a train, heading for god-knows-where with only a horny dog for company. She leant her head against the window, feeling the thrum of

the engines and the gentle bouncing of the carriage, and closed her eyes.

“We’re here love.” Sophie felt someone gently shaking her shoulder. She’d fallen asleep. As the guard passed her and moved along the carriage, Sophie picked up her phone. It was ten past three in the afternoon. Harvey was snoring from under the table — the poor dog was exhausted. *You and me both*, she thought.

Sophie had found the village of Tremellen on Google Maps and had figured she could catch a bus to the nearby town of St. Buryan, and then get a taxi from there to Tremellen. The bus terminal wasn’t even a minute’s walk from the train station, and once there she’d not had to wait long for the A1 bus.

The journey had only taken thirty-five minutes and at about four o’clock in the afternoon, she and Harvey alighted the bus in St. Buryan. The town she expected to find, turned out to be a small village, and it was staggeringly picturesque. As the bus pulled away, Sophie spun around to take it all in. The village square had an old stone memorial in the centre, and was bordered by a pretty stone church, post office, pub, an antique centre, small stone cottages, and a village shop. What struck her the most, however, was the silence. It was a far cry from the noise and bustle of London. All she could hear were birds singing and the sound of a lawnmower somewhere in the distance. As there was no sign of a taxi rank, Sophie slung her gym bag over her shoulder, and crossed the lane to the St. Buryan Inn.

She was grateful to see a chalkboard outside the pub with *OPEN* written in capital letters and written underneath, the words, *Dogs Welcome!* An empty ice-cream tub, half filled with water, lay on the ground outside the entrance, and after Harvey had lapped up a good deal of it, Sophie entered the pub.

It was very quiet, no doubt because it was between lunchtime and dinner. Sat, alone, at the bar was a guy with slicked back hair, a large gold earring in his left ear, wearing a faded denim jacket. He was engrossed in a folded newspaper, and a half-drunk pint stood on the counter in front of him. Smells of home-cooking wafted from the kitchen, and Sophie felt ravenous. She looked at Harvey and decided that he could do with something to eat too. She approached the bar, just as a young woman entered it from the other end, through a side door — presumably the kitchen. Sophie was surprised to see she was covered in tattoos, had multiple piercings, and that she was also strikingly beautiful with long, thick hair, rosy cheeks, and deep blue eyes.

The young woman approached Sophie. “Hello. What can I get you?” she asked cheerily.

“Hi,” answered Sophie, “Can we get anything to eat?”

The landlady’s face fell slightly. “Well, the kitchen’s closed and doesn’t open until five p.m. But if you don’t want to wait, I can do you a tea cake — if you like? Or knock up a quick sandwich?” She looked at Sophie, hopefully.

“That’d be lovely. Two teacakes and a coffee please.”

The landlady’s face broke into a warm smile. “Coming right up.” She spun on her heels and bustled back into the kitchen.

Sophie put down her bag and perched on a bar stool. Harvey lay down on the floor. She still couldn't get over how extraordinarily quiet it was. There was no traffic noise, no cars, no lorries, and no jets flying overhead. She could feel the stress oozing out of her, and it wasn't long before the landlady returned with two teacakes on a plate, and a cup of coffee, accompanied by a small jug of milk and a bowl of assorted brown and white sugar lumps. *Oops*, thought Sophie, *I forgot to ask for two plates.*

"That'll be four pounds fifty please."

"Oh, and for the teacakes?" Sophie started digging into her purse.

The landlady laughed. "No. It's four pounds fifty for all of it." She put her hands on her hips. "You're not from round these parts are you?"

Sophie looked up, sheepishly, and held out a five pound note. "No, London."

The landlady gave Sophie a knowing look, took the note, cashed it in the register, and put a fifty pence piece back on the bar.

Sophie thanked her, put the change back in her purse, and, when the landlady had her back turned, she snuck a teacake down to Harvey and consumed her own toasted bun almost as fast as Harvey gobbled his.

She was just finishing her coffee when she asked the landlady, "I wondered if you might be able to help me? I need a taxi to a village called Tremellen."

"You staying there?"

"Sort of..."

The landlady turned to the guy who was sitting further along the bar. “Oi! Dave!” The man looked up. “Finish your pint, this lass needs your services!”



# 16

Sophie wasn't exactly sure of the model, but Dave's taxi was an old light-blue Ford with a large darker blue band along the side. It looked retro but was immaculately kept, with polished chrome bumpers, door handles, and wing mirrors.

Dave took her bag and placed it in the boot of the car, then opened a rear door for Harvey so he could hop up onto the back seat. Harvey just stood there looking at the open door. Dave looked at the dog, gave a click of his tongue, and lifted him in. He shut the rear door and then opened the passenger door for Sophie. "Madam," he said with flourish. Sophie smiled and got in. Dave walked around the front of the taxi and climbed into the driver's side. No sooner was he seated when he took out a black comb from his jacket pocket and, looking at his reflection in the rear-view mirror, started to smooth back his hair.

Sophie turned to him. "Is it far?"

Dave pocketed the comb and scratched his chin. "Oooh. Let me see. If we don't encounter any tractors or cows, I reckon I can have you there in under 15 minutes." He patted the dashboard and winked at her. "She might be twenty years older than you, but this *Escort* can really shift!"

Sophie smiled back, thanking God that the innuendo was missed on him. Or was it? Was this Elvis lookalike flirting with her? *He looks about sixty*, she thought, as Dave turned the key in the ignition and the engine roared into life — the exhaust thrumming and growling. *Sounds more like a bloody helicopter than a car.*

Dave drove like a banshee escaping hell. Sophie assumed he knew these roads well, as he careered full speed around bends and over small bridges. The pink, fluffy dice dangling from his rear-view mirror swung perilously from side to side. She wished she'd gone for a pee before leaving the pub, but she was sure she could hold on for fifteen minutes or so.

Dave glanced at his passenger before fixing his eyes again on the road. "So what brings a chick like you to Tremellen?" He sniffed. "Most people've never heard of it."

Sophie focused on the winding road ahead. "Oh, I'm just getting away for a bit."

"A holiday? Well, you'll be getting away from it there alright. The Crusty Barnacle's not exactly the Ritz Carlton, but Maggie'll make you feel right at home."

"Right," said Sophie, not having a clue what he was talking about, and not wanting to engage much in conversation. Dave took the hint and they passed the rest of the short, but speedy, journey in silence.

The roads were incredibly windy, and it was all Sophie could do to control her bladder and not wet herself. Finally, they plunged down a narrow hill, the hedgerows scraping each side of the car, before all of a sudden the road ended and in front of her was the sea, sparkling in the sunshine.

At first glance, Tremellen was stunningly pretty; a small natural bay nestled between the rocks. Directly in front of her, a harbour wall ran the length of the tiny hamlet, from the small car park onto which they had emerged, and then along a short lane with a row of terraced cottages

pressed into the steep hillside. Piles of lobster pots sat on the edge of the wall, and Sophie could just see the tops of two boats which were moored against it. She peered out of the passenger window and they appeared to have stopped outside an old stone pub.

Dave got out and rushed around the car to open the passenger door for Sophie. “Here we are m’lady.”

Sophie stepped out, feeling a little queasy. She’d not seen a meter in the car and was worried about how much it would cost. “How much do I owe you?”

“Let’s call it a tenner, including a tip?” Dave opened the boot and took out Sophie’s bag, placing it on the ground. He then opened the rear door and gently lifted Harvey out, placing him on the ground too.

Sophie thanked the taxi driver and gave him a ten pound note.

“Here’s my card in case you need taking anywhere.” He paused for effect, handing the card to Sophie, then leaned in towards her. “Or any other personal services you may require.” He nodded at the card in Sophie’s hand. “It’s got my mobile number on it.”

Sophie shuddered.

Dave winked before getting back into his car, then he reversed in a cloud of fumes and headed back up the narrow lane.

Sophie looked at the pub. She was desperate for a pee but it looked closed as the door was shut and all the inside lights were off. Outside, attached to a post, an old sign hung from chains; on it was a picture of a boat, and under it, in peeling red and gold paint, *The Barnacle*. Someone had crudely painted the word Crusty between the two words. *Nice*. Opposite the pub, on the edge of the quay, there was a small shed which

looked like some kind of kiosk or shop, however, it also appeared to be closed.

The place was deserted.

Sophie pulled out the bunch of keys from a zip pocket at the end of her bag. According to the fob, the cottage was called, *La Canelé*, which struck Sophie as a little bit incongruous for a Cornish village. She picked up her bag and led Harvey along the short row of cottages, looking at the name of each cottage as they passed. Above the door of the very last cottage, in faded writing, on a small, grey wooden plank: *La Canelé*. *Thank goodness, this is it.* Sophie's bladder was about to give way any second.

She tried every key in the door but none of them worked. As she fumbled, Harvey cocked his leg against a drainpipe. *Oh fuck it*, thought Sophie, and she looked for a tree, bush, anything.

The front door of the cottage was right on the lane and there was nothing to hide behind. Sophie looked around. The lane was empty, but opposite the cottage she could see some steps leading down the harbour wall.

She quickly tied Harvey's lead to the drainpipe, ran across the road, took some steps down until she was hidden from view, pulled down her knickers, and lifted up her summer dress. Bliss.

While she was mid flow, she heard a cough, and looked up. Walking past the top of the steps was a middle-aged woman, sporting a Barbour jacket, headscarf, and Hunter Wellington boots. At the end of a thin red lead was a white shih tzu who was also gazing down at Sophie. The

woman glared at Sophie, tutted, and continued her walk up the lane towards the pub.

*Where the hell did she come from?* thought Sophie. *She must have emerged from a coastal path, hidden at the end of the lane where the sea met the rocks, not far from the cottage.* Sophie was mortified. “Afternoon!” she called out cheerfully after her.

Sophie retried each of the keys in turn and finally one did seem to fit. With a wiggle and a pull, the lock gave and Sophie pushed open the door, which creaked on its hinges. Sophie, gingerly, entered the cottage.

The front door led directly into a dusty living room. It clearly hadn’t been lived in for many years. How long had Gwen been in London? Sophie tried to remember. Gwen had won the Battersea Bake-off for ten years in a row, and then she’d judged this year’s competition, so that made eleven years, at least. The cottage smelled damp but at least the roof hadn’t leaked, as far as Sophie could see. Perhaps Gwen paid someone to keep the outside in a reasonable state of repair?

The cottage, being only two-up two-down, was surprisingly spacious. Sophie conducted a quick exploration of the house. A narrow stairwell wound from the living room to the first floor. Upstairs, there was a large bedroom and a bathroom.

Sophie dumped her bag on the bed. The room was airless and stiflingly hot, and so, with some effort, she pushed open the bedroom window. She decided to take off her white trainers and sweaty socks and put on some flip-flops. *Why not?* she thought. *After all, I’m on holiday.*

Heading back downstairs she poked her head into the kitchen, before going back into the living room. A second door from the living room led into a small garden at the far end of the cottage. The garden itself sat between the lane and the steep hill. Sophie peered through the end window of the living room, which was next to the garden door. It looked as if there was some kind of outhouse or shed at the end of the garden, but it was hard to tell as the lawn was so overgrown with weeds.

On one of the living room walls hung certificates in wooden frames and Sophie took a closer look. They had large, dark-red wax stamps, and the text was written in French. Sophie could see the name *Gwendoline Humphrey* written in black script, and the words *Pâtissière* and *Paris*. These were clearly awards. Gwen had been a *Pâtissière* and, judging by the quality and quantity of the awards, a very good one too.

She went from the living room back into the kitchen to take a closer look at what it offered. The kitchen was perfectly laid out, featuring smooth granite work surfaces and a matching island in the centre. Under the kitchen window, overlooking the lane, was a large, white Belfast sink and a double drainer. On one wall stood a beige three-oven Aga, and a separate Miele gas oven and hob. There was a beautiful pine dresser, and an old-looking American-style fridge and stand-up freezer. This was a chef's kitchen, and Sophie felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up when it dawned on her that this was now *her* kitchen. At the rear, towards the hill, was a door. Sophie opened it to find some steps leading down into a cool, dark, walk-in pantry. The pantry shelves were bare, save for a few bottles of what looked like spirits.

Back in the main part of the kitchen, Sophie opened several of the cupboards, and each was filled with every kind of cooking utensil and cookware one could ever need. In a lower cupboard stood a cream Kitchen-Aid mixer, and various other appliances, including an electric kettle.

Sophie took the kettle to the sink to fill it. She turned the cold tap but nothing happened. Of course, the water must be turned off. She knelt down and opened up the cupboard under the sink — it smelled terrible. Sophie fumbled around inside the cupboard and discovered a large brass tap attached to a pipe entering in from the outside. She turned it anticlockwise, and there was a banging and a rattling and a chugging. She stood up, bumped the cupboard doors closed with her knees, and looked at the tap. The noises ceased, then with a loud chug, brown water spluttered from the tap, before it stopped and then started again. Finally, brown water trickled out and the flow increased. *Gross!* She left the tap running and it began to run clearer until eventually it ran completely clear. Sophie left it a few more moments before filling the kettle. She turned off the tap, set the kettle on a work surface, and plugged it into a wall socket. No light lit up on the kettle. Great, no electricity! Sophie tried the kitchen light switch. Nothing. There must be a fuse box somewhere.

She went back into the living room and tried the light switch there. Again, nothing. Low to the ground, next to the entrance door, Sophie spotted a small panel built into the wall, and she opened it to reveal a fusebox. All the switches were set in the same position apart from one big one at the end. It was stiff but she managed to push it over.

Immediately, the light came on in the living room and she heard a click come from the kitchen, and a hiss as the kettle settled down to begin to heat. As she stood and closed the panel, Harvey stood with his nose pressed against the front door. “What? You need to go again already?” She sighed. “Oh, all right then.”

Sophie checked the front door was on the latch, so she wouldn't lock herself out, and led Harvey outside, crossing the lane to the steps. The tide was out and the two boats moored against the quay by the pub rested on the mud and shingle. *An ideal doggie stomping ground*, she thought. Harvey stared at the steps but didn't move, and so, with some effort, Sophie lifted him up and carried him awkwardly to the bottom, where she placed him on the grey beach. “Off you go,” she said, and Harvey trotted out onto the shingle. However, after a few yards he began to sink in the soft mud up to his belly. Harvey tried to lift his paws out of the mud but he was stuck fast. “Oh really? You're kidding me?” groaned Sophie.

Sophie looked down at her flip-flopped feet. She could slip them off, but didn't fancy walking barefoot on the mud and shingle. Stepping out onto the mud she tried to keep her balance, as she carefully made her way towards Harvey, who seemed perfectly content to stay put.

When she got to him, she leaned over and tried pulling him out of the mud but he was too heavy. She heaved and pulled, sending wet mud splattering over both her and the dog. She eventually managed to pull him free, and hugging his wet body, she started to walk back towards the steps. She felt her right flip-flop come off. “Sod it!” she cursed, but



kept going. She then felt her left foot slip forward, sending her toppling backwards. Letting go of Harvey, Sophie's hands flew back to break her fall. She landed on her backside, sinking deep into the mud, with Harvey landing with a splodge next to her — all four legs again buried in the mud.

As she sat there, she heard someone clear their throat above her. Standing at the edge of the harbour wall, the same woman from earlier — the one in the Barbour jacket — peered down at her, the white shih tzu at her side. The woman shook her head and tutted again before disappearing from view. “Thanks for the help!” yelled Sophie after her, “I’m fine!”

She didn’t feel fine.

Sophie lifted a hand out of the mud and pushed her hair away from her forehead, smearing mud all over her face in the process. She screamed. “Fuck it!”

She’d lost everything. She’d lost Gwen, and now she’d lost her stupid flip-flop, her arse was hurting, and she had a fat, wet dog pinned in the mud next to her. It was all too much and tears began to trickle down her cheeks. Who did she think she was? She knew fuck all about how to live on her own.

Sophie was so busy sniffing, and sobbing, and feeling sorry for herself, that she didn’t notice a man approach her, until a thick, Scottish accent came from above. “Cinderella, I think this slipper belongs to you?”

# 17

Through a blur of tears, Sophie slowly focused on the man standing before her: back wellies, black jeans, black leather belt, and a midnight-blue shirt. The sleeves were rolled up, revealing a tattoo on his upper arm. She squinted against the sunlight, and held up a muddy hand to block out the sun. The man looked to be in his early thirties; unshaven, with unruly, dark brown hair, and slate-blue eyes. He was holding Sophie's rescued flip-flop in one hand, and by his side stood a beautiful, black, flat-coat retriever. The dog had its head cocked to one side and looked curiously at the stranded pair. Sophie sat, dumbstruck. The man walked over to the water's edge, washed the flip-flop in the sea, and returned. He crouched down and lifted up Sophie's right foot. He slid the flip-flop into place and smiled. "It fits!"

Sophie sniffed, and let out a small laugh. "I bet it would fit anybody, even you!" She glanced down at his big feet. *Perhaps not!*

He stood up and offered Sophie an outstretched hand. "Angus."

"Sophie," she replied, taking his hand and allowing herself to be pulled up.

Angus looked at his hand, shrugged, leant over, plucked Harvey out of the mud, and tucked him under one arm. Harvey wagged his tail and looked at his rescuer with adoration. Angus offered his other hand to Sophie.

*God, she thought, I feel so pathetic! I need a Prince Charming to come and rescue me?* She waved away the hand. "I'll be fine now. Thank you."

Sophie led the way back to the steps with Angus and his retriever following. Once they had mounted the steps and were standing on the lane, Angus lowered Harvey gently to the ground. “Do you live far?”

“Oh, me? No! Ha. Um...right here.”

Angus glanced around, looking surprised. “Here?”

Sophie looked directly across the lane at *La Canelé* and Angus followed her gaze. “This is my fr...” Sophie caught herself. “This is *my* cottage.”

“Your cottage?”

Sophie looked back at Angus. “You ask a lot of questions don’t you? Is it a Scottish thing?” She immediately realised she had sounded a little harsh.

She was relieved when Angus laughed, “I’m sorry, it’s just that I’ve not seen you before. Not that I come here that often myself, but still, I think I might have noticed you.”

Sophie grinned. “It’s the mud-caked look isn’t it?” She glanced down over her body and when she looked up she noticed Angus looking at her, too. “Yep, not many like me around.” She wiped her hands on her dress. “Anyway, thank you for your assistance.”

Angus raised his eyebrows and just stared at her. She felt awkward, exposed.

“Um...can I offer you a cup of tea?”

Angus hesitated for a moment.

“It’s the least I can do.”

Angus smiled. “Bonnie and I would be delighted.”

Sophie was a bit taken aback that Angus had accepted, and she hesitated for a moment. “Right then.” She wasn’t sure why she felt nervous and looked down at her dog for support. “Come on, Harvey.”

They walked across the lane to her front door, Sophie conscious of her filthy dress and hands. “I might have to clean up a bit.”

Angus spotted an outside tap and he nodded towards it. “Why don’t you head on in and I’ll wash your wee...” He looked at Harvey and coughed. “I’ll wash your doggie down out here. Maybe gimme a shout when you’re ready?”

Sophie felt like a rabbit caught in headlights. Why wasn’t she able to think straight? “Right. Okay. Thanks. Um...back in a mo.” She pushed through the front door to head upstairs.

Sophie looked in the bathroom mirror and was shocked at the sight. Her hair and face were streaked with mud. *I look like such a mess!* She didn’t want to keep Angus waiting long, so, quickly she stepped into the bath and slipped off her flip-flops, dress, bra, and knickers. She then turned on the bath taps, which, like the kitchen sink, ran brown before running clear. Despite the water being freezing cold, Sophie washed her hands under the tap, before splashing the water on her arms and legs, and finally onto her face and hair. When she was satisfied that she was free from the mud, Sophie surveyed the bathroom, dripping and shivering. *No bloody towels!* She hopped out of the bath and padded, goose-bumped and dripping, to the bedroom. She grabbed a blanket off the bed and rubbed her body as dry as she could, before rooting through her bag to find some fresh clothes. She found some faded jeans,

a creased, but clean white T-shirt, and some socks. She put her trainers back on and pulled on a pastel-blue, v-neck, cashmere sweater. She grabbed her hairbrush and ran back to the bathroom, where, using the mirror as a guide, she straightened her damp hair. Finally, she bounded back down the stairs, across the living room, to the front door.

Angus sat on the threshold, and the two dogs were standing before him looking attentive. He held his arm out, the palm of his hand facing down. "Sit!" Both dogs sat, licking their chops, and he tossed them each a dog biscuit. Both biscuits bounced off the dogs' noses and onto the floor, where they were greedily gobbled up. He laughed and looked up at Sophie. "You can teach them to sit but not to catch!"

Sophie looked surprised. "I had no idea he knew how to sit!"

Angus returned a puzzled look. "They're clean but a bit damp. Are they allowed in or shall I tie Bonnie up out here?"

"Oh, let her in, she'll be fine." Sophie backed into the living room to allow Angus to enter the cottage, and the dogs followed him inside.

Harvey waddled into the middle of the living room and shook himself, sending water flying in all directions! Sophie waved her arms in the air and leant backwards, trying to escape the onslaught. "Oh, bloody Nora! Harvey! Really?" Harvey looked at her, trotted to the rug by the empty fireplace, turned around three times, lay down, and closed his eyes; meanwhile, Bonnie ambled around the room, sniffing at the furniture. Sophie moaned. "Bloody dog," She looked at Angus, who was smirking, and she raised her eyebrows. "Tea?"

Sophie and Angus sat in armchairs nursing cups of hot water. Harvey, with his legs stuck up in the air, was snoring, and Bonnie was either asleep next to him or resting with her eyes closed — the way dogs do sometimes. Sophie felt embarrassed. “I’m really sorry. I only just arrived today and I don’t have any tea...or coffee...or milk...or sugar...or anything really.”

Angus looked down into his mug. “It’s okay. It’s hot...and, um...it’s healthy.” He looked up at Sophie, smiled with his eyes, and the pair burst out laughing.

Sophie put her fingers to her lips. “Oh! I know what I *do* have.” She quickly put her mug on the floor and dashed up the stairs. She returned a moment later with a tin foil package, which she waved in the air “Voila!”

Sophie disappeared again into the kitchen, and Angus heard the sounds of drawers opening and closing, and the clattering of crockery. Sophie returned with two large slabs of lemon drizzle cake served on plates. She offered Angus one of them. “Here you go. It’s a little bit squashed after being in my bag, but it should be okay.”

“Thank you.”

She put her own plate on her armchair, before going back into the kitchen and returning with two more plates of cake. Harvey, attuned to the sound of cake being served, was sitting up expectantly, and Bonnie opened her eyes, sleepily. Sophie set the two plates before the dogs. Angus watched in astonishment as Harvey tucked straight in, devouring it in a few gulps, whereas Bonnie just lay there sniffing the air. As soon as Harvey had finished his own cake, he looked at Bonnie, looked at

Bonnie's plate of cake, and then tucked into Bonnie's slice too. Angus burst out laughing again. "If you're gonna keep feeding cake to the not-so-wee doggie, you're gonna have to build some strong muscles to carry him back from the beach every time he goes for a pee!"

Sophie looked a bit crestfallen. "Oh." She looked at Harvey who was struggling to lie down again. "I mean, I can see he's a *bit* overweight."

"A *bit* overweight?" Angus could sense it was potentially a sensitive topic, and so he proceeded gently. "Aye." He sighed. "It's okay as a treat every once in a blue moon, but it's nae healthy."

"He's always been allowed to eat cake. He really likes it..." Sophie tailed off as she realised how lame it sounded.

"Aye, I bet he does. Do you have any dog food?"

Sophie felt ashamed and bit her lip. "No. No, I don't have anything. And I don't have a car either."

"No car?"

Sophie feigned mock crossness. "There you go again, repeating what I say with a question."

"Sorry." Angus thought for a moment. "Tell you what. If you can manage tonight, I'll stop by in the morning and bring you some supplies. Dog food and tea bags might be at the top of the shopping list!"

"Oh no, I couldn't possibly ask you to do that. I have Dave, the taxi-driver's number. I'll call him tomorrow."

"What? Dodgy Dave?"

Sophie glared at Angus. "There you go again!"

He held up his hand in admission. "Sorry. Honestly, it's nae bother though."

Angus took a bite of the lemon drizzle cake, stopped chewing, frowned, raised his eyebrows, then started chewing again before swallowing. Then he said something that sounded like, “*Longantatch!*” He stared at Sophie. “Sophie, that’s delicious. Really? Wow! You made this?”

Sophie blinked and looked down, bashfully. “Yes.”

“Crivens, girl, you could sell these and make a fortune!”

When Angus and Sophie had finished eating, and Harvey was once again asleep with his legs sticking in the air, Angus and Bonnie bid their farewell. As they stepped out onto the lane, Sophie stood on the doorstep and Angus looked Sophie in the eye and moved in closer. *Shit!* thought Sophie, *he’s closing in for a kiss!* She’d not looked at Angus in that way — not really — but, well, hey, when in Rome, or Scotland, or Cornwall. Angus reached behind her head with his hand. They were so close. Sophie closed her eyes and leaned forward, ready to receive him. She felt almost giddy, then felt a pluck in her hair from the back of her head. Sophie opened her eyes in surprise.

Angus dangled a piece of gloopy, brown seaweed from his fingertips. “This was stuck in your hair.”

Sophie blushed and stammered. “Oh! Um...thank you.”

Angus smiled and winked. “Nae bother. The mermaid look kinda suits you. See you tomorrow.” He turned and set off up the lane.

Sophie felt something nudge between her calves and Harvey stood between her legs, watching the visitors go, before looking up at her.



Sophie muttered. “I know, *I know*. Don’t look at me like that, you daft mutt. It’s all your bloody fault in the first place!”

*What on earth was I thinking? Must be the sea air or something*, she thought to herself, and she decided to put Angus, and his big feet, rugged looks, sparkling slate-blue eyes, strong arms, and kissable lips, out of her mind.

# *Sophie's Lemon Drizzle Cake*

Ideal as a snack for long train journeys, or as a thank you for being rescued from muddy estuaries.

## **Ingredients**

- 250g unsalted butter
- 250g caster sugar
- 250g Self raising flour
- 4 medium eggs
- 3 lemons, you need the zest and the juice separately
- 100g icing sugar (maybe more)

## **Step 1**

Preheat a fan oven to 160°C, then grease and line a loaf tin.

## **Step 2**

Beat together the butter and the sugar, before slowly mixing in the eggs.

## **Step 3**

Sift the flour into the mixture and combine until smooth, then stir in most of the lemon zest (reserve some for the topping).

## **Step 4**

Spoon the mixture into the loaf tin and bake for 40 minutes.

## **Step 5**

Poke holes in the top of the cake whilst it is still warm and in the tin.

## **Step 6**

Mix the icing sugar with the lemon juice, then pour the mixture over the top of the cake. Here you may need more icing sugar, or use less lemon juice, as you may prefer a sweeter or more lemony topping!

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Deciding a closer inspection of the house contents was in order, Sophie spent the early evening rooting through the kitchen cupboards; starting with the pine dresser. The first of its three large drawers was stiff on its runners, incredibly heavy, and contained a large quantity of fine, heavy, Rattail cutlery including fish knives, soup spoons, and dessert forks. *There must be over twenty place settings*, thought Sophie. The second contained dark-red, cloth napkins, and silver napkin rings. The napkins themselves were a little musty, and Sophie made a mental note that they would need a good wash. In the third drawer, lay a thick, dark grey book, with a hard canvas-bound cover.

The book looked old. It was tatty around the edges, and its cover was stained with ancient splashes and marks. Like the napkins, it too smelled musty. Sophie lifted it out and onto the centre counter. Sophie opened the front cover and gasped as she recognised the loops and swirls of black ink. On the opening page was a recipe for *Tarte aux pommes à la frangipane* — the ingredients and notes were written in French. With her schoolbook knowledge, Sophie deduced it was for a kind of apple tart. Madam Fournier, her GCSE French teacher, would be impressed!

The book was filled with page after page of recipes: cakes, pastries, and desserts. This was Gwen's own recipe book, the one she had left behind. It was almost too much for Sophie to take in. She picked up the book and hugged it close to her chest. This item was far more precious than the rest of the cottage put together. *Oh Gwen! Thank you!*

After letting Harvey out for a quick pee, Sophie stripped and shook all the sheets and blankets, before remaking the brass-framed bed. Once finished, she climbed under the covers, and using all the pillows, propped herself up against the headboard. From the glow of the bedside lamp, she poured over every page in Gwen's book. *There must be over two hundred recipes in here.*

Sophie wasn't sure when the recipes were written, but she presumed these were Parisian delights from Gwen's time in the city. She wondered whether she should translate the recipes into English to make them easier to read. However, a few of the later recipes *were* written in English, perhaps transcribed after Gwen had arrived in Cornwall. Either way, this was a treasure trove of delicacies, and she couldn't wait to begin trying them out. She took a final bite of the remaining drizzle cake before hopping out of bed, padding to the bathroom to brush her teeth. When she returned, she let out a contented sigh, and turned out the light. Her first day in Cornwall had been quite an adventure, and as she lay in the darkness, she considered the day's events in her mind, before falling into a deep sleep.

Sophie woke, blinking, as her eyes adjusted to the morning light. Something downstairs was snorting and banging, and it sounded like some kind of Cornish troll was stomping around the living room. It dawned on her that someone was banging on the door and that Harvey, being unable to bark properly, was snorting to try and attract attention.

Sophie stepped out of bed. “Coming!” She yanked the top sheet from the bed, wrapping it around her naked body, as she crossed the bedroom. She stumbled down the stairs and made it to the front door, where Harvey was impatiently grunting and wagging his tail. She unlatched the door, opening it to find Angus, standing on the doorstep, with Bonnie by his side. On the lane next to them were two cardboard boxes full of groceries.

Angus looked Sophie up and down, tracing her hair that cascaded down one side of her neck, involuntarily licked his lips, and swallowed hard.

Sophie, feeling his stare, pulled the thin, cotton sheet tighter around her, not realising that this made it cling even more revealingly to her bumps and curves.

Angus flushed, as did Sophie, and he stammered. “Aye, um...sorry.” He looked away then looked back at her. “I didn't mean to wake you. I, um...have something to stuff you with.”

Sophie’s cheeks burned. “You what?”

Angus’s eyes grew wide and he reddened even more. “I mean, I came with some stuff for you. Groceries!” He nervously fingered the neck of his sweater.

Harvey waddled out of the door to his favourite drainpipe and Bonnie joined in by sniffing. It was a useful diversion for Sophie. “Ew, gross! Why do they do that?”

Angus sighed in relief at the change of subject. “Beats me.”

“Thank you for the shopping. Come in. I’ll go and get dressed. Please, if you wouldn’t mind popping the stuff in the kitchen, that’d be fab.” She

turned and quickly dashed upstairs. Angus couldn't help but glance at the way her backside shifted under the soft cotton. He glanced heavenward and shook his head, before picking up a box and carrying it into the kitchen.

When Sophie returned she was wearing the only other summer dress she had brought with her. It was skimpy and pastel yellow, covered in dainty orange-petalled flowers with red centres.

Angus, glanced at her, and keeping his head down, removed the last items from the boxes and placed them on the centre counter.

Sophie inspected the items before her. "Wow, what's all this?"

Angus stood back and allowed himself to look at Sophie. "Well, I figured you'll not have had any brekkie this morning, and so, I thought, perhaps, if it's okay with you, I could make you something to eat? I bought some cherry tomatoes, bacon, asparagus, and some ciabatta rolls. I've also brought you some basics: tea, coffee, milk, sugar, and some special diet dog food."

Sophie spied the bag of Woofplan. "Yummy!"

Angus laughed. "Not for you, obviously. Oh, and, as I figured you like baking, I brought you some eggs, flour, and butter."

"Wow, that's amazing, thank you. How much do I owe you?"

Angus blushed. "Och, nothing. Consider it a housewarming present."

"Where did you get it all? St. Buryan?"

"Yes and no. There's a small store there, but there's also a farm I like to go to. It's not far from the village and has a roadside stall." He couldn't

help but take a quick glance at Sophie's bare arms and legs. "So, hungry?"

Sophie smiled. "Starving! I'll put the kettle on." Before she did so, however, she opened the packet of Woofplan, poured some of the dry biscuits into a bowl and placed it on the floor. Harvey sniffed at it, looked up at Sophie, and gave an indignant snort. He then took two steps back from the bowl and sat down. Sophie shrugged. "Can't say I blame you."

Sitting, perched on the edge of a counter with her coffee, Sophie enjoyed watching Angus as he moved about the kitchen preparing brunch. To get the hobs to work, he'd had to find the gas cylinder in the narrow ginnel behind the row of terraced cottages, check it had gas, and turn it on. Sophie admitted to herself that, as she assumed all houses had a mains supply, she probably wouldn't have figured that one out. "How long will it be? Only, I thought I might have a look in the garden, as I've not had a chance yet."

Angus snapped the bottoms from some of the asparagus stems. "Och, you have five minutes or so."

"See you in ten then!" Sophie smiled and slid off the counter.

The narrow garden was about twenty yards long, flanked by the steep cliff on one side, and the lane on the other. An old picket fence provided a barrier between the lane and the garden, and close to the cottage end was a small wooden gate. Sophie wiggled the gate open and entered the garden. The unkempt lawn was overgrown with weeds and small trees,



and she had to wade through the long grass to get to the dilapidated building at the end.

The building itself was made from stone with a slate roof, and it was divided into two sections with two doors on the right and a window on the left. Sophie tried peering through the window, but it was too dark to see what was inside. Sophie tried the handle of the left hand door, and as it was unlocked, she managed to pull it open and peer inside. It was an old storage shed, filled with flower pots, a hand mower, stakes, and pieces of old wood. It looked like the kind of place spiders would hang out. Sophie shuddered, pushing the door closed again. She then tried the right hand door. It was stuck fast, with a bramble snaking up and across it. The bramble had also managed to push tendrils under the door itself, wedging it shut. Sophie pulled and pushed. Nothing. She decided to put her shoulder into it, yanking and twisting the old bakelite handle. Still, nothing. She held onto the handle and leant backwards pulling with all her might. There was a splintering of wood and a loud scraping sound as the door pulled open, then with a squeal, Sophie plunged backwards and crashed onto the ground, landing on her backside. "Ouch!"

Angus peered down at her. "Are you quite finished down there? You've got to stop falling at my feet like this! Brunch is ready!"

"It's not funny. Help me up!"

Angus yanked Sophie up by her hand. She was now standing outside, what appeared to be, an old outhouse. She winced and looked at the palm of her hand which was oozing blood from a long scratch.

Angus held her hand and inspected the wound. “Let’s get that cleaned up.”

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Sophie winced as Angus dabbed the scratch on her palm with a damp tissue. She glanced at the tattoo on his arm. “Why a Tudor rose?”

Angus hesitated and sighed. “It’s from a different chapter of my life.” He then continued to gently wipe Sophie’s wound.

Sophie feigned disinterest but was intrigued by what this chapter of his life might have entailed. “It’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it.”

Angus put the tissue down and looked at Sophie soberly. He sighed. “I had it done in prison.”

Sophie’s eyes widened.

Angus continued, his voice quiet and serious. “All the gang members had them. It was like...a badge of honour... You know, when...”

“What?”

Angus glanced around as if checking that the coast was clear, looked Sophie directly in the eye, leant in, and whispered. “When you took down your first prison guard with a home-made shiv.”

Sophie gasped. “What? Really?”

Angus leant back, laughing. “Nae, you noggin! It’s just a design I liked when I was younger. That’s all!”

Sophie thumped him hard in his chest and started to laugh too.

The couple sat with their legs dangling over the harbour wall, their dogs sitting beside them. The sun shone down, and Sophie could feel herself beginning to relax as its rays gently warmed her face. The sea lapped lazily at the shingled beach, picking up bits of weed and placing them on

increasingly higher ground as the tide drew in. The two wooden boats moored in the harbour would soon be afloat, and Sophie had to tear her gaze away from the view to focus on the food.

They each held, on their laps, a plate of toasted, buttered ciabatta bread, poached eggs, sautéed asparagus, roasted cherry tomatoes, and crispy bacon. Sophie couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten a home-cooked meal that wasn't cake, and she wasted no time tucking in — ignoring Harvey's, *please drop me something* stare.

Sophie used her bread to mop up the last of the tomato and egg yolk from her plate. "That was utterly delicious!"

When they had finally put down their plates, Angus put his hands behind his head, lay back on the asphalt, and closed his eyes. "So, what's your story? I don't even know your last name?"

Sophie hesitated, then spoke, softly. "I'm not sure you want to hear it."

"No, I do. Go on...if you want to. I bet it's a really lovely last name."

Sophie laughed, slapped her hand on his leg, and lay down next to him. "It's Kingsman." She sighed and paused before starting at the beginning. She recounted her story; about her parents, the accident, Clare, JJ, the revelation about Clare and Martin, the last few weeks with Gwen, and finishing with her inheritance of Gwen's cottage, here in Tremellen.

When Sophie had finished, Angus lay in silence, then propped himself up on one arm and looked down at her. "I'm sorry."

"Story of my life."

Angus sat back up. "Gwen sounds like a remarkable lady."

Sophie also sat back up and crossed her legs. “She was, and a generous one too. I miss her.”

“So what are you going to do next?”

“Truly, I don’t know. Get a job I suppose. Sell this place. I don’t know.” She shrugged. “And what about you?”

“Me? I don’t live here. I’m visiting my formidable Aunt May. Actually, she’s not formidable at all. She’s a big softie. She lives in a place called Glen Mornay — literally over the hill. It’s probably quicker to walk to hers from here than it is to drive around the lanes.” He sighed. “She’s been getting frailer and frailer every visit, and so I try to get down from Aberdeen as often as I can. Actually...” He chewed his lip and hesitated. “I head home first thing tomorrow.” There was a silence between them, then Angus looked beyond Sophie and smiled. “Well, at least we won’t need to wash up the plates!”

Sophie turned to see Harvey licking her plate.

“Ewww, gross dog!”

Angus made a move to grab the plates. “Well, I’d better get going. I’ll help you in with these before I go.”

Sophie put her hands up to block him. “Oh, no, it’s okay. Thank you, you’ve done enough.”

Angus let his hand drop. “Aye, well...you’re welcome.” He stood up and Sophie stood too. He held out his hand. “Till next time then?”

Sophie took his hand and shook it. “Till next time.” She wanted so much to hug him and to be hugged, but the couple just looked awkwardly at one another, then they loosed hands.

Angus slapped his thigh. “Come on, Bonnie,” and he and Bonnie set off up the lane towards the pub.

Sophie and Harvey watched them go. She felt deflated. Perhaps it was being on her own again. Still, she had a whole house and garden to tidy up. She leant over to gather up the plates and cutlery, and as she did so, Harvey let out a little whimper. She put on her mock Scottish accent. “Aye laddie, I’ll miss them too.”

Back in the kitchen, Sophie washed the plates, stacked them on the drainer, and wondered what to tackle next. *I really ought to try and meet the neighbours*, she thought to herself, and she decided that evening she would go to the pub. What better way to meet the locals than that? Better still, she would take something with her. What could she take? She had flour, eggs, sugar, and butter. *Cupcakes!* Yes, she’d make cupcakes. A simple recipe, people can take one if they want one, and easier to manage than a whole cake that you have to slice. But what kind of cupcakes to make? She didn’t have any vanilla essence or icing sugar to decorate them, and plain cupcakes would be a bit boring.

Sophie remembered the bottles she’d seen in the pantry, and went inside to take a better look. The pantry was dark, and as she felt with her fingers along the wall for a light switch, her hand brushed against a cord that dangled from the ceiling. She pulled the cord, illuminating the pantry in a warm glow from the ceiling bulb.

The pantry itself was cool, and Sophie took the three steps down, her bare feet on the cold, tiled floor. The shelves that lined the walls were empty, apart from a few bottles. Sophie leant in for a closer look.

Goslings dark rum, and Grand Marnier. Perfect! There was also a Scotch whisky called Glen Maddoch. Seeing the whisky made her think of Angus, and Sophie made a mental note to remember to ask him about it — if she ever saw him again.

There was so much she wanted to ask Angus, such as what he did for a living, and how he could take time off to travel virtually the entire length of Great Britain. She laughed when she realised that, although she'd given him her surname, he'd not divulged his, and she played over in her mind their last conversation together. He'd said, *Till next time*. Did that mean he was hoping to see her again? It certainly sounded like it. Or perhaps he was being polite. Had he gone shopping and cooked brunch because he felt sorry for her? But then, hadn't she felt his eyes all over her, or had she imagined that too? It felt too soon to get romantically involved with anyone, and she couldn't believe over a month had passed since she'd left her flat, her job, and her London life. The lingering pain came less from Martin's unfaithfulness — sleazebag though he was — it was Clare she couldn't forgive. What she had done was unforgivable.

It felt good to get back into the now familiar rhythm of baking; gently folding the ingredients in a bowl, adding a dash of rum, greasing a cupcake pan with butter, filling the pans with the thick cake batter, and putting the tray in the gas oven. While the cakes were baking, Sophie warmed the orange liqueur on the hob.

When the cakes were golden brown, she popped them out onto a rack, then poured the hot liqueur over each cake, letting it sink into the

sponge. She then sprinkled a little of the granulated sugar on top of each cake, which would stick to the liquor and give each cake a little crunch.

As they cooled, Sophie stood back from her alcoholic creations. It was the best she could do with the ingredients she had at hand, yet it seemed appropriate to take rum and orange liqueur cakes to a pub, especially a pub in Cornwall. She dubbed them, *Smuggler's Cupcakes*, although she doubted that hardened seventeenth Century smugglers would be sitting around eating cupcakes! Come six p.m. she would head down to The Barnacle with her tray and say hello. Right now, however, there was quite a bit of cleaning to do, not to mention some clothes to wash. Thankfully, the cottage was equipped with a washer-dryer.

She looked down to find Harvey staring at her and the counter top. She glanced over at Harvey's still full bowl of Woofplan. "Sorry mate. No cake for you. Angus said so. You'd better get used to it!"

The dog let out an indignant snort.



# *Smuggler's Cupcakes*

Sophie's rum and orange liqueur-laced cupcakes. Ideal for breaking the ice with new people, especially if they are Cornish pirates.

## **Ingredients (makes at least 12!)**

- 240g butter, softened
- 240g caster sugar (plus extra for the topping)
- 2 large eggs
- 240g self-raising flour
- Splash of milk
- Goslings rum
- Grand Marnier

## **Step 1**

Preheat a fan oven to 180°C and prepare the cupcake trays.

## **Step 2**

In a bowl, cream together the butter and the sugar, before adding the beaten eggs slowly and combining until smooth.

## **Step 3**

Slowly sift in the flour, and fold in gently until the mixture is smooth

## **Step 4**

Add the rum to the batter. If the mixture is too thick, stir in a splash of milk, before spooning it into the prepared cupcake trays and baking for 14 minutes.

## **Step 5**

Warm the Grand Marnier in a pan, and spoon this on top of the cupcakes as they cool. Sprinkle sugar over the top to add some crunch.

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“I won’t be long,” Sophie said to Harvey. “Stay here and be a good dog,” however, Harvey didn’t even turn his head to look at her; all four paws were pointing skyward and he was snoring, deeply.

Balancing the tray of cupcakes in one hand, Sophie opened the front door with the other, and there, on the doorstep, sat a pair of shiny, bright-blue wellies. She glanced up and down the lane, but it was empty. Taking a closer look at the boots she noticed, tucked into one of them, a piece of rolled up paper. Sophie backed into the living room, balanced the tray of cupcakes on an armchair, returned to the boots, and pulled out the note. *I forgot to give you these. Hope they fit like the glass slipper!* Sophie smiled, picked up the boots and moved them to the inside of the door, then turned to pick up the tray of cupcakes. “Harvey!” The dog, his nose just inches from the tray, jumped back. Sophie grabbed the tray and laughed. “Nice try, bozo!” Had the mutt really been asleep or just pretending? “*Your* food’s in the kitchen. Yummy!” Sophie left the dejected dog behind and headed for the pub.

There were only a few cars in the car park, and in the twilight, Sophie stood outside The Barnacle and took a deep breath. *Here goes*, she thought, and backed through the heavy, wooden front door.

The Barnacle was far from the busy, bustling pub she had expected. The interior was tired: the carpet was threadbare and the decor looked like it hadn’t had a makeover for years. In places, the stained wallpaper was peeling or missing. The only redeeming feature were some stunning

looking paintings on the walls; colourful, abstract art, that looked completely out of place.

Not only did the pub look tired, it was practically dead. Two men, one much older than the other, sat at a table against one wall, playing cards. Sophie heard the older man say, “Fifteen two, fifteen four, and a pair’s six.”

A mature couple, presumably husband and wife, sat at a table near the bar with their drinks; a pint of ale and a glass of white wine. The wife was quite petite, beautifully made-up, wearing a plain blouse and skirt, her dyed-blond hair in a bob. She wore expensive-looking gold bracelets and a delicate gold watch. The husband was stockily built and looked like he had lived a good life. His short blond hair, too, looked dyed and was wispy, beginning to thin. He wore a starched white shirt, open at the collar, and he also donned an expensive-looking watch. They both appeared to be staring into space, not talking to each other.

Behind the bar was a lone woman who looked to be in her mid to late fifties, leaning, elbows on the counter, swiping on her phone. She was quite striking looking, even without any make-up, and had long, thick, black hair tied in a loose ponytail at the base of her neck, and large, gold hoop earrings. She wore a billowing red blouse, and she reminded Sophie of a gypsy or a pirate.

As Sophie walked towards the bar, the patrons turned and looked at her. The woman behind the bar put down her phone and stood up, smiling. “What’s a pretty thing like you doing in a place like this?”

Sophie placed her tray of cakes on the bar, and the woman, presumably the landlady, narrowed her eyes, suspiciously. Perhaps she thought Sophie was here to pedal her wares?

Sophie swallowed. “Hi. I inherited... I mean...I’m the new owner of *La Canelé* — the cottage at the end of the row. My name’s Sophie.”

“Gwen’s place?”

Sophie shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. “Yes, um, Gwen — she died recently. I’m sorry.”

The woman at the table piped up. “Did you say Gwen’s passed away?”

“Yes, a couple of weeks ago.”

The landlady addressed the man sitting with his wife. “We haven’t seen her here for, God, how many years, Rob?”

The man scratched his chin. “Oh, I expect it’s been, blimey, fifteen years, perhaps more?”

The younger man stopped playing cards and eyed Sophie with interest. “Never met her.”

The landlady turned back to Sophie. “She’s not been here for a long time. I didn’t know her well. I’d only just taken on the pub back then.”

The woman at the table’s face fell. “Such a sad story. She kept herself to herself after her son died. Did you know her?”

“Yes, she was a friend,” replied Sophie.

The woman ran her finger around the rim of her wine glass. “Back in the day, when her son — Colin, I think his name was — was little, she would hold these tea parties in her garden and the whole village was invited. Plates piled high with all kinds of yummy treats. All home-made.”

“Yes. She was a great baker.” Sophie looked down at the tray of cupcakes she’d placed on the bar. “I brought these in memory of her.”

The landlady smiled and held out a hand. “How kind. I’m Maggie, I own The Barnacle.”

The young man scoffed. “Crusty Barnacle!”

Sophie shook the landlady’s hand and returned the smile. “Sophie.”

Maggie nodded towards the young man. “And that’s my tosser of a son, Tom.”

Tom beamed at Sophie by way of a greeting. He had twisted in his chair and sat with his broad back leaning against the wall.

Maggie turned to the couple at the table. “This is Robert and Cynthia. They run Tidelines, the little shop on the quay.”

Cynthia smiled. “Call us Rob ’n’ Cyn.”

“And that’s Terry who...” Maggie frowned. “Actually, Terry, what *do* you do?”

Terry was bald, apart from a few wisps of grey hair above his ears. He had a long, bushy, grey beard, and Sophie noticed he was wearing a single gold stud earring in his left ear. He winked and gave a gap-toothed grin. “Spend all my days pining after you, Mags!”

Maggie ignored him and turned back to Sophie, “And that’s pretty much us. The other two cottages between us and you are holiday lets. Not sure if anyone’s in them right now, but they get booked out later in the season. Then there’s a few bigger houses and farms dotted around the place, but we don’t see much of the owners. Most of the houses in these parts are second homes. Bloody city folk, driving up the house

prices so they can have a slice of the country.” Maggie stopped. “Oh, no offence meant.”

Sophie dropped her eyes. “Well, yes, I am from London, but I don’t own another house. This is all I have.”

Maggie’s face softened. “Well, you’re very welcome here, love. I’m sorry, it’s just that, well, the hoity toity in these parts give us locals a bit of a wide berth.”

Rob nodded in agreement, raising his eyebrows, and rolling his eyes. Clearly he didn’t think much of the neighbours, but he smiled, regardless. “Nice to meet you. Sandra was it?”

“Sophie.”

He looked puzzled. “Sofa?” He raised his eyebrows. “Sofa so good!” Rob laughed at his own joke.

Cynthia gave her husband a withering look and glared at him. “Her name’s Sophie, you bloody idiot!” She turned to Sophie. “Sorry love, he’s as deaf as a post without his hearing aid in.”

Rob looked a bit taken aback and he mumbled down into his pint. “Sophie. Lovely name.”

“Can I get you a drink, love?” asked Maggie, “On the house.”

“Oh yes. Please.” Sophie glanced at Cynthia’s wine. “What wines do you have?”

Maggie raised her eyebrows. “Red or white?”

“Oh, white. What do you have?”

“No, that’s your choice. I mean red wine or white wine. We’ve got one of each. We don’t go in for a lot of that fancy stuff around here. It’s plonk and it’s only Cyn that drinks the stuff. Thank God you didn’t ask for red!”

Maggie laughed as she reached under the counter and took out a bottle. “Ice?”

“No! I mean, no thank you!” Sophie’s eyes grew wide as Maggie poured a glass. The wine didn’t even appear to be chilled and she wondered if she should have said yes to the ice, after all. She thanked Maggie and took a sip. It was all she could do to not pucker her lips. Whatever it was, it tasted like warm, weak vinegar. Sophie forced a smile and put the glass back down on the bar, wondering how she could dispose of the rest of it.

With everyone’s eyes on her, Sophie took a deep breath and held up the tray of cupcakes. “Let’s have a toast to Gwen?” She offered a cake to Maggie, who took one. She then walked to the two tables and each person took a cake. At Tom and Terry’s table, as Tom took a cake with one hand, she felt his other hand on her bum and she immediately spun away from him, back to the bar. She put the tray down and took a cake for herself. She held it up. “To Gwen!”

Maggie swallowed her first bite. “Bloody hell! What’s in them?”

Rob was nodding sagely, impressed with his cake. “Definitely not vanilla, eh Cyn?”

Cyn’s eyes grew wide, as she tucked into a second bite. Tom had placed the whole cake in his mouth in one go and was still chewing, cheeks bulging, while Terry was nibbling, rat-like, around the edge of his cake.

“Rum, oh, and some Grand Marnier. I drizzled some on the top.”

Maggie looked impressed. “How did you say you knew Gwen?”

“She taught me to bake.”



Cynthia greedily eyed the tray on the bar. “They’re lovely.”

“Would you like another one?”

Cynthia placed a hand on her chest and acted surprised. “Oh, well, I suppose I could manage another. It’d be rude not to. And Robert does like a good bun, don’t you Robert?”

Rob looked up. “What?”

Cynthia leant towards him. “You like your buns!”

Rob’s face lit up. “Ooh, yes I do, yes I do.”

Sophie took the tray around a second time. Cyn and Rob both took a second cake. At Terry and Tom’s table, Sophie was careful not to get too close. Terry was still nibbling his first cake, but Tom, grinning at her, took another two, putting them on the table in front of him.

Sophie returned to the bar and took a seat. She automatically picked up her glass then remembered what it tasted like, but, as everyone was looking at her, she felt obliged to take another sip.

Maggie looked serious and sighed. “Drink it while you can.”

“How come?”

“This’ll be our last season. Tourists don’t come down here anymore, and if they do, they just come to look at the view, then turn around without spending. The big pubs up on the main road get all the trade. I think I’m finished.” She rolled her eyes and nodded at her patrons with a smirk. “And I’m not sure I can cope with seeing this lot’s miserable faces night after night. Seriously though, the brewery wants to close the pub down because there’s no trade. They want to sell it off. They won’t spend anything on it as it’d be a money pit, but the bastards can’t get rid

of me as I have a lease on the place.” She sighed. “I’d have probably left sooner but it’s a roof over mine and Tom’s heads.”

Terry shuffled in his seat, suddenly alert. “You can’t close the pub!”

Maggie put her hands on her hips. “Yeah, well, you tell me how we can afford to keep it open, smartypants?”

Terry didn’t know what to say, looked down, and there was an awkward silence. Hearing his partner’s chair scrape, he looked up to watch Tom sidle up next to Sophie. “Oi! We were in the middle of a game!”

“Hold on to your hat, Salty, I’ll be back in a mo. Gotta welcome the new neighbour haven’t I?” Tom smelled of booze, and Sophie caught a faint whiff of something else she couldn’t place. He leant in towards Sophie and grinned. “I’m Tom.”

Sophie forced a smile in return.

Despite a small beer belly, Tom was physically fit, and broad shouldered. He had curly, sun-bleached hair, hazel eyes, a ruddy complexion, and his skin was weathered and brown. His hands were large, and his fingernails, Sophie noticed, were dirty.

He leant against the bar. “I’d like to take you out.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“My treat!”

Sophie stuttered. “Oh, that’s nice of you but I’m not looking for...you know. I’m not...”

Tom grinned. “Not a date. On my boat!”

Sophie turned to Maggie, bit her lip and raised her eyebrows, appealing for help.

Maggie sighed. “On the *Baby Barnacle*. It’s Tom’s fishing boat. He runs mackerel trips from the quay.”

Sophie relaxed then immediately tensed up again. “Oh!” She began desperately trying to think of a way out of it. “But I can’t swim!” As soon as it was out of her mouth she realised how stupid she sounded.

Tom frowned, questioningly.

Maggie sniggered. “She might be a bit of a rust bucket, but she’ll stay afloat.”

Sophie laughed, going along with it, realising it sounded as if she’d made a joke.

Tom frowned but then softened. “Tomorrow afternoon then. Be on the dock at 2pm. It’ll be high water. You’ll love it.”

Sophie glanced nervously around the room, and then at Tom. “I’m sure I will.”

# 21

Sophie spent the following morning cleaning the cottage, and assessing any repairs and renovations that would need to be made. She still hadn't made up her mind about what to do; whether to stay in Tremellen and find a job, or sell the place and move back to London. With no transport, however, she wondered what kind of a job she might be able to do in a remote Cornish village. She calculated that, if she was careful, she had enough funds in the bank to live on for a few months, and still pay for some work to be done on the property.

On top of the cottage and her future financial worries, there was Harvey — an added complication in her life. She'd grown fond of the dog, and looking down at the stodgy pet, she worried about him. He hadn't eaten for two days, and the Woofplan remained untouched. *Perhaps I should give in and give him some cake?*

When early afternoon arrived, Sophie donned her new wellies, let Harvey out for a quick pee on his drainpipe, then shut him in the cottage. It was a slightly overcast day and she was relieved to see the silver sea appeared to be calm. Sophie walked the short distance along the lane to where the *Baby Barnacle* was bobbing, tied up against the quay opposite the pub; its inboard diesel engine gently throbbing. The boat had a metal hull with a wooden gunnel and a wooden wheelhouse at the front. It looked like it had once been painted bright blue, yellow, and white, but years in the Cornish sun had peeled and bleached the paint such that, to Sophie, it looked shabby chic.

Sophie heard banging and bumping coming from inside the wheelhouse. “Hello?”

Tom emerged, wiping his oily hands on a rag. His face lit up when he saw Sophie, and he threw the rag back into the wheelhouse before holding out a hand. “Come aboard!”

Sophie walked down a few steps and onto the boat, taking his greasy hand and stepping down onto the deck. She noticed two fishing rods standing in metal rod holders at the stern. “We’re actually going to catch fish?”

“That’s the plan! I hope you’ve got sea legs.” As he said the word *legs* he glanced down at Sophie’s, wrapped in her skin-tight jeans. He swallowed, hard.

Sophie was alone on the deck, and there was no sign of anyone else in the carpark or on the quay. “So just us then?”

Tom sighed and his face fell. “Yep. We used to be sold out all summer — families, kids, parties — everyone loved a fishing trip. But these days, folks head off to Benidorm or Bali, or if they do come to Cornwall they want amusement parks or The Eden Project. Most of the visitors we do see are older couples, and they’re more interested in cream teas than fishing; and besides, what can visitors do with the fish they catch unless they’re self catering?” He paused and shrugged. “If mum decides to shut the pub then I’ll probably have to give up the boat. Fishing is all I know.” He then hopped up the steps, quickly unwhipped two ropes from pilings — one at the stern, tossing the rope onto the deck, and then one at the bow which he held onto as he reboarded the boat, pushing it away from

the harbour wall with ease. He coiled the ropes and stowed them safely.

“Ready?”

Sophie nodded.

Tom entered the wheelhouse, clicked the engine into gear, and the boat slowly began to chug forward. Tom steered the vessel so that it was pointing straight out to sea, and they headed off, riding over the gentle swell, with just a couple of seagulls for company — hovering close by the boat in search of any tasty morsels that might get tossed their way.

Sophie stood, holding on to a rail, and peered into the wheelhouse. As Tom took the boat straight out to sea, he kept looking at a small screen, presumably a depth sounder or fish finder.

Sophie closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of being rocked to sleep. After what felt like only a few minutes, she opened her eyes at the sound of the engine clicking into neutral, before it was turned off. Immediately, she was struck by the silence. There was little to no wind, and the *Baby Barnacle* simply rose and fell gently with the swell. She looked back and could see Tremellen nestled in its tiny bay between the rocks, with the Cornish coastline — bathed in the early June sunshine that was beginning to break through the clouds — spreading away for miles in each direction. It was breathtakingly beautiful, however, she was starting to feel a little queasy.

Tom lifted out one of the rods from its holder. He unwrapped a lead weight from the handle of the reel and swung the dangling gear over the side of the boat. “Have you ever fished before?”

She swallowed hard to stave off the rising feeling of nausea. “No.”

“Right. So, as you can see there are three hooks above the weight with feathers on them.” The feathers glinted in the sunshine — green, yellow, and red. “You hold the rod with the reel on top, like this. This lever lets the line down. I’ll show you.” Tom clicked a small lever on the reel and the weight and line dropped into the water. “Keep your thumb on the spool to control the speed as it goes down. You mustn’t let it spin out of control. Then, when the weight hits the bottom, the line will go slack. Click the switch and wind up about ten turns, then jerk the rod up and down like this.” Tom lifted the rod hard and let it drop, then repeated it. The tip of the rod jiggled. “Ha! Got something already. Here you go!”

He handed the rod to Sophie who tucked it under her arm and began to wind the reel. She could feel a gentle tugging as she wound in.

“Stop reeling and lift it out.”

Sophie lifted out the gear and swung it onto the deck, eager to see what they’d caught.

Sophie’s eyes grew wide, and she smiled from ear-to-ear, as a small brown fish flopped around on the deck. “What is it?”

“It’s a small pout. We don’t want those, and this one’s too small to eat.” Tom unhooked the fish and tossed it back overboard. “Right, your turn.”

Sophie swung the line back over the rail. She flicked the switch on the reel and, keeping her thumb on the spool, began to let the line out, but after only a couple of seconds the line had gone completely slack. She frowned. “The line’s not going out. I must’ve hit the bottom already.”

Tom looked over the gunnel of the boat.

“Reel in, you’ve got mackerel on the line!”

Sophie began to wind in the slack line, then all of a sudden the rod tip pulled down hard and began bouncing and knocking. She squealed with delight as the rod jerked, and she wound in the fish, before lifting and swinging three plump, shiny, iridescent fish onto the deck. They had spectacular markings; silver bellies, and the most gorgeous metallic shades of green and blue, with black stripes along the back. Tom quickly unhooked the wriggling fish, pulled over a bucket, and dropped them in.

Sophie was thrilled. She'd caught her first ever fish. "Can I hold one?"

Tom grinned "Sure!" He pulled out one of the fish and handed it to Sophie.

As Sophie stood marvelling at the fish, it struggled to get free of her hands. Rather than letting it go, however, she squeezed it tight, releasing a squirt of brown poo that splattered her face and into her mouth. She dropped the fish, groaning as she tasted the salty, gritty, rotting, fish poo. "Eurgh!" She hung over the edge of the rail and spat, but it was too late, she could feel the bile rising and she threw up, coughing.

She felt a hand on her shoulder, and Tom held out a bottle of water. "I'm so sorry."

Sophie took the water, swilled, and spat it out.

Tom looked concerned. "I should have warned you. They can do that sometimes."

Sophie stood back up and composed herself. She actually felt much better after being sick and took a large gulp of the water and slammed the bottle back into Tom's chest. "Come on! We have more fish to catch!"



Tom looked relieved, breathed a sigh of relief, and he broke into a big smile. “Want to get a big one?”

“Hell yes!”

Tom stared at Sophie, his gaze lingering like a love-struck puppy, before he blushed, shook his head, and entered the wheelhouse.

After manoeuvring the boat to a new location, Tom cut the engine. “We’re over some really rocky ground here. Just do as you did before. Let the gear go all the way down to the bottom. It’s very snaggy, so as soon as the line goes slack, meaning your weight has hit the bottom, quickly wind up a few turns before jiggling the feathers.” Sophie did what she was asked. She let the line down, felt the weight hit the bottom with a clunk, then she wound up a few turns and began to lift the rod up and down, working the feathers to attract a fish.

“What are we after?”

“Hopefully a pollack. They’re good eating and fight hard.”

Sophie lowered the rod and then tried lifting it, but this time it was stuck hard. She pulled but it was no use. She groaned in dismay. “I’ve got snagged.”

“Bugger. Looks like you have. Okay, give me the rod and I’ll see if I can free it.”

Sophie was just about to pass the rod to Tom when there was an almighty yank down and the rod tip bent almost down to the water. Line spilled off the reel.

“Shit! It’s not the bottom, it’s a fish!”

Sophie struggled to hold onto the rod as more line stripped off the reel. She let out a little yelp. “I can’t hold it. It’s too heavy.”

“I’m not bloody touching it! It’s your fish! Okay, so when it stops pulling, lift the rod up, and then wind as you lower it. It’s called pumping the fish. Whatever you do, don’t let the line go slack. Keep a tight line on it the whole time. That’s it.”

Sophie lifted the rod and, slowly, the fish came up with it. Then she wound in as she lowered it, getting some line back onto the reel. The rod tip was knocking heavily.

“I don’t think it’s a pollack.”

“What is it?”

“I think I know, but go gently. No rush. Bring it in slowly.”

Sophie pulled the rod up and wound down. Every so often the fish would take a bit of line, but as it got higher in the water it got slightly easier. The fish was so heavy, it was like lifting up a sack of potatoes, and her arms were beginning to ache. Tom was looking intently down into the water. Eventually they could both see something with a yellowish tint coming up through the depths.

Tom let go of the railing and dashed to the stern. “I’ll grab the net! Keep it coming!”

The fish was nearly at the surface and Sophie’s eyes were wide with awe. “It’s huge! What is it?”

Tom slid the net into the water. “Don’t lift it out. Just walk backwards.”

Sophie did as she was asked.

Tom lunged, lifted, and hand-over-hand, pulled the pole of the net towards him before lifting the fish onto the deck. “Bloody hell!” He

turned to Sophie who whooped, and they high-fived. “You’ve just caught a double-figure cod!”

# 22

It was the biggest fish Sophie had ever seen, with an enormous head and huge eyes and mouth. Its upper body was creamy yellow-green with dark green spots, a brighter cream lateral line ran along its length, and its belly was white. Sophie stood on the deck looking down at the fish. “Is that good?”

“Good? It’s flippin’ amazing! I reckon it’s gotta be close to fifteen pounds. I’ll tell you what. I’ll fillet it, and how about we celebrate by serving everyone fish and chips in the pub tonight?”

“Could I try?”

“What?”

“Filleting the fish.”

“Sure. Okay. Let’s do it now before we head in. But before we do, we need to weigh it and take a photo.”

Tom showed Sophie how to pick up and hold the fish, before grabbing his phone from the wheelhouse and taking photos of Sophie with her monster catch. He then weighed the fish, before laying it on the filleting table. “Fourteen pounds, ten ounces. A cracker!”

Afterwards, he took a bucket with a rope tied to the handle, dropped it over the side, and filled it with fresh sea water. He took a filleting knife from its holder and gave it a quick sharpen on a stone, before handing the knife to Sophie. Tom carefully showed Sophie where to make the cuts behind the head and on the tail, then along the spine, and how to use long cuts, sliding the blade carefully along the bones.

Once the two large fillets were off, Tom put the carcass in a separate bucket, and then demonstrated how to shimmy off the skin using the flat of the knife. He put the clean fillets into the bucket of fresh saltwater, before showing Sophie how to gut and clean the mackerel. When she was finished, Sophie was splattered with fish guts, blood, and scales.

As they set off for home, Sophie couldn't believe how her life had changed since leaving London, and she came to the realisation that, for the first time in weeks, she felt happy. She stood at the stern of the boat, watching the bubbling churn of the wake, letting the gentle breeze blow through her hair, and observing the seagulls keeping pace with the boat — rising and criss-crossing in the air just feet above her head. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath of the fresh sea air, then went into the wheelhouse and rested her hand on Tom's shoulder. "You were right. I loved every minute of it."

As Sophie climbed the steps back onto the quay, she felt decidedly dizzy. She was utterly filthy and smelled dreadful, but as she looked down at her slimy hands and stained clothes, she giggled to herself. *If only Clare could see me now!* Sophie took a sharp intake of breath, but it was too late to reel the thought back in. The pain returned, but instead of being the sharp, knife-twister of the past, it felt more dull, as if somehow the events of the past weeks were acting like protective armour; or perhaps the adage was simply true — that time heals all wounds. Either way she felt relieved and grateful that the memory no longer hurt as much as it did.

Sophie wiped her hands on her jeans and looked up to see the woman with the small, white shih tzu staring at her in disgust. The woman tutted, shook her head, and continued walking up the lane.

Tom, who had tied off the boat, sidled up to Sophie. “Oh, don’t worry about her. That’s Claudia, she has a pickle so far up her arse she can taste vinegar. She’s sniffy with everyone.”

Sophie smiled, nothing was going to ruin her day. “Thanks Tom. I’ll see you at the pub later for dinner. I can’t wait!”

She decided that Tom was alright once you got to know him. Who knew that within two days she’d meet *two* eligible bachelors.

Tom watched Sophie walk up the lane to her house, and sighed, before heading back down the steps to begin cleaning up the boat.

That evening, Sophie sat at the bar of *The Barnacle*, this time with Harvey sitting at her feet. When she had returned home, the Woofplan had all gone, and she decided that, as a reward, he deserved a visit to the pub, too. The locals — apart from Tom, who was in the kitchen — were all sitting in the same places they had been the previous night. On seeing Harvey, they’d all commented on what a lovely dog he was, and he happily worked the room, visiting each one for a fuss, before settling back down at the feet of his owner.

Maggie wiped her hands on a tea towel. “What can I get you? Same as last night?”

Sophie couldn’t face another glass of the awful wine. “Do you make any cocktails? A margarita, perhaps?”

Terry burst out laughing, began to choke, and ale spewed out of his nose.

Maggie smiled at Sophie, then looked scornfully at Terry. “Well, if you don’t want red or white, you can have Cornish ale or scrumpy cider.”

Sophie had tried cider in pubs in London and she liked the cold, sweet, fizzy, apple drink.

“Cider please. A pint. I’m gasping!”

Maggie raised her eyebrows in surprise, then filled a pint glass with amber liquid directly from a large, oak barrel. She set it on the bar. “Here you go.”

Sophie went to reach for her purse but Maggie held up her hand. “All the locals have a tab. You can settle up whenever you like.”

“Thank you.” Sophie took a long sup of her pint and it tasted amazing. It wasn’t fizzy, but like a delicious, flat, apple juice. It didn’t taste strong at all, just wonderfully refreshing.

Rob, Cyn, Terry, and Maggie, all watched as Sophie continued to quench her thirst by gulping down half the pint in one go. She placed the pint glass back on the bar and wiped her lips. “Yummy!”

The other four patrons all cheered.

Maggie laughed. “You’re one of us now — a proper Cornish lass!”

Tom had relished telling everyone about Sophie’s fish, and phoned around to arrange the supper. Maggie had laid an extra table for herself and Sophie. The three tables were adorned with salt, vinegar, and ketchup, and Maggie supplied the six of them with cutlery and paper napkins.

Tom backed out of the kitchen carrying the first two plates, piled high with a large fillet of deep-fried, scrumpy-battered cod, chips, and mushy peas.

Maggie, standing at the bar, brought her friends to attention. “Right! Here we go everyone!”

As Tom took the first two plates of food to Robert and Cynthia, Sophie, sitting at the bar squinted at Maggie. “*Shame* again!”

“You sure love? You’ve had two pints of scrumpy already.”

“*Poshitive.*”

Maggie frowned, however, she poured Sophie another pint and set it on the bar. Sophie took a large gulp, then stood up from her bar stool, swayed, and made her wobbly way to the empty table.

Cynthia turned to her husband. “It’s not that strong is it, the cider?”

Rob widened his eyes and leant back a little in his chair. “You gotta be kidding. They call that stuff *The Widow Maker*. It’s 9.3%!”

Cynthia’s eyes nearly popped out of her head as she eyed Sophie’s pint glass, jealously. “Oh!”

Tom laid down the last plate of food at his own place setting, and before he sat down, raised up his beer glass. “To Sophie!”

“To Sophie!” they all cheered, and they began tucking into the delicious, crispy feast.

As they sat, sated from the meal, Sophie was draining her third pint of scrumpy cider. She looked around at everyone, and tapped the side of her nose with her finger, conspiratorially. “Tom’sh a liar!”

The others looked at her, mouths open.



“He said he only knowsh ’ow to catch fish. But I know shomething! He knowsh ‘ow to cook it too!” She burst out laughing.

The others laughed too.

Rob wiggled his eyebrows and winked at his wife. “Tell us again how big it was Sophie? Cynthia here likes a big one, don't you Cyn?”

“It wash thish big!” Sophie flung her arms out wide. “Weeeeeeee!” As she did so she lost her balance, fell off her chair, landing sideways on the floor.

Harvey waddled over to her, and looked her in the eye.

Sophie yawned. “Helloooo Harvey! Will you marry me?”

Maggie snorted. “I think it’s time to get someone home.”

“Feck, this dog is heavy,” moaned a rather drunk Terry, as he copied Tom’s example, and carried Harvey along the lane, a few steps behind his friend.

Sophie was fast asleep and slung over Tom’s shoulder. “Just put him on the ground — he can walk for himself, you daft bugger.”

When they arrived at Sophie’s cottage, Terry put Harvey on the ground and rubbed his lower back.

“Right, now unlock the door,” commanded Tom.

Terry moaned. “Don’t feel right going through a lady’s handbag?”

Tom muttered. “For feck’s sake, hurry up. Just find the key. I swear she’s getting heavier. What d’you wanna do? Break it down?”

Terry grumbled in protest, but rooted around in Sophie's bag as instructed. Once he was inside, he turned on the light and surveyed the

state of Sophie's cottage. "This place looks like it could do with some work. Look at it."

Tom bent down to duck himself and Sophie under the door frame. "I can take it from here." Harvey trotted in behind them.

Sophie woke up. "Ooooh! I'm home. And flying!"

Tom stood Sophie on her feet, her arms wrapped around his neck. She giggled. "I bloody love you, Tom."

Tom turned to Terry and winked. "I said, I can take it from here."

Terry gave Tom a knowing look and nodded. "Oh, right! I'll leave you love birds to it then."

Sophie tried to focus on the old man. "Bye Terrywerry!"

Terry left the cottage, closing the door behind him.

Tom continued to prop Sophie up. "Right, let's get you upstairs."

Sophie grinned into Tom's face. "Ooh, is that a properstishun? You naughty boy!"

Tom laughed, supporting Sophie from behind, as they climbed the stairs single file. Sophie staggered all the way to her bedroom, before collapsing on the bed face down, and Tom followed her in.

He looked down at her, then he carefully untied her laces and slipped off her trainers, then her socks — placing them on the floor next to the bed. He slowly unzipped her dress and pulled it down over her shoulders, then gently lifting her, he slipped it down over her slender body and legs. He laid the dress on the bedroom chair and turned back to the bed, where Sophie lay in her bra and knickers. He slowly traced the contours of her body with his eyes, trying to memorise every detail. He felt himself stir and put his hand to his crotch, however, feeling a

little guilty, he swallowed hard, before placing a pillow under Sophie's head and wrapping the covers back over her. "Goodnight, Sophie." He left Sophie's bedroom, turning out the light on the way.

Tom sat on the quay with his back to a piling, staring out into the blackness. He could hear the *Baby Barnacle* rocking gently on its mooring, and the water lapping up against the harbour wall. He finished his second cigarette, stubbed it out, and flicked it expertly into a metal rubbish bin.

Seeing Tom enter the bar, Maggie put her hands on her hips. "You've been a while? Salty came back ages ago."

Tom just shrugged, grinned, and winked. "I can't help it if the ladies find me irresistible."

The others looked at him in surprise but Maggie simply shook her head.

# 23

Sophie groaned and tried to open her eyes. They were glued shut by her brain in a desperate attempt to keep the light from penetrating its throbbing recesses. *What the heck was in that stuff? How did I get into bed?* She probed her memory and remembered the pub; the fish-and-chips; but how did she get home? Sophie forced her eyes open and groped for her phone on the bedside table to check the time. It wasn't there. Reluctantly, she swung her legs over the side of the bed. She desperately needed to pee and she was gasping for some water. *Weird*, she thought to herself, as she looked down at her body. She was still wearing her bra and knickers, and didn't remember getting undressed — and besides, she normally went to bed naked.

Sophie wobbled to the bathroom and thumped down onto the toilet. Her head throbbed, and she reached over into the bathroom drawer, searching for some pain killers. She desperately wracked her brain, trying to remember what had happened last night. The last thing she could remember was sitting at the table and talking about the big fish. *Urgh!* Right now, the very thought of fish made her want to vomit.

Sophie gingerly made her way down into the living room, and found Harvey trotting anxiously backwards and forwards, and snorting by the front door. With eyes half-closed, she yawned and opened the door for the dog. "Morning pooch." Harvey dashed — as well as a fat French bulldog can — to his drainpipe to relieve himself, while Sophie leant against the door jamb.

“Afternoon!” called out Rob, winking, as he and Cyn walked past.

Sophie managed a little wave in return. *Afternoon?*

Rob continued to stare at Sophie, turning his head to look over his shoulder. Cynthia smacked his arm, and he turned back to concentrate on where he was going.

Sophie yawned and a couple, with their two young boys, emerged from a neighbouring cottage. Sophie tried to be neighbourly. “Morning!”

The family stared, open-mouthed in return. The mother pushed past her dumbstruck husband to cover the eyes of her two boys, and rushed them forward, turning to snap at her husband, who was glued to the pavement. "Frank!" Her shrill voice broke his trance, and he ran to catch up as the whole family followed Rob and Cyn, up the lane.

Sophie looked after them, puzzled, then down to Harvey, who sat on the doorstep staring up at her — and then she realised she was standing in only her bra and knickers.

It was getting on for one o'clock in the afternoon, and Sophie stood in her kitchen with a steaming cup of black coffee; her headache reduced to a distant throb thanks to the miracle of paracetamol. Her stomach grumbled and she rooted around in the cupboards to find something to eat, but she and Harvey had made their way through the supplies Angus had brought over. She would have to go shopping.

She plunged the depths of her handbag to find Dave's card, and retrieving her phone from the bag's side pocket, she tapped in the number written on the card. After a few rings she got through to Dave.

“Dave’s taxis at your service — unless you’re from the inland revenue, in which case, this is Elvis.” Dave laughed down the phone.

“Hi. I need a taxi please, um...now, if that’s convenient?”

“Oh hello! I recognise your voice. You’re the snazzy chick I dropped off at the Crusty Barnacle?”

*Who, in the twenty-first century, uses the word snazzy?* “Yes, that’s me.”

“On my way. See you in fifteen, or maybe ten.”

“Thanks – outside the pub.” She wasn’t ready for Dave to know exactly where she lived.

Dave’s Ford Escort careened up the lanes. “So where to, babe?”

Sophie raised her eyebrows and the pitch of her voice. “Babe?”

Dave ignored her. “How about The Lizard or Mousehole? There’s the Seal Sanctuary or Flambards?”

Sophie huffed. “Actually, just the shop in St. Bunyan please.”

“Oh, right then.” He sounded a little disappointed. “Londis it is.” After a minute or so of silence, he spoke up again. “So, I hear you had a groovy night last night?”

“You what?”

“A groovy night. Word travels fast in these parts. Tom’s a good lad and he deserves a bit of fun. So...you and him an item then?”

Sophie was stunned into silence. Bits of her memory came floating back. Being carried. Tom’s strong arms. *Oh, God.* She had the vague memory that she’d told Tom she loved him and asked someone to marry her! Then what had happened? She couldn’t remember all the details, but it was obvious she hadn’t been in a fit enough state to undress. *Oh,*

*no!* She and Tom must have ended up in bed together. Sophie was mortified and her mind reeled. Had they used contraception? How stupid could she be? And Tom — okay, so he wasn't bad looking, but he wasn't really her type. And how could he take advantage of her like that? *I guess some guys just can't help themselves.*

“Sorry babe, I didn't mean to pry.”

Sophie snapped. “I'm not your babe! Just drive.”

Dave ducked his head slightly and retreated into his seat. “Got it.” He leant over and pushed a cassette, which got sucked into the car's cassette player. The smooth croons of Elvis Presley started to emanate from a speaker in the door next to her — well, at least she wouldn't have to put up with listening to Dave for the rest of the journey.

Later that afternoon, once all the groceries were stowed, and the cupboards and fridge restocked, Sophie held a large bowl in her hands and was using a silicone spatula to fold cake mix. Baking was the only way she could relax and think, and she had quite a bit of thinking to do.

She needed to find out what had happened the previous evening, but couldn't stand the thought of seeing Tom. She didn't know what she would say to him, or how to let him down, however, she would have to face the music sooner or later. She decided, instead, that she would have a quiet word with Maggie.

As Sophie sat on the wooden verandah steps of The Barnacle, waiting for the pub to open, she noticed that Tom's boat wasn't on its mooring, and was grateful that he was out of the way. She heard a bolt unlock

behind her and turned to see Maggie looking at her, sympathetically.

“Come in, love. I saw you sitting out there from upstairs.”

Sophie followed Maggie into the pub. “Can we talk?”

“Of course love, let me pop up and clean my brushes.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“No bother love, I was just finishing my painting.”

“You paint?” Sophie admired the acrylics on canvas that were strung on the old, tired walls. The colours were bold with stripes and swooshes and great contrasts between dark and light. They had a depth to them too, and each painting evoked emotions — sadness, joy, calm. “So *you* did all these?”

Maggie chuckled. “Yes, for my sins.”

“They’re stunning! Do you sell many?”

“Oh, none at all. To be honest, I’ve not tried selling them.”

“You should!”

Maggie smiled. “Grab a seat and I’ll be right back.”

Sophie took a seat at a table, and when Maggie returned, she sat down opposite her. “Now, first, before you say anything, let me apologise. I shouldn’t have let you drink that much scrumpy — it’s lethal stuff.”

Sophie snorted. “Oh, I did that all by myself.” She bit her lip. “Um...about Tom. I don’t usually do things like that, you know...”

“Look, love, I’m sorry. He shouldn’t have taken advantage of you like that. He’s got a soft spot for you, that’s for sure. I could wring his neck sometimes, that lad.”

Sophie sighed, her head dropping. “Oh.” Maggie had confirmed what she had feared. *Fuck*. She had slept with Tom.



There was a scuffling sound and Terry entered the pub, “Ello me dears! Did yer miss me, Mags?” He spotted Sophie. “Oh, hello Sophie. Your hubby about?”

“My what?”

Maggie frowned, looking as if she was about to strangle the old man. “Can it, Salty!” She glared at Terry who stopped in his tracks. “Sit down. I’ll get your pint.”

Terry meekly sat at his usual table next to the wall.

Sophie muttered. “I’d better get going,” As she stood to leave, Tom walked in.

Maggie put her hands on her hips. “Oh, look what the cat’s dragged in. You owe this young lady an apology.”

Tom’s face flushed and he looked embarrassed. He walked slowly over to Sophie, keeping a good arm’s reach away from her. “Sophie. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for anyone to believe we’d, you know, well... You see, I guess I was kinda chuffed people thought we had, you know...and so, I... I should’ve put them straight.”

“What?”

Tom held out his hands, apologetically. “I should’ve put them straight, that nothing happened.”

“You mean we didn’t?”

“God no!” Tom opened his eyes wide. “Not that I didn’t want to! I mean, look at you. You’re fecking gorgeous. You were a bit worse for wear, so I just carried you home and put you to bed.”

Terry piped up. “And I carried Harvey!”

Sophie didn't know what to say, and she stood there, both relieved and embarrassed. She decided not to mention the fact that Tom had removed nearly *all* her clothes, but thank God she hadn't slept with him! Despite letting everyone believe he'd slept with her, he'd been honourable — and that was something.

Maggie glared at Tom who chewed his lip and rocked nervously from foot to foot. “Look, let me make it up to you. I have an idea.”

# 24

Sophie pushed her garden door open with her bum, hands full with a tray of shortbread fingers and home-made lemonade. Bees and butterflies, enjoying the early July sunshine, were making their way along the borders of buddleia and lavender. The lawn had been mown, the picket fence that bordered the lane had a new lick of white paint, the shed and outhouse had been repaired, and her new friends sat at a picnic table that Tom had found on Facebook Marketplace. Sophie felt truly happy as she laid the tray on the table. “I can’t thank you enough. All of you.”

She gazed over the picket fence, over the lane, across the harbour, and out to sea, where the sun sparkled and danced on the surface; as if it was made from emeralds and diamonds, rather than water. A gentle breeze blew, and gulls whirled high on thermals overhead. “It’s wonderful isn’t it?”

Three weeks had passed since the incident in the pub, and the Tremellen locals had rallied round, helping her to tidy *La Canelé*. Terry had been amazing, steadily plodding on, working, fixing, nailing, mowing, and painting. Tom had used his truck to pick up items he had sourced online. Robert and Cynthia had turned up with plants from a garden centre and refused to accept payment for them, and now, here she was, in her own picture perfect Garden of Eden.

Sophie closed her eyes and breathed in the sea air. Smiling to herself, she began distributing glasses of lemonade to her friends — the four of whom were trying, and failing, to look inconspicuous: Terry glanced at

Tom with a smile, Tom winked at Maggie, and Rob and Cyn were grinning like Cheshire cats. Sophie, catching on, narrowed her eyes. “Okay, what’s going on?”

Tom grinned. “We’ve got a little surprise for you. I’ll be back in a jiffy.” He jumped up, bolted out of the garden gate, and jogged up the lane.

Sophie, eyebrows raised, looked from face-to-face, and Rob, smirking shamelessly, just shrugged his shoulders. Cynthia and Maggie, however, tried various methods to suppress their smiles, raising eyebrows and avoiding eye-contact; while Terry simply hummed to himself, eyes glued to the sky.

“Lovely weather isn’t it?” commented Cynthia, clearly trying to fill the loaded silence, and the four locals burst out laughing.

Sophie flapped her arms against her sides. “What? What is it? What are you up to?”

The friends looked at each other, not saying a word. The silence was broken by the sound of a car approaching, and a small, brown, old-style Mini pulled up in the lane outside the cottage garden. The handbrake squeaked, the engine turned off, and Tom unfolded himself from the small car. “Danaaaaaa! Catch!” He tossed a bunch of keys over the low fence to Sophie, who caught them.

Sophie looked at the keys in her hand, then at Tom, then at the car, then back at Tom again. “What?”

Tom placed a hand on the roof of the car. “Okay, so it’s not exactly a Ferrari, but a mate of mine in Newlyn had this banging around in his yard, and he said I could have it for free if I could get it working...and I did! Now it’s yours. No more taxis!”

Sophie's mouth dropped open. "Really?"

Tom smiled. "Yep, really!" Then his face fell and he frowned. "Oh, shit, you can drive can't you?"

"Well, yes, but I've not driven in years." Sophie welled up and stammered. "I don't know what to say... A car? You bought me a car?"

"It's just a little run-around. It should keep you going for a bit. Wanna take it for a spin?"

Sophie clenched the keys in her hand and stuttered. "Oh, I..."

"It's okay, I'll come with you. We'll take it slow."

Sophie beamed and looked around at her friends. "Okay!"

The gang all cheered and clapped, and Maggie flapped a hand towards Sophie. "Go, go, go!"

Sophie smiled and did a little jig as Tom held open the car door.

Tom, his head brushing the interior roof, squashed himself into the passenger seat; while Sophie strapped herself in, moved the seat forward, and checked the controls. She crunched into first gear, and began her three point turn in the lane. There was a collective gasp from the onlookers when she turned the wheel and suddenly lunged towards the harbour edge. Thankfully, she found the brake at the last minute, and Tom, white as a sheet, detached his fingernails from the dashboard. He tried not to make his voice wobble. "Okay, let's just take it easy from now on."

Sophie reversed the car almost to the picket fence, then floored the accelerator, thrusting the little car up the lane — a cloud of grey noxious smoke billowing from its exhaust. *Just like riding a bike!*

Before the car hit the hill, she placed her left hand on the small gear stick, gripped it hard, and quickly yanked it, trying to get it into second gear. Tom let out a little yelp and Sophie turned to find her hand was on his crotch. “Oh my God!” She let go of the steering wheel, and both feet came off the pedals. The car stalled at the foot of the hill.

Tom whimpered.

Sophie looked straight ahead. “I’m so sorry! Everything’s so close together in here.” She put the car into first, depressed the clutch, and restarted the engine. *Mmmm! Not so small after all.*

Tom looked down at his bulge, which seemed to have liked the sudden attention, and was beginning to grow, pressing against the inside of his jeans. He placed his hands in his lap and blushed, mumbling, “Let’s go.”

Later the same week, Sophie wanted to treat her new friends with something special, and to say a particular thank you to Tom for all he had done — especially for the car. As she leant on the kitchen counter, browsing through Gwen’s recipe book, she noticed a recipe for *Canelé de Bordeaux*. She Googled them, and immediately decided to make these special rum and vanilla French pastries. What could be a more fitting tribute to the work they had all done on her new home, *La Canelé*?

Using Gwen’s recipe — with the help of Google Translate and Gwen’s English notes — she had let the batter rest overnight, and found the requisite copper moulds in the back of one of the kitchen cupboards. Sophie spent the day making sure the little cakes looked perfect, before turning her attention to herself. She pulled on her favourite cropped

white jeans and pastel-blue cashmere sweater, and with a look in the mirror, decided the trousers still made her bum look good. Sophie ambled over to The Barnacle with Harvey in tow, and after arranging the canelés on a pair of three-tiered cake stands on the bar, waited for the gang to arrive.

“Oh, so that’s why the cottage is called *La Canelé*?” mused Cynthia. “I must say, these are the most delicious things I have ever tasted. What’s in them?”

“Rum, vanilla, and honey,” replied Sophie.

Rob winked. “Oh, not just vanilla after all then?”

Tom held out his hands and leant back in his chair. “They’re fit for a king!”

Sophie laughed. “King Tom!”

Terry rolled his eyes. “King Tosser, more like!”

Sophie made eye contact with all her friends. “Well, you’re all kings...and queens, to me.”

Just as she was speaking, Harvey started snorting and whining at the closed pub door. “Oi! Harvey, you’ve already been for a pee.” Sophie put her hands on her hips. “What is with that dog? Harvey! Come here!” The dog, however, refused to heed, and was now wagging his tail, furiously.

Everyone stared at the door and Angus walked in with Bonnie. Sophie’s face lit up. “Angus!”

“Hello all!” Angus bent over to greet Harvey with a back rub, while the French bulldog and Bonnie went nose-to-nose, then nose-to-butt. “And hello, Harvey. Blooming Nora, look at you!” Angus looked up. “He’s half

the dog he used to be!” Angus stood up and spied the dainty cakes on the stand. “What’s all this then? A party?”

“Yes.” Sophie smiled and glanced over at her fisherman friend. “Tom bought me a car!”

Angus raised his eyebrows in surprise. “A car, you say?”

“Yes. And they’ve helped me clear the cottage garden. You should see it — it’s just wonderful.”

Angus smiled. “Sounds lovely.”

*I’d forgotten how fit he is.* “Can I get you a drink? I presume you know everyone?”

“Aye. The usual, Maggie, please.”

Maggie took a dimple mug from a shelf. “Coming right up, love.”

Angus took up a stool at the bar, eyeing the canelés hungrily. “I see you’ve been baking?”

“Yes, please have one.”

“What are they?”

Sophie pushed the cake stand along the bar towards him. “Canelés. The cottage, Gwen’s cottage, is named after them. I found them in her recipe book.”

Angus took one of the cakes and bit into it. The crispy, honey-flavoured exterior gave way to an unctuous rum and vanilla custard on the inside. Angus put his hand to his mouth and began to laugh. “Oh my God, Sophie, these are... They are... Oh my...” He popped the rest of the canelé into his mouth, finished the pastry, and dabbed his mouth with a paper napkin. “You really ought to start your own bakery and make cakes again.”



Maggie placed a pint of ale on the counter and raised her eyebrows.

“Again?”

“Aye, didn’t she tell you? Sophie here is a master baker!”

Sophie stiffened. “Oh, I’m not — not really.”

“You’re a dark horse aren’t you?” remarked Cynthia. “Although, come to think of it, we’ve all been on the receiving end of a few of Sophie’s delight’s over the past few weeks.” Cynthia glanced at Tom, who blushed, as did Sophie. “These canals...”

“Canelés,” Sophie corrected.

“Right, these kennels are simply divine!”

“Aye, she has a gift,” encouraged Angus. “So when are you going to open up your own bakery or pâtisserie Soph?”

Tom sniffed. “Oh don’t be daft. Who’s gonna visit Tremellen to buy pastries?”

There was a silence before Terry spoke. “I’d hike a thousand miles to eat more of these.” He looked at Sophie, his face deadpan and serious. “He’s right, Sophie, you have a gift.”

# 25

Terry tapped the table. “So that’s fifteen two, fifteen four, fifteen six, and one for his nob makes seven.” He had convinced Sophie to play Cribbage with him, and for the past twenty minutes she had sat opposite him at his table as he explained how to play and to score, while Angus and Tom stood watching.

Sophie peered at the four cards spread in front of her. “One for his knob?”

“Aye. His nob or his nibs. You get one for having a Jack the same colour as the turn-up suit, and Jacks, well, they’re up themselves ain’t they? Snobby bastards.”

“They are?”

Tom laughed. “Just nod and agree. Some of the rules of crib don’t make sense to me either.”

Terry frowned. “Oi! You youngsters should be grateful. I’m passing down a time honoured tradition here. Crib’s been played across this land since the Celts were pushed out of Cornwall.”

Tom chuckled. “They all left ‘cause us Anglo-Saxons forced them to play card games with fecked-up rules.”

Terry ignored him. “Right. Seven points.” He moved Sophie’s rear matchstick seven places on the cribbage board. “And you win!”

Sophie raised her eyebrows. “I do?”

Terry stared at the board, frowning. “Yes.”

She laughed. “I’m still not sure I understand cribbage.”

Still staring at the board, Terry scratched his bald head. “It’ll get under your skin. You’ll see.” He plucked out the matchsticks and began to put them in their starting holes. “Right, Tom, your turn. I still need to get you back for the other night.”

Sophie and Angus took their leave from Tom and Terry’s table, and headed to the bar. Tom followed them with his gaze, eyeing Angus suspiciously, before turning, reluctantly, back to the new game.

Sophie placed her empty glass on the bar. “Back visiting your aunt?”

“Aye, Aunt May, bless her. I’m back for a day or three.” Angus tapped his head towards the bar area. “Looks like you’ve made friends here?”

Sophie smiled. “Yes. Yes, I have.”

“So, are you going to go back to London?”

Sophie bit her lip. She’d been thinking about it a lot. Tremellen, the cottage, the pub, and these people. They’d gotten under her skin and made her feel welcome, but how could she possibly afford to stay here? Her funds were running low and, with no source of income, she’d soon have no choice but to pack things up and get a job in the city. She was sure Jeffrey would take her on again, but working for him, or more specifically, with Clare, was the last thing she wanted to do.

“Soph?”

“Sorry, um...I don’t know. However, I do know that I’m falling in love with this place...and its people.”

“I understand. It’s a special part of the world — a lot like Scotland.”

“It’s just...so peaceful. I thought I’d hate it; be bored out of my mind; but it feels so free — so calm.”

Angus gazed at Sophie; the way she tucked her hair behind one ear, exposing two delicate stud earrings, and a glimpse of her soft neck. “Aye, I hear you. She’s beautiful alright.”

On the lane outside the pub, with their dogs by their sides, Sophie turned to Angus and they both began to speak at the same time.

“No, you go on,” said Angus.

“I wondered, if perhaps you’d like to come back for a night cap?” offered Sophie.

“When you say night cap, I presume you mean...”

Sophie laughed. “A drink — nothing more!”

Angus smiled. “I’d love to.”

The couple ambled along the lane to Sophie’s cottage, Angus admiring the freshly landscaped garden on the way in.

Sophie hung up Harvey’s lead on a hook by the door, while Angus found an armchair. “Gin and tonic or a whisky?”

“When you say whisky, you mean a Scotch?”

“If the cap fits!”

“That’ll do nicely — thanks.”

Sophie fetched the old bottle of Scotch from the kitchen larder. She returned to the living room with the bottle and a glass.

Angus gasped. “Glen Maddoch? You’re serving me Glen Maddoch?”

Sophie’s face fell, suddenly worried she’d made a faux pas. “Is that bad?”

“Bad? You’re kidding me! Nay, feck, this is old stuff — really good stuff. They dinnae make it any more. The last bottles sold for thousands! I’ve never even seen it before, let alone try it.”

Sophie grinned. “Just as well I didn’t use it for cooking then?”

“Cooking?!”

Sophie smirked. “Or for cleaning the loo.” She poured a dram into a glass and offered it to Angus, who swirled the glass, sniffed, and swirled it again. “Would you like some ice?”

“Ice? No way! I’d like to try it neat, then perhaps add a little water to release the phenols.” He shook his head and chuckled to himself. “Glen Maddoch. You could knock me down with a feather.”

It felt good watching Angus sip his whisky — the pure satisfaction on his face. Sophie gazed for a moment before returning to the kitchen to pour herself a gin and low-calorie tonic. She’d almost fainted when she spied a single bottle of *Whitley Neill - Rhubarb and Ginger* in the tiny supermarket. It was an extravagance, but she’d decided to treat herself.

The couple sat in the cottage living room, sipping and enjoying each other’s company when, finally, Angus drained the last drop of his whisky and held the glass up to the light, observing the legs that ran down the side.

“Would you like another?”

“Hell, yes...but no. Keep it someplace safe. Perhaps I might be invited in for a wee nightcap another day?”

Sophie blushed. “If you’re lucky!”

Angus looked intently at Sophie. “So...”

Sophie returned his gaze. “So...” She felt her tummy doing backflips. She looked at his mouth, at his tongue licking the whisky from his lips, and wondered what it — no he — would taste like.

Angus stood up and sighed. “It’s been a long day, travelling down. I suppose I’d better get back to Aunt May. She’ll be wondering where I’ve got to.”

Sophie rose and they stood close together, looking into each other’s eyes.

Angus went to reach out to touch Sophie’s hair, then paused, withdrawing his hand. He let out a little sigh.

*God, if I could only read his mind.* Sophie swallowed. “Okay.”

Angus took his leave, heading back up the lane with Bonnie in the twilight, shaking his head, and Sophie closed the door behind him.

Sophie was still standing motionless by the door, when Harvey snorted and scraped a front paw against it. “You want to go out...again?” It was still just light outside, and so she opened the door to allow him to do his business while she leant against the door jamb.

It had been a good week and a great day: the car, canelés, winning at cribbage, Angus.

*Angus.*

Sophie sighed, heard footsteps approaching and looked up, half expecting, half hoping, it was Angus returning. Her face fell when she saw it was Claudia, accompanied by her little shih tzu, complete with a pink ribbon tied in its hair between fluffy ears. Harvey looked up, wagged his tail, snorted, then made a dash for the shih tzu. Seeing

Harvey charging towards her, the little dog struggled on its lead to get away, then pulled the lead completely out of Claudia's hands, running away towards the edge of the harbour with Harvey in hot pursuit.

Claudia gasped. "Pixie! Pixie! My poor baby!" She turned to Sophie, her eyes fierce. "She's going to be eaten by your horrible mutt!"

"It's okay! He's only horny!"

Claudia's eyes looked like they would pop out of her head, looking utterly distressed, presumably at the thought of *that thing* with her prized shih tzu. She watched in horror as Pixie hurtled down the harbour steps towards the water and disappeared out of sight, followed closely by Harvey.

Sophie smiled as she had never seen her dog run so fast. *Go Harvey!* Then she worried. *Oh shit, I hope the tide's out!* Then she panicked. *Oh no! Not the steps again. Not the mud!*

Both women rushed to the edge of the harbour wall and arrived at the same time. Looking down, they could see Harvey standing at the bottom of the steps, wagging his tail. He had learned his lesson and he was pacing backwards and forwards, not wanting to step out onto the mud. Pixie, however, was out on the flats, yelping helplessly, and stuck fast.

*Oh fuck.* There was only one thing for it. Sophie removed her trainers and socks, and carefully tiptoed down the steps. She looked at her white cropped jeans, and for a moment wondered if she should take them off, but then thought better of it and rolled them up as far as they would go — which she feared wasn't far enough. Stepping out onto the mud, she sank down to her ankles, felt it squish between her toes, and carefully walked out to where Pixie was yapping.

“Do be careful!” shouted Claudia from the high harbour wall.

Sophie snorted. “Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.”

“Not you! With my little Pixipoo!”

Sophie huffed and continued her journey to the stranded dog, which was yapping, incessantly. “It’s okay, I’ve got you.” She bent down to try and lift the little dog, but it tried to bite her. “Fuck, you little shit!”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yes, fine!” She grabbed Pixie on each side and with some effort she lifted her out of the mud, but the dog struggled in Sophie’s arms and somersaulted out of them, landing upside-down, head-first in the mud. *Fuck!* Pixie stopped yapping. Sophie slopped over to the dog and lifted it up again. It was licking and trying to spit out mud, its furry face dripping, its pink ribbon now askew and stained brown. Holding the wriggling dog, Sophie stepped back through the mud and to the steps, handing the stinking, mud-laced Pixie back to its owner when she reached the top.

“Oh, my poor darling. My poor baby!” Claudia held Pixie at arms’ length and turned to Sophie, “It’s all your fault. You should keep your blasted dog under control!”

Sophie raised her eyebrows and smirked. “He just wanted to play.”

Claudia scoffed. “I bet he did!” She stormed off with Pixie in her arms.

Harvey looked up at Sophie, wagging his tail.

Sophie wagged her finger at him. “Bad dog!” She looked at her caked legs and arms, then laughed. “Bad dog!”



# *Canelés de Bordeaux*

For this recipe you will need special Canelés moulds. Canelés are supposed to be a deep golden brown. They are caramelised, not burnt! You can grease the moulds with butter alone, but the beeswax gives the traditional crunchy case. You can also replace the rum with Cognac for a stronger flavour.

## **Ingredients (makes 18)**

- 500ml whole milk
- 50g softened butter (plus 50g to grease the molds)
- 200g granulated sugar
- 150g bread flour
- 4 egg yolks
- Large pinch salt
- 1 tsp vanilla extract, or a large vanilla pod split open
- 50ml dark rum
- 50g beeswax (or you can use extra butter as Sophie did the first time she made them)

## **Step 1**

Heat the milk, 50g butter and the vanilla in a pan until simmering, then turn off the heat. If you are using a vanilla pod, allow it to steep in the milk and remove the case just before you need to use the milk.

## **Step 2**

Melt together the beeswax and 50g butter, and grease the molds with the mixture.

### **Step 3**

Sift the flour into a bowl, then whisk in the egg yolks, sugar and salt.

### **Step 4**

*Gradually* add the hot milk mixture and whisk, making a runny batter.

### **Step 5**

Stir in the rum, then allow the batter to cool, before storing in the fridge overnight.

### **Step 6**

Preheat a fan oven to 230°C, then pour the mixture into the molds, just over  $\frac{3}{4}$  full. Place the molds on a tray before baking for 10 minutes. Reduce the temperature to 190°C and continue to bake for another 50 minutes.

### **Step 7**

Tap the Canelés out of the molds whilst they are still piping hot.

# 26

Sophie strolled along the lane with — the now much lighter and more spritely — Harvey tugging at his lead. Tremellen had attracted a sprinkling of summer visitors and the fine weather had encouraged hikers to take to the coastal path — the small, sheltered hamlet offering a welcome break from the steep, winding trail. There were several cars in the quayside car park and a dozen or so customers sat at picnic benches outside the pub. A family of three dangled crab lines over the harbour wall and a little girl squealed with delight as she pulled up an angry looking crustacean and plopped it into a blue, plastic bucket.

Robert and Cynthia's shop, *Tidelines*, was nothing more than a large shed on the quay, and Sophie was delighted to see that the black shutter doors were open. Some brightly coloured buckets and spades — similar to the one the little girl was using — stood on the ground outside, and a board advertised various ice-creams and lollies that could be purchased from a freezer.

Cynthia was sitting in a patch of shade, just inside the door, and she gave Sophie a little wave, who returned with a smile.

Cynthia took a deep breath through her nose and breathed out through her mouth. “Beautiful morning isn't it? It's going to be a real scorcher.”

“Yes. Nice to see a few tourists around too.” Sophie noted the embroidery needles and the silky, dark-red material that lay on Cynthia's lap. “That looks fun, what are you sewing?”

Cynthia whipped it under her chair and out of sight. “Oh, just a little something.” She tilted her head, frowning, and paused for a moment. “Perhaps...I might show it to you one day? When it’s finished, of course.”

Sophie jutted out her lower lip and sagely nodded her head, smiling. She had no idea what Cynthia was up to, and although the couple were odd at the best of the times, she liked them very much.

“Would you like an ice-cream?”

Sophie wandered to the freezer and peered inside. “Oooh! Mini Milks. I’ve not had one of those for years!”

“Help yourself dear. It’s on me!”

Robert, seemingly from nowhere, emerged from behind a pile of boxes at the rear of the shed. “Giving away all our profits again?” He chuckled to himself. “Hello Sophie, how are you today?”

“Oh, I’m good, thanks. You?”

He put his hands on his hips, pushed his shoulders back and stretched. “Not bad. Not bad.”

Cynthia nodded towards her husband. “He’s been in the garage all week building a cage, and now he’s just got in a shipment that he’s trying to sort out.”

Rob winked at Cynthia before smiling at Sophie. “So what’ll it be? Chocolate, strawberry, or vanilla?”

Sophie thought for a second. “Vanilla. It can’t be any other flavour!”

Rob’s face fell. “Oh, that’s a bit disappointing. Vanilla’s a bit boring isn’t it? Oh well, vanilla it is.” He opened the freezer door, reached in, and pulled out a vanilla Mini Milk, which he peeled and passed to Sophie.

“Thanks.” She popped the end of the ice lolly into her mouth, allowing the sugary cream to melt on her tongue. “Been busy?”

Cynthia smiled. “Oh, no dear — we hardly sell anything.”

Sophie didn’t know how to reply. “Um...isn’t that the point of a shop? To sell things?”

Rob sighed. “Yes, yes it is. We retired seven, no wait, eight years ago. We’ve lived not far from here for years and so we bought a little pad up the lane, discreetly tucked away in the woods. We had time to spare, as the only other thing we do is organise the occasional little soirée; and as we don’t need the income, and this little shop was closing down, we took it on.”

Cynthia continued Rob’s story. “Yes, it seemed such a shame to lose it. Doesn’t seem right to come to the seaside and not be able to buy a crab line or an ice-cream, does it?”

Sophie was impressed and nodded in agreement. “Well, I think it’s lovely.” She waved her milk pop in the air again. “Thank you!”

Sitting on the harbour wall, with Harvey, her legs dangling over the edge, the taste of the Mini Milk brought back so many memories of her childhood and her parents. A cloud passed over the sun making Sophie shudder — the sense of loss and longing felt, at times, overwhelming.

Sophie was brought back to reality by a loud, demanding voice, coming from behind her. “Excuse me?”

Sophie turned to see Claudia standing in front of Robert and Cynthia’s shop, while Pixie stood, staring at Harvey, tail wagging. Harvey let out a little whine and licked his chops.

“Is this all you have?” questioned Claudia, rudely.

Robert sighed. “Morning Claudia. And how are we this fine sunny day?”

Claudia seemed taken aback by Rob’s friendliness, and she softened her tone a little. “Well, if you must know, I’m in a bit of a bind.”

“Oh?”

“It’s my fortieth birthday party on Sunday, and I have a large group of friends coming down from Hampshire for the weekend. My caterers have let me down at the last minute.”

Robert scratched his chin. “Well, let me see. We have rocket lollies, Fabs, Twisters, and Feasts. I’m sure we can sort you out.”

Cynthia caught Sophie’s eye and winked, and they both suppressed a giggle.

Claudia huffed and glared at Rob, who held out his palms submissively. “Seriously though, the best person to ask is Maggie, in the pub.”

Claudia murmured before dragging Pixie across the car park.

Cynthia snorted. “That woman is something else. She owns that posh house over the hill. Doesn’t mix with the locals — all high and mighty. Still, it made me giggle to think of all her posh pals sucking on ice-lollies.”

Rob and Sophie chuckled, and Sophie glanced over to the pub, spying Maggie watering a couple of pots of red geraniums on the front verandah. Curiosity got the better of her, and she decided to walk up the lane back towards her own cottage and duck in a narrow alley at the east corner of the pub — the perfect position for eavesdropping. *This, I’ve got to hear.*

Maggie sighed, her shoulders slumping. “I could do you fish and chips if you like?”

“Fish and chips? Fish and chips?! Do I look like the sort of woman that serves fish and chips at an important private reception? I suppose you think we could wash it down with a can of fizzy pop too?”

Maggie bit her tongue and kept her tone civil. “Well there is *someone* you could try asking.”

“Yes?”

“Our Sophie. She lives in the cottage at the end of the row. She’s quite the baker.”

“Really?” Claudia thought for a moment. “Sophie, you say? Right, come on Pixie! The cottage at the end, you say?”

Sophie didn’t wait to hear Maggie’s reply. She bolted from her hiding place and ran down the lane, Harvey’s little legs only just keeping up. She burst into her living room, shutting the door behind her, and leant back against it. Claudia would arrive at any moment.

There was a knock at the door behind her, so Sophie drew a deep breath to compose herself, and opened the door with a smile. “Can I help you?”

Claudia stiffened, her eyes wide. “*You’re Sophie?*”

Sophie was ready for her. *Oh, I’m going to enjoy this!* “I suppose you’ve come to tell me what you think of me? Looking down at me. If you’d not let go of your bloody poncy foo-foo little dog then she wouldn’t have gone out onto the mud. And what thanks do I get for rescuing her?”

Nothing. And now you come to my door to berate me?” Sophie stuck her chin in the air for dramatic effect.

Claudia looked stunned, and squinted as if suppressing her frustration. “Yes, well, that was most unfortunate.” She stuck her own chin in the air. “However, I’m willing to let bygones be bygones.”

Sophie narrowed her eyes. “That’s very gracious of you.”

“Well, anyway, that’s not why I’m here. I need your help.”

Sophie folded her arms. “Go on?”

“I hear you’re something of a baker, and, well, I need someone to cater for my fortieth birthday party at lunchtime on Sunday.”

“I don’t do catering.”

“Believe me, you’re the last person I want to ask. But it looks like you’re my only option. And besides, you owe me. It took me hours to wash the mud out of Pixie’s delicate coat, and...” She looked down at her precious pooch and sniffed. “I’m still not sure the smell has gone.”

Sophie suppressed a smile. “I thought you said bygones were bygones?”

“I’ll recompense you adequately...generously.”

Sophie wondered what she was doing, entertaining the thought of helping this stuffy woman. “How many people?”

“Oh, forty or so. Sandwiches, a selection of cakes, fancies, that kind of thing? It’s a special occasion.”

“Sunday — as in two days?”

Claudia looked defeated. “Yes.”

“Twenty pounds a head.”



“Twenty pounds?” Claudia’s face lit up. “Then you’ll do it?” She began hastily fishing around in her handbag for a card, which she eagerly passed to Sophie. “My card. It has everything on it: my address, phone number, and so on. Can you be there by nine a.m. to set things up? I’ll have a marquee in the garden, and plenty of plates, cake stands, cutlery, napkins and so on, if you can just bring the food?”

“I’ll be there.”

When Claudia had gone, Sophie leant her back against the closed door, fighting the urge to tear up. She groaned. “Harvey, what the fuck have I done? Why didn’t you stop me? I can’t bake for forty people. And in two days? What am I going to do? Shit, shit, shit!” She slumped down onto the floor. “ I’m going to need a miracle!”

# 27

Sophie heard a knock behind her. *Claudia's obviously forgotten something*. Getting to her feet, she re-opened the door to find her favourite Scotsman standing coyly on her doorstep. "Angus!"

He smirked. "Aye, yes it is. I'm nae disturbing you am I?"

"Oh no, not at all."

"Bonnie and I were just walking past and we wondered if you and Harvey would like to go for a drink tonight?"

"Yes! I mean, no! I mean, I'd love to but..."

Angus seemed to notice Sophie's red eyes, and feeling self-conscious, she rubbed them. He frowned. "I'm sorry. I've come at a bad time."

She groaned. "No! I mean, yes. It's just I've gone and done a stupid thing."

Angus raised his eyebrows, as if prompting explanation.

"I've taken on a job — which is a good thing, I guess. I don't know what I was thinking. It's for a woman called Claudia."

"Claudia?" Angus mimed a cat's paw with his left hand and hissed. "The Claudia I just passed in the lane?"

Sophie chuckled. "You know her then? Well, yes, *that* Claudia. It's her fortieth birthday party on Sunday and I've agreed to do the catering. It's now..." Sophie looked at her watch and squealed, "almost lunchtime on Friday."

Angus lit up. "Sophie! That's great news!"

Sophie slapped her hand to her forehead. "I'm fucked!"

Angus raised his eyebrows and chuckled. “Ach, well, would you like me to help?”

Sophie rolled her eyes, sarcastically.

“Sorry. I’m no Pam the Jam, but I know my way around a kitchen. I’ll be your sous chef if you like?”

“Oh, Angus!” Sophie flung her arms around the big Scotsman. Angus had come to her rescue again. At this rate, she’d have to think of a superhero name for him — *The Tartan Titan!*

Bonnie lay down with Harvey in the living room, while Angus and Sophie stood in the kitchen of *La Canelé*. Sophie began to pace up and down.

“Right, so the first thing I need to do is decide what we’re going to make, then I’ll need to get the ingredients this afternoon.” She ran her hands through her hair. “While I sit with Gwen’s recipe book and my notepad, I wondered if you wouldn’t mind cleaning and sorting out the kitchen appliances and so on? I’ve not really been through the lower cupboards thoroughly, or even know if the mixers work.” She panicked. “We’ll need to get set up to bake, then tonight we can do a load of prep for tomorrow. How does that sound?”

Angus smiled. “You’re the boss! And don’t worry. We’ve got this.”

Sophie stopped pacing. “Are you sure you’re okay to help me? It’s so kind of you.”

“What, and miss you launching your career as the finest caterer in all of Tremellen?” He winked. “I’m all yours, all weekend. I’ll have to pop back at some point and let Aunt May know. She’ll understand.”

“Thank you.” Angus really was a Godsend. “Oh, by the way, who is Pam the Jam?”

“Pam the Jam? Only one of my superheroes – and a family friend. Have you not heard of River Cottage?”

“River Cottage? Sounds familiar.”

“Hugh and the gang?”

Sophie frowned, puzzled. “Eh?”

“Ach, don’t worry.” He laughed. “I’ll introduce you to them one day.” Angus pulled out a chair for Sophie. “Anyway, you sit down and get the menu sorted. The first thing I’m going to do is make you a cuppa.” He pulled off his sweater and tossed it into the living room, then rolled up the sleeves of his blue Oxford shirt, revealing his muscled forearms.

*I really must stop staring at him, thought Sophie, but those arms, oh my God.*

While Sophie sat at the wooden centre counter with a mug of tea, pencil in hand, pouring over Gwen’s recipe book; Angus set to work. He methodically worked his way along the cupboards, emptying the contents onto the counter, then wiping everything down. Amongst the electrical items he found a large old Kitchen Aid, as well as a Kenwood mixer, a Magimix from the 1980s, and two different kinds of electric whisk. They all worked, although one of the whisks gave off a bit of a burnt smell when it was fired up — Angus assured Sophie it was just dust on the motor and not to worry about it. He also turned on the gas to the Aga, explaining to Sophie how, once they heated up, they stayed hot with minimal use of gas.

“There, got it!” Before her, on the pad, was her plan. “Let me read it to you.” She looked up as Angus slid a large plate of Marmite on toast and a second mug of tea towards her. “When did you? How?” She’d been so engrossed in her work, she hadn’t noticed him making her the snack. *Who is this guy?* she thought to herself.

Angus took a slice of toast. “Gotta keep your strength up.”

Sophie took a piece, and began reeling off her plan. “Okay, for savoury we’ve got Gruyère and parmesan gougères, Roquefort and caramelised onion tart, and mini cheese croissants. Then for sweets: mille feuille, macarons, canelés, éclairs, financiers, and madeleines.”

“What’s a goo-share?”

“It’s like a small savoury puff, made with choux pastry.”

“And what was it you said, a Financer?”

“Financiers, they’re like posh almond slices. Utterly yummy. I’ve worked out what I need and the quantities.”

“It’ll mean a trip to France...or Penzance, it’s closer. Give me the list and I’ll go for you. With the drive, it’ll take me...” he thought for a moment, “let’s say three hours at least. If I go now, I should be back by fiveish. What can you get done while I’m out?”

“Well, I have the ingredients for canelés, so I can make the batter for that, besides, it needs to be made the night before. I can make the pastry bases for the tarts — they’ll need blind baking.” Sophie thought for a moment. “If I can get some more butter I can start the dough for the puff pastry. I can probably get some from Maggie.”

“Ok, sounds like a plan. I’d better be off. Okay if I leave Bonnie here?”

Sophie ripped a page from her notebook and held it out for him. “Of course. I’ll walk them up the lane when I go and see Maggie.”

Angus took the shopping list. “Right, see you in a bit.” Leaning over the counter, he took another slice of toast, and as he did so, kissed Sophie on the cheek. He leant back, blushing, and for a moment they held each other’s gaze. “God, I’m sorry.”

Sophie smiled and gave his hand an encouraging squeeze. “I’m not — it was sweet of you.”

Angus breathed a sigh of relief, winked, and set off on his mission.

The amount of work Sophie had to do felt overwhelming, and she bit her lip and glanced, nervously around the kitchen. Closing her eyes and slowing her breathing, she imagined she was back at Gwen’s — the routine and flow of baking; the sound of the mixer; the smell from the oven; Gwen’s encouragement echoing around her head. *You can do this, Sophie Kingsman.* Opening her eyes, and with a huge amount of mental effort, she willed herself out of her chair. *You can do this Sophie Kingsman.*

All afternoon, Sophie prepped as much as she could. Maggie had a huge block of catering butter in her fridge at the pub, which meant Sophie was able to start the process of rolling and chilling the puff pastry for the mille feuille and croissants. She made the bases for the tarts, as well as the large bowl of batter for the canelés.

Angus returned just before six p.m., laden with bags. “I’m sorry it took me so long, traffic was a mare. There was a broken-down horse lorry on the A30, but I got you everything you need.” Angus heaved the bags onto

the counter top. “There’s a fabulous deli in the town centre where I got the cheeses.”

When they had unpacked and safely stowed the ingredients, Angus leant back against a kitchen counter. “What’s next?”

“I’ll make the macarons tonight. You can head off, but I’ll need you tomorrow if that’s okay?”

Angus lingered for a moment but Sophie was already scanning the contents of the fridge. He pushed himself off the counter. “Righto. I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow morning.”

“Angus?” She walked up to him and stood on tiptoes to kiss him softly on the cheek. “Thank you.”

Angus was frozen in place, his fingertips brushing the place where her lips had been. “Aye, you’re welcome.” He held his breath and stared into Sophie’s blue eyes, then coming to, he blinked, shook his head, and let out a long sigh. “Come on Bonnie! Time to go.”

Sophie spent the evening making the pastel-coloured macarons, and doing as much other preparation as possible, such as grating the cheeses. When she had done all she could, she sat with a glass of white wine, and nibbled the broken macarons, working out a plan for the following day; what she needed to make and in what order, along with the timings.

Saturday was going to be a long day.

Harvey stood wagging his tail, looking up at Sophie with eyes the size of saucers.

Unable to resist, she tossed one of the macarons down to the begging dog who wolfed it up.

*What am I doing? Angus'll be cross with me!*

Angus. Her heart fluttered whenever she thought about him. She remembered the kiss he'd given her on the cheek, and she swore she felt an electricity between them. Did he feel it too? She had desperately wanted him to kiss her before he left. What was with this guy? Why was he holding back? Perhaps she was misreading all the signals? Perhaps he was just being nice to her? No, he definitely liked her, she could tell. And she liked him too — a lot.



# 28

Saturday had been a whirlwind of a day; Sophie and Angus had baked and laughed, they had eaten Marmite on toast, drunk many cups of tea, and sampled cakes — taking only a couple of breaks to walk the dogs up the coastal path for a quick run. They baked well into the night, and when they'd finally finished, the fridge was packed to the gunnels with sumptuous savouries and cakes.

The kitchen, however, looked like a bomb site. Every surface was littered with unwashed bowls, trays, and utensils. It looked as if someone had emptied all the cupboards, liberally sprinkling the contents over every counter and work surface, before coating the lot in flour, sugar, and icing. Amongst the carnage stood three empty wine bottles and two empty wine glasses.

Sophie groaned. "I can't face it."

"Aye, neither can I. I'm beat," agreed Angus.

"Dram?"

Angus grinned. "Thought you'd never ask."

The couple sat in their armchairs, glasses of Glen Maddoch in hand — the amber liquid illuminated by the warm glow of a floor lamp.

Sophie sniffed her glass. "It smells like petrol!"

Angus chuckled. "That wee dram in your glass is probably worth about a hundred pounds. Now, sniff again, and describe what you smell."

Sophie put her nose to the glass again and inhaled slowly. She closed her eyes. “Okay...it smells, um...smokey. Yes. Like someone’s been burning wood. No, not wood. Oh...like grass or earth, a bit like the smell after it rains. Yes. Like sweet, cooked, wet grass.”

Angus raised his eyebrows, impressed. “Very good. That smokiness is from the peat. Go on.”

“And, um...honey or golden syrup maybe. And the sea— it smells a bit like the sea or seaweed!”

Angus laughed. “You’re bang on! Right, now, keep your eyes closed and sip it with all those flavours in your mind.”

Sophie took a sip, at first scrunching up her face, then letting all the flavours burn and melt over her tongue. As she sat there, tastebuds exploding, she felt Angus’s lips gently press against her own. She opened her eyes momentarily, before closing them again, as she felt the tip of his tongue gently stroke her lips and his hand stroke her hair. She let her tongue meet his as they pressed their lips against each other. Angus held the kiss for a long time, before eventually breaking away, using the arm chair to pull himself up from the floor on which he knelt. He stood gazing at her, holding her hand gently in his. “Sophie... I...um... I’m sorry.”

She gently squeezed his hand. “I’m not.”

He sighed. “I’d probably best be going. Today has been, well...just wonderful.”

“It has.” Sophie put her hand over her mouth to stifle a yawn. “It has.”

...

At one end of the marquee, erected on Claudia's well-kept lawn, a barman in a white shirt and black trousers, was spreading out an array of wines, gins, and mixers on a makeshift bar, while at the other end. Sophie, Angus, and Claudia stood before a long trestle table. The table was lined with a white linen tablecloth — almost long enough to brush the floor — and on it stood an array of pretty, mismatched, tiered cake-stands, each one piled high with mouth watering delicacies. It had taken the best part of an hour to transport, unpack, and lay out all the food, and then return the empty plastic tubs, tins, and plates to Angus's Land Rover. Now, Sophie's spread was laid out before them, and it looked stunning.

Claudia gasped. "I'm speechless. Utterly speechless. This is nothing short of spectacular. And *you* made all this?" She turned, wide-eyed, to look at Sophie, who blushed.

"Yes, with a little help from Angus here."

Angus took a small step back. "Och, don't look at me. All I did was do what I was told. This is all Sophie's work."

Claudia smiled from ear to ear. "My girl, I owe you a debt of gratitude and...an apology." She gently gripped Sophie on each arm, leant in and kissed her on both cheeks. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you!" She then clapped her hands together in excitement.

Sophie didn't know what to say, but simply shrugged her shoulders and stood there, feeling slightly embarrassed. "Happy Birthday."

Angus put his hand on her shoulder and whispered into her ear. "Well done, you."

That afternoon, Angus and Sophie sat next to each other as they dangled their bare-footed legs over the edge of the harbour wall opposite Sophie's cottage. Sophie, dressed in her strappy, yellow, summer dress, rested her head against Angus's shoulder, squinting at the bright sun and the reflections from the water. Along the harbour wall, near the pub, Tom was tying up his boat, and they both gave him a wave. Tom, however, met their wave with a glare and continued to coil ropes. Angus slowly lowered his hand. "What's eating him?"

"You, I think."

"Oh."

They sat in silence for a while before they heard footsteps approaching on the lane, and they turned to see Maggie holding two pints of cider. "I thought you might need these? It's baking isn't it?" She laughed at her own pun. "The sun too!"

The couple laughed.

Angus took the drinks and passed one to Sophie. "You're a star."

Maggie tilted her head forward and raised her eyebrows in mock seriousness. "Mind she only has one of those. They have quite an effect on her!" She then made her way back to the pub.

Angus held up his pint. "Cheers."

Sophie held up hers and they chinked glasses. "Cheers."

They both took a swig of the delicious, apple scrumpy.

Sophie put down her pint next to her and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "Mmmmm — that hit the spot. Still doesn't taste alcoholic to me."

The tide was in and the couple sat, mesmerised by the reflections further out, and the undersea world in the crystal clear water before them. Every so often they would see a small fish dart in and out of the weed near the harbour wall, or they would glimpse a crab slowly edging its way across the bottom, foraging for food. To their left, sandpipers worked the edge of the rocks, and in the distance a pair of cormorants stood with their wings spread wide, drying in the sun. Bonnie and Harvey sniffed the sea from the steps, before eventually settling down next to them, Harvey resting his head on Bonnie's legs.

Sophie's scrumpy was nearly finished, and she felt happily woozy. "I think they like each other."

"Aye. So, Miss Kingsman, as we're getting to know each other, tell me, what's your most embarrassing moment?"

Sophie laughed. "You want me to list them chronologically or alphabetically?" She thought for a moment. "Well...when I was thirteen years old, I was on a school trip to Germany, and I had this *awful* crush on my German teacher — Mr. Hanky. We were at a swimming pool and afterwards I was in my swimsuit in the changing room showers, when he walked in, stark bollock naked, holding hands with another man. He was standing to attention, if you get my drift. I was mortified. I wore glasses back then and I had walked into the wrong changing room by mistake. He quickly grabbed a towel and wrapped it around himself, but he was still pointing at me and I couldn't keep my eyes off it! He told me I was in the men's shower room and I went bright red and ran out. Turns out he

was gay. I think he was dead worried I'd say something, but I was so embarrassed I've never told a soul until now."

"I can't believe it! That's incredible." Angus paused for effect. "You wear glasses!" He laughed.

Sophie bumped him with her shoulder. "I did, but had laser treatment a couple of years ago." She smiled. "So what about you? What's your most embarrassing moment?"

"Me?" Angus thought for a second and sighed. "I used to belong to a running club, and we'd train three nights a week. We used to wear track suits over our running gear. One night, when I was about fifteen years old, I took off my tracksuit, put on my running spikes, and stood at the end of the running track. A group of girls in the club started pointing and laughing. I'd forgotten to put on my running shorts and was stood there in my paisley, patterned Y-fronts!"

Sophie grinned, glanced down at Angus's crotch, and put on her most seductive voice. "I bet they wouldn't be laughing now." She laughed. "And I can't believe you still wear paisley patterned underpants!"

"Ach, you're a mare!" He pushed her gently, and she pushed him back.

Sophie sighed. "I suppose we'd better go and clean up the kitchen."

The kitchen was as they'd left it — cream, pastry, crème pât, flour, and icing splattered over the cluttered surfaces, and Sophie was a bit tipsy. "Urgh, I've stood in some custard, I think." She lifted up her foot, looking at it. "It's all over my toes." She felt Angus's eyes on her. "What?"

He walked over to her, and with no effort, lifted her up with one arm. With the other he swept aside some of the clutter on the centre counter

and sat Sophie on top of it. He smiled, took her foot, and studied it. “Yep, looks like crème pât to me.” He lifted her foot and put her toes in his mouth. She could feel his firm tongue swirling around them.

Sophie giggled. “Urgh, gross!”

Her dress had slid up her legs and Angus eyed them, hungrily, following them to where her white panties were exposed. She followed his gaze, as he teasingly pulled down her dress, before putting his hands under her armpits, lifting her off the counter top, and back onto the floor.

Sophie narrowed her eyes. “Tease!” She grabbed a bowl of soft icing from the counter, took a handful, and lobbed it at him. The icing splashed all over Angus’s top and jeans, with some splattering on his face.

He stood there for a moment, then narrowed his eyes, and frowned. “Oh, you’re asking for it now!” He took a bowl of cream from the side, walked over to Sophie, and smeared it from her chin, down her neck and to the top of her breasts. He then pushed his hand down, under the top of her dress, under her soft bra, and rubbed the cream all over her right breast. Sophie’s nipple immediately hardened, and with one hand, she felt down and grabbed at his crotch, caressing it in her hands and feeling it pulse and swell. She unpopped the buttons on his jeans and his manhood slipped out. They kissed — long and deep, tongues entwined — then Angus lifted Sophie and laid her back onto the counter top, her legs apart. This time he reached up under her dress and pulled down her knickers. Sophie gasped. As they kissed and he nuzzled her neck, Sophie

felt him enter her, and there, amongst the tins, and trays, flour, and sugar, she savoured a sweetness she had never imagined.

...

Sophie woke, smiled, and reached for her phone on the bedside table. It was almost half past six and she'd slept for nearly two hours. Yawning and rubbing her eyes, she rolled over. The bed was empty, and she stroked the sheet with the palm of her hand. "Angus?" Sophie waited but there was no reply and the cottage remained quiet. "Angus?"



# Mille Feuille

A delightful dessert of layers of thin puff pastry, crème pât, and icing. Eat on your own or with that *special* friend. Save a little crème pât for later on in the evening.

## Ingredients (makes 9)

- 500g puff pastry (homemade or shop bought)
- 480ml whole milk, plus extra for the icing
- Vanilla pod split,
- 2 tsp vanilla extract
- 6 egg yolks
- 140g granulated sugar
- 40g cornflour
- 20g butter
- 500g icing sugar
- 30g cocoa powder
- 130ml whipping cream

## Step 1

Thaw the puff pastry and heat a fan oven to 200°C.

## Step 2

Roll the pastry out evenly, aiming for a thickness of just under 2mm. Then use a sharp knife or pizza cutter to cut out at least 27 rectangles measuring 5x10cm.

## Step 3

Line a baking sheet with parchment paper and place some of the pastry rectangles on with space between them. Place another sheet of

parchment on top, then another baking tray to weigh the pastry down and stop them puffing up too much. Bake for 10 minutes, repeating the process until all rectangles are cooked. Leave them to cool.

#### **Step 4**

Place 480ml milk in a pan and scrape the seeds out of the vanilla pod into it. Bring this to a simmer, then leave to cool. You can always add the pod too for extra flavour!

#### **Step 5**

In a bowl, mix the sugar and cornflour together then add the egg yolks and whisk until light and fluffy.

#### **Step 6**

Add the hot milk mixture gradually, whisking until smooth. Strain this into a saucepan before cooking, whisking constantly, until thickened and simmering.

#### **Step 7**

Remove from the heat and stir in the butter. Allow it to cool for a few minutes, then put cling film on the surface to stop it forming a skin. Leave the custard to cool.

#### **Step 8**

Put the icing sugar in a large bowl, then add the vanilla extract and a splash of milk, whisking together and adding more milk as needed to make a glaze that is not too thick or too runny.

## **Step 9**

Pour a third of the icing into a clean bowl, then whisk into that the cocoa powder and some more milk, again you will need to judge the consistency. Spoon both icings into piping bags.

## **Step 10**

Whisk the whipping cream and stir it into the cooled custard, before spooning this into a piping bag. You may need to whisk the custard first to avoid lumps.

## **Step 11**

Take 9 of the best looking pastry rectangles to use for the tops. Decorate them with the vanilla icing, then use the cocoa icing to create patterns on them. Use your imagination and make them pretty! Allow these to set before you need them.

## **Step 12**

Assemble the pastries! Lay out 9 pastry rectangles and pipe neat blobs of the custard onto them. Top this with another piece of pastry, and pipe more blobs onto this. Finally top with the iced rectangles. Try to keep the blobs uniform to make the pastries look neat and professional.

# 29

Looking past where Angus had lain, Sophie noticed some flowers in a beer glass, standing on the bedside table. Lavender — no doubt picked from her cottage garden — and it smelled divine. She heaved herself out of bed, smiling as she remembered the events of the day; the spread at the garden party and the banter with Angus on the harbour wall, and she blushed as she remembered the kitchen, then the bedroom, and how they'd showered together before she'd fallen asleep in his arms. *Does that make us an item now?*

Slipping on some black leggings and a T-shirt, she bounced down the stairs and into the kitchen. It was spotless — everything had been washed and stowed and all the surfaces gleamed. Angus must have tidied up and cleaned while she slept. Sophie smiled again. *What an angel! But where is he now? Perhaps he had to dash off and didn't want to wake me?* Her phone buzzed in her hand. "Hello?"

"Sophie? Claudia, here. I just wanted to thank you again for today. People haven't stopped talking about your food, and several friends have asked me for your number. I'm afraid I've had a little too much to drink, and so instead of coming down in person, I've asked my good friend Piers to pop down with your payment. I hope cash is okay?"

"Oh, yes, thank you. That's lovely."

"Very well then, I'll send him over now. You've been such a darling. TTFN!"

Sophie had completely forgotten about being paid, then remembered she still owed Angus for the ingredients.

It wasn't long before there was a knock at the door. Sophie opened it, and there, standing before her, was a portly, tanned young man, very smartly dressed in a dark-blue blazer, white open-collared shirt, beige chinos, and dark brown brogues. His hair was slicked back and Sophie thought he looked like a cross between a 1950s American gangster and an estate agent. He was holding a bunch of roses — which Sophie recognised from Claudia's garden — and behind him was a sleek looking dark-blue sports car, which Sophie thought was possibly a Jaguar.

“Sophie?”

“Yes!”

“Wonderful! What a pleasure it is to meet you. I'm Piers. Piers Branagan.”

He thrust the flowers forward and Sophie took them, beaming. “Roses! Lovely — and they smell gorgeous!”

“Now, let me look at you.” Piers took Sophie's hands in his, gazed into her eyes, then looked down at her hands before holding them up to his lips, kissing them.

Sophie giggled.

Piers held up her hands. “Ah! These hands that produced such delightful works of exquisite cuisine. I wondered, would it be too much of an imposition to have the briefest of words with you? I promise, I won't take much more than a minute of your time. Oh, and I have the remuneration from Claudia to give you too.”

“Yes, do come in.”

Piers lowered her arms and followed Sophie into the cottage.

Angus had returned, having walked up the lane just after the arrival of Piers in his Jaguar, and now, watching the cottage door close, Tom — who had seen Angus standing in the lane — sidled up beside him. Without turning around or acknowledging Tom's presence, Angus let the bunch of flowers he'd bought drop to his side.

Tom scoffed. "Looks like she played us both, eh? So, are you going to go and confront him then? Looks like a right smarmy bastard — and look at that car! Some kind of Jag isn't it? Guy's got money alright. They always go for the rich types in the end." Tom chuckled to himself.

Angus had seen and heard enough. Without saying a word, he walked Bonnie away from Tom, and back up the lane to his Land Rover. As he walked, he lobbed the bunch of yellow freesias over the harbour wall and onto the mud.

Sophie had only met the man for two minutes and, although he was probably the campest and most over-polite person she'd ever met, she already liked him. "Can I get you a drink, Mr. Branagan?"

"Oh no, I can't stop — and do call me Piers. Only my mother calls me by my last name." Piers let out a hoot and Sophie couldn't help but laugh; his manner, his accent, and his actions were hilarious, and he knew it. With a flourish, Piers reached into his blazer pocket and took out a white envelope. "The dues from Claudia."

"Oh, thank you." She flipped open the envelope and inside were a stack of fifty pound notes. She counted forty of them.

Sophie gasped. “Two thousand pounds? Oh, she’s made a mistake. This is far too much!”

“Oh, no mistake my dear. Claudia was so pleased with you she decided to pay you what she was going to pay her original caterers.” He rolled his eyes. “Although, between you and me, I expect she would have forked out a bit more than that — they were coming down from London, you know?”

Sophie sat down on the arm of one of the armchairs. *Two thousand pounds!* She couldn’t wait to tell Angus.

Piers leant forward in his chair. “However, the real reason I wanted to meet you is that I’m a food critic for one of the broadsheets, and, well, you’re quite a find, Miss Kingsman — if you don’t mind me saying so. I wondered if I might write a little piece on you and your catering business?”

Sophie stiffened. “Oh, I don’t do catering.”

Piers stammered. “Oh...but, I thought...”

“The party? It was a one off. I was just helping Claudia out of a bind.”

Piers looked crestfallen. He slumped back in his chair, his face fell, and he wailed. “Oh, what a pity, what a shame, what a travesty, what a waste. Well...if you change your mind, here’s my card.” He tilted his head down so he was looking up at Sophie, and raised his eyebrows. “If you ever, ever, change your mind and start your own business, you’ll let me know. Promise?”

Sophie took the card and nodded. “I promise.”

Piers smiled, seemingly satisfied. “Very well then.” He glanced around the room. “I must say your cottage is *rather* charming. Delightful! Now, I really must dash. Don’t get up, I’ll see myself out.”

Sophie sat, looking down at the money, and knew exactly what she’d do. She’d head up to Aunt May’s house straight away, surprise Angus, and give him the money she owed him for the ingredients. In fact, she’d give him half the money Claudia had given her. After all, he deserved it, and it was only fair.

The Mini’s small engine whined as Sophie followed the narrow lane up to the B3315, before turning right, then right again down Shoehorn lane, keeping an eye out for a sign for *Glen Mornay*, Aunt May’s house. Typical that Aunt May’s house should be named after a cheese sauce. *Another sign that Angus and I are meant to be?* She saw it on the left hand side — a stone wall ended at the entrance to what looked like a farm, and on the wall on the opposite side of the entrance was a wooden sign that read *Glen Mornay*.

Sophie steered her Mini into the turning and drove up the single track that led to the house. The house itself was quite impressive — not a mansion by any means, but a stately, two-storey, cream-coloured house with royal-blue painted window sills and a large cedar tree framing it to the rear.

Sophie parked her car on the gravel parking area. The house had commanding views of the sea and the horizon, and lush green pasture land spilled away, down to the cliffs and the coastal path. Angus was right, it would only be a fifteen minute down-hill walk to Tremellen,



where you would emerge from the coastal path at the end of her garden and onto her lane. The return journey, however, would involve a *very* steep walk.

Sophie crunched over the gravel to the blue front door and rang the bell. After about a minute, the door opened and a small, smiley, old woman stood on the threshold. She wore a long tartan, knitted skirt in dark greens and reds, and a sky-blue blouse with narrow vertical pleats; the collar of which was pinned with a silver brooch in the shape of a tudor rose. Her hair was tied in a tight bun, and she wore half-moon glasses on a light silver chain. “Aunt May... I mean...May?”

May broke into a smile. “Och, I can guess who you are, young lassie! Come in, come in!”

Sophie followed the old woman into the house, along a dark corridor and into what could only be described as a parlour. It was a heavily furnished room with ornate furniture, a wooden parquet floor, and thick, dark-red curtains. It had a very Victorian feel about it, complete with an upright piano and an aspidistra plant on a round wooden table.

May’s Scottish accent was strong. “If you’re looking for Angus, I’m afraid yae’ve not long missed him.”

“Missed him?”

“Aye, he’s headed back up north, just a few minutes ago. I’m surprised you didn’t pass him on the lane. In quite a hurry he was.”

Sophie frowned, puzzled. “Oh.” She glanced around the room and there, on the sideboard, was a framed photo of Angus with another woman. It was a wedding photo, and Sophie suddenly felt very dizzy. Angus, dressed in tails, was waving his grey top hat, and the woman in

her beautiful, white off-the shoulder bridal gown, was holding a bouquet of stunning white roses. The couple in the photo were holding hands and smiling as confetti rained down on them both.

May could see Sophie staring at the photo. “Och, it’s a lovely snap isn’t it? That’s Rose and Angus on their wedding day last year.”

Sophie couldn’t take her eyes off the picture and she could feel her breathing becoming faster. *What the...? Rose?* Sophie swallowed. “Do they both still live in Scotland then?”

Aunt May smiled. “Oh yes, Aberdeen!”

Sophie felt like she was on autopilot. She took the envelope out of her handbag and placed it next to the photo. “This is for Angus. Oh, and when he next stops by, tell him I never want to see him again.” With that, she turned and left Aunt May in the parlour and walked briskly back down the corridor to the front door. She let herself out, too consumed with the onslaught of thoughts and images bombarding her mind, to bother closing the door behind her.

When she was sitting back in her Mini, her hands were shaking too much to get the key in the ignition. She screamed and slammed her hands on the dashboard. “Shit!” *The utter bastard! No wonder he was so cagey about seeing me. Well, no way am I going to be ‘the other woman’.* Sophie rammed the key into the ignition and started the engine, swinging the car around, she hammered back down the lane. “Bastard! Utter bastard!”

# 30

Three days after the party, Sophie sat in an armchair in her living room. She'd spent the intervening time pottering around the cottage and garden, scanning the local job sites on her phone, and thinking about her time in Tremellen and the different people she'd met.

She'd spotted a junior post writing for a newspaper in Penzance, but nothing else that really interested her, and she felt restless and irritable. She hadn't even been in the kitchen; everything was left just as Angus — *the cute, tidy bastard* — had left it.

She hadn't come down to Cornwall just to go back to London with her tail between her legs, and she certainly hadn't come down to Cornwall to find love. *Thank God I hadn't emotionally invested in Angus. And at least Tom and I are still friends.* But what was she to do with her life?

She'd been in touch with Mr. Harris, and there were still enough funds set aside in Gwen's estate to pay the council tax and bills on the cottage for the foreseeable future. To be honest, she'd not even thought about it, and it was a relief to discover it was all in hand. Her savings had taken a little boost with half the money from Claudia, but she couldn't coast forever.

Her phone buzzed. It was a text from Claudia: *Perhaps this is the incentive you need?* Sophie clicked on a link to the Guardian newspaper. There, in front of her, was Piers' column, called *Branagan Bites*. Sophie scanned the column and at the end was a section with the heading, '*Set Down Your Cornish Pasties and Lift Up Your Cornish Pastries!*'

**Dear readers, absolve me for appending material other than applicable critique, however, once or twice in one's allotted span, one is subject to a surprise assault on one's taste-buds that leaves one giddy with rapturous bliss. At the week's end, I had the delectation of such comestible gratification. I graced the garden party of a dear friend in Cornwall with my esteemed presence. The caterer — I hesitate to use such a banal word for a soul so gifted— goes by the name of Miss Sophie Kingsman. This young maestro bestowed an offering of French pâtisseries that match, or even exceed, those I have been fortunate to savour in Parisian Michelin starred *boutiques de desserts*. Alas, this virtuoso pâtissière does not grace the planes of mortals such as you and I, and her artistry remains concealed to the general public. I was fortunate to be afforded a rare glimpse, and to be momentarily transported into the presence of the divine. Perhaps, like God, she will reveal herself fully, when we, the world, are ready to receive her.**

**Until next week,**

**Piers Branagan.**

Sophie smiled at the flowery biblical language, and re-read the section twice through. *Am I really that good?* Both Angus and Claudia's words about starting a business echoed in her mind. She had the premises and the equipment; and the occasional catering job — if it paid as well as the last one — would certainly keep her afloat. She could also use her front room and the garden in summer as a tea room.

But to start a French bakery and tea room in Tremellen was utter madness. Tom said it himself, *Who'd come to Tremellen?* Well, Piers Branagan did, and perhaps, if *he* made the effort to come, others would too? But what to call it? Sophie looked at Harvey who looked back at her, then it occurred to her. It was obvious.

She'd call it, *A Slice of Cake*.

...

As Sophie leant against the bar in The Barnacle, Maggie puckered out her lower lip and thought for a moment. "Sounds like a wonderful idea. Like you said, the catering work will pay for the lack of footfall. You'll not be rich though."

"No, but, to be honest, I don't think I need to be rich. Right now, I have a home, friends, a pretty awesome view, and everything I need. I don't think I have anything to lose."

Maggie held up her gin and tonic as a toast. "Well, here's to *A Slice of Cake*." Sophie raised her glass and they both had a sip of their drinks.

"The thing is, I don't really want to do this on my own — if you know what I mean. I could do with another pair of hands."

"What, like an assistant?"

"Yes. I couldn't have done Claudia's garden party on my own."

Maggie smirked. "You and Angus seemed to be getting along rather well."

Sophie rolled her eyes and sighed. "A little too well."

"So has Angus gone back to Scotland?"

“I don’t know and I don’t care.”

Maggie appeared to sense it was no longer a topic for conversation, and she changed the subject back to the task in hand. “Well, there’s plenty of young folk around here that wouldn’t mind a Saturday job or holiday work. Just put an advert in the local paper. You could do the interviews here, and I could be a second pair of ears and eyes if you like?”

“Oh, would you? That’d be great!”

Maggie smiled. “I’ll help you in any way I can...while I’m still here.” Her smile faded and, embarrassed, she turned away from Sophie and sniffed.

“I’m sure things will turn around for The Barnacle soon.”

Maggie pushed her shoulders back and took a deep breath. “I hope so too. It’s my home, but the books aren’t looking good and I’m close to throwing in the towel.”

...

Sophie did as Maggie suggested and ran a small advert in the Lizard Gazette for the coming weekend.

**WANTED: Tea Room and Catering Assistant for part-time holiday and weekend work. Contact Sophie Kingsman at: [asliceofcake@tremail.com](mailto:asliceofcake@tremail.com)**

Soon after the Gazette had gone to print, Sophie received three email enquiries. She'd decided that the following Saturday, as Maggie had suggested, she would interview each of the candidates at The Barnacle. She set the morning aside and arranged it so that each candidate would arrive at half hour intervals. Now, the morning had arrived and she sat at a table waiting for the first applicant to arrive.

Maggie was restocking the under bar fridge with tonic water. "What's his name again?"

"Jack Jenkins. He's seventeen, and doing a City and Guilds in motor mechanics at Penwith College."

"He's late." Maggie shut the fridge door and they heard the sound of a motorbike pulling up outside the pub. "Speak of the devil. That sounds like him now."

The door to the pub opened and in walked a lanky teenager with a long floppy fringe, dressed in denim and wearing heavy, black army-style boots. In his left hand he held a motorbike helmet, while the index finger of his right hand rooted around in his right nostril. As he entered, he looked at whatever he had extracted, sniffed it, then wiped his hand on his oily jeans. He looked around and swaggered over to the bar. Maggie didn't say a word and just nodded towards Sophie, sitting at the table. The lad walked to the table and thrust out a hand.

Sophie looked down at the greasy appendage. Jack's fingernails were black with oil, soot, grease, and god-knows-what. Actually, she knew exactly what, as just a few moments before, some of it had been deposited on his jeans. She faked a smile. "Um...no thanks."

Jack thumped himself down into the chair opposite Sophie. “Suit yourself.” He placed his crash helmet on the table and rubbed his fingers through his greasy hair. Sophie turned to Maggie who was shaking her head in disbelief.

“My eyes are here.” Jack looked up from the twin bulges in Sophie’s T-shirt, which he was blatantly admiring.

“Sorry. Just...well...look at them. Are you free tonight?”

“What?”

He raised one eyebrow. “Maybe you could...go for a ride on my motorbike, if you know what I mean?”

Maggie was stifling a laugh and had to put her hand over her mouth. Sophie was incensed and glared at the interviewee. “Excuse me? You’d probably only go too fast and lose control. I think this interview is over.”

Jack sniffed and huffed. “All right then. Your loss.” He got up, picked up his crash helmet and walked out, and as he did so he muttered. “Cock tease.”

“Wanker!”

Before exiting the door, he turned, stuck two fingers up at Sophie and Maggie. Maggie swung the bar door flap open and charged after him. Jack looked terrified and bolted out of the door.

After he had disappeared, Maggie looked at Sophie and burst out laughing. “I thought he was rather good. This interview process is going to be tough if the other candidates are anywhere near his calibre.”

Sophie shook her head. “For fuck’s sake!” *Really?*

Maggie made her way back to the bar. “Who’s next, love?”

“Lisa Loveridge. What’s with all the alliterative names?”



“Not sure, but speak of the devil number two.”

The door opened and a rather scruffy young woman entered the pub. She was wearing a tie-dyed T-shirt, silver hot pants, and she had long, scraggly hair, which she was rubbing furiously. She stopped scratching and came over to the table where Sophie was sitting. Maggie decided to leave Sophie to it and returned behind the bar.

“Lisa?”

Lisa bit her nails and avoided direct eye contact. “Yes?”

“Please, take a seat.” Lisa sat down. “Right, let’s get down to business. You said in your email you have catering experience?”

Lisa pushed her hand under her hair and started to scratch at the nape of her neck. “Well, yes. I make food all the time.”

“Oh?”

Lisa sat up and pushed her shoulders back, proudly. “At home. I make all my own meals.”

“Great. What kind of things do you cook?”

Lisa began scratching at the top of her head. “Oh, all sorts. Cereal, beans on toast, microwave ready meals, you know, that kind of thing.”

“I see.” Sophie turned to Maggie who was shaking her head again.

Lisa took her hand out of her hair and shook her head from side to side.

Sophie watched and noticed something dust-like fall onto the table. She peered a bit closer. Whatever it was had legs and was moving, and she recoiled in disgust. “Well, thanks for coming. Nice to meet you. I’ll contact you if you get the job.”

“Is that it?”

“Yes, um...sorry... Time’s up. Gotta go.”

Lisa stood. “Oh. Thank you.” She made her way out of the pub.

When she had left Sophie quickly stood up. “Oh my God!” She took a paper napkin, wiped the table, and scrunched up the paper into a ball.

“Everything okay?”

Sophie didn’t want to embarrass Lisa any further. “Yes, fine. I don’t think she’s *A Slice of Cake* material.”

“I think you’re right. Well, there’s almost half an hour before the next candidate arrives.”

Sophie slipped out of her chair. “I think I’ll just pop home and, um...freshen up. I suddenly feel a bit itchy. I’ll be back in half an hour. Let’s hope this next one...” She looked at her pad. “Clarissa Blandford is better. I’m not sure about this assistant thing. Not sure at all.”

Half an hour later, Sophie entered the pub ready to interview candidate number three, and was surprised to see the interviewee already sitting at the pub table with her back to Sophie. Sophie started walking towards the table when the girl turned around, stopping Sophie in her tracks.

The girl’s knuckles were white as she gripped her coffee cup too tightly. “Hi Sophie.”

Sophie’s cheeks flushed, her mouth went dry, and she choked — a blanket of clamminess breaking over her body. *You’re fucking kidding me?* “Clare? What the fuck?”

# 31

Sophie turned on her heels and bolted out of the pub.

Clare launched out of her chair. “Wait!” She scrambled after Sophie, who stormed up the lane towards her cottage. “Please!”

Sophie stopped in the lane and spun around to face her old friend, her eyes tired, her shoulders drooping. “I’ve started a new life... What you and Martin did...”

“I didn’t. Please, Sophie. Please. Hear me out. His name wasn’t Martin, it wasn’t even Michael.” Clare hunched her shoulders and raised her arms in surrender. “I had no idea. Trust me. I had *no* idea.”

Sophie squinted, and pursing her lips, anxiously clenched and unclenched her fists. “What?”

Clare walked slowly towards Sophie, gently shaking her head, eyes full of tears. “Soph, I would never, ever hurt you. Please, let me explain. Trust me. Please.”

Sophie threw her head back with a groan, then sighing, went to sit on the edge of the harbour wall.

Clare followed and sat next to her, and the two girls sat in silence for a moment before Clare spoke. “God, I can’t believe I found you.”

“How *did* you find me?”

“Me? I’m a top journalist working for a national magazine with a readership of at least ten people!” Clare bumped her shoulder against Sophie’s.

Sophie half laughed.

“I responded to your advert. I’ve been trying to find you for weeks. You disappeared off the face of the earth, and we’ve all been looking for you! Then, last week Dad Googled you and found your name in an article in the Guardian online. It mentioned Cornwall, your name, and baking, and so we guessed it must be you. I tried to get in touch with the journo but got no reply. Then I searched Cornish newspapers online for your name and hey presto, I saw your ad.”

“Impressive.” Sophie drew in a deep breath. “So, Martin and Michael were the same person? No wonder he didn’t want to meet any of my friends or family.”

Clare put her hand on her friend’s knee. “Yes. I got dad to investigate him and it turns out his real name is Stephen. We weren’t his only conquests, and get this, the flat wasn’t even his own flat. He was just a cleaner who had the keys and used the owners’ stuff while they were away. He’s got into a whole heap of shit over it. They reckon it’s just the tip of the iceberg, and the police were involved and everything.”

“But I thought...” Tears began to stream down Sophie’s cheeks. “I thought...”

“No. God no. Sophie, I love you.” Clare lifted her hand from Sophie’s knee and wrapped it around her best friend, leaning so their heads were touching. “I tried to chase after you, but those bloody Louboutin heels I was wearing. I was in a cast for weeks after the accident.”

Sophie snapped upright, lifting her head from Clare’s. “Cast? What accident?”

“That night. I thought you saw me? I tripped and fell down those god-awful stairs. Broke my sodding wrist in three places. Michael ran off and left me — the bastard. Just as well, as I would’ve dropped him.”

“What? Oh Clare. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.” Sophie hung forward with her head in her hands and burst into sobs. “Oh Clare. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

The two girls hugged and rocked for a long time.

“It’s not your fault Soph. God I’ve missed you.”

Sophie groaned. “Oh my god, what have I done? How are JJ?”

“Look, it’s okay. I told them I thought I’d found you. I think we should call them and let them know you’re alright.”

...

“And you have a dog? Any more surprises?” asked Clare, as the two girls stood in Sophie’s kitchen nursing mugs of hot, sweet tea.

Sophie giggled. “He likes you.”

“Well, let’s hope he’s got it out of his system. What kind of dog is he anyway?”

“A randy French Bulldog. You should have seen him when I inherited him. He’d been brought up on cake and was huge. Now he has diet doggie food, poor sod.”

“So tell me what happened after you ran off that night. You vanished without a trace. We even reported you as a missing person and the police investigated. They said their enquiries had led them to believe you were safe and well. They refused to tell us how they knew, and we

couldn't find out anything. I tried your phone, email, Facebook, all of it. You just vanished.”

Sophie sighed. “It’s a long story.”

“Well, I’m not going anywhere. I’ve got all the time in the world. Tell me everything.”

The two girls decamped to the living room, and Sophie told Clare everything that had happened; about Gwen, learning to bake, about the funeral, the cottage, Tremellen, the garden party, and about Angus.

When Sophie had finished, Clare looked slowly around the living room as if seeing it for the first time, and stared at her friend wide-eyed. “God Sophie, that’s incredible! I don’t know what to say. Shit! We’re sitting in your own house. Your very own house!” She laughed. “And you can cook! No more polystyrene pizza!”

Sophie smiled. “Yes, it is pretty amazing.” Her smile faded, “There’s one other thing I’ve not told you.” She looked down and swallowed, her voice quiet and serious.

Clare leant forward, concerned. “What is it? You’re not ill or something?”

Sophie paused then looked directly at her friend. “I’m late.”

“Late as in...late as in...?”

Sophie nodded.

“Oh God. You’re never late. Fuck, at uni I used to set my watch by your periods. Didn’t you use protection?”

Sophie rolled her eyes. “Please, don’t lecture me. I know. I fucked up.”

“Shit.” Clare shrugged. “But you might not be. You might just be...late?”

Sophie chewed her lip. “Maybe.”

Clare sat upright. “Well, you need to find out. *We* need to find out.”

Sophie frowned. “What? Now?”

“Yes! Now! God, Sophie! Where’s the nearest shop?”

Sophie stared — eyes glazed — at her friend, finding it hard to focus.

“St. Bunyan.”

“Oh yeah, I got a taxi from there.”

Sophie snapped back to the present and smiled. “So you’ve met Dodgy Dave then?”

“Dodgy as fuck!”

The two girls laughed.

Clare pretended to back comb her hair. “I mean, what’s with the whole Elvis persona?”

Sophie shook her head. “Perhaps he *is* Elvis?”

“You know, he actually tried to put his hand on my knee!”

Sophie winked. “I bet you loved that.”

Clare raised her eyebrows and nodded towards Sophie, who simply stared back. “So...you gonna give him a call or what? We’re not gonna walk there!”

“Oh, shit! I didn’t tell you. I have a car!”

“Bloody hell, look at you!”

“Don’t get too excited. It’s only a clapped out Mini.”

“I’ll get my bag.”

Clare gripped the sides of her seat as the Mini sped up the narrow lanes towards St. Bunyan, hedgerows full of cow parsley scraping

against the side of the car as Sophie worked the gears to gain maximum speed. Sunlight flashed through the windscreen, bouncing off the dashboard, and Clare flipped down the sun visor to shield her eyes. “So...Angus? If you are...you know...preggaz, then, is Angus...?”

“Yes! What do you think I am?”

“Right...so tell me all the juicyies.”

Sophie feigned nonchalance and shrugged her shoulders. “Well, you know me — it was kinda naughty.”

Clare waited for Sophie to elaborate but Sophie just smiled to herself.

“Oh go on — tell me! And spare no details! For example...” Clare put on her best Scottish accent, “did the big Scotsman heave you onto the kitchen table and ‘ave his way wi’ ya?”

Sophie blushed, raising her eyebrows, and tilted her head from side to side.

“No way! You dirty girl! In the kitchen? No way! He didn’t squirt whipped cream all over you or something did he?”

Sophie blushed even more, and put on her best school ma'am voice. “That’s enough Miss Adebayo. I have no wish to discuss this matter further.”

The girls drove on in silence, then Sophie sighed. “Yeh, but it’s all over. He’s married.”

“Married! Well, you left that major plot twist out of the story! Fuck, Soph. I’m sorry.”

“I wouldn’t have gone near him with a ten-foot barge pole if I’d known he was married. Anyway, it doesn’t matter.”

“It bloody does matter if he’s the father of your child!”



“I don’t even know if I *am* pregnant yet!” She paused. “”And I’m not sure I want to know.”

The girls sat in the parked car in St. Bunyan town square, and Sophie squirmed, looking anxiously at the entrance to the grocery store. “I can’t go in. It’ll have to be you. You’ll need to pretend the test’s for you.” She hunkered down a bit in her seat.

Clare’s mouth dropped open. “Great...thanks.”

“Hey, I have a reputation to uphold.”

Clare raised her eyebrows and muttered. “Hmmm. It’s a good job I love you. I’ll be back in five.” She exited the car, leaving Sophie to nibble nervously at the end of her nails. A few minutes later Clare returned with a bag and got in the car. “I bought three!”

“*Three?*”

“That’s all they had! And, well...you’ve got to make sure. The snooty cow behind the counter gave me a well-funny look. I told her I’d had a heavy night with three men!”

“You didn’t? Clare!”

Clare laughed. “Some getaway driver you are! Step on it!”

Sophie started the engine, put the car into gear, and they drove the little Mini back to Tremellen.

Clare pressed her ear against the bathroom door and knocked. “Don’t forget to stop mid flow and do the second one!”

“Oh fuck! I just dropped one down the loo. It’s alright, I’m still holding two of them.”

“At the same time?”

“Yes! I wasn’t sure if I’d have enough pee to do one after the other. It’s okay, the one I dropped is floating.”

“Too much information!”

A few moments later, Clare heard the toilet flush and Sophie emerged from the bathroom.

Clare stood, holding her palms up in question. “Well?”

Sophie gently hopped from one foot to the other. “I can’t look.”

“Do you want me to?”

“No, I can do this.” She looked down at the ends of the two white sticks. “Two blue lines. That’s good isn’t it?”

Clare looked at the unfolded paper instructions and her mouth dropped open. “Depends if you like babies or not.”

The two girls lay on Sophie's bed, looking up at the ceiling, the early morning light filtering through the bedroom curtains.

Clare broke the silence. "So what'll you do?"

Sophie sighed. She'd been awake half the night thinking about it. *Stay in bed forever and never see anyone ever again.* "Make a go of it, I guess?"

"You mean keep it?"

Sophie was silent for a moment. "Tremellen. This cottage. They have a history of strong women who brought up children on their own. Maggie did it, Gwen did it. Why can't I?"

"But what about your plans, about the tea rooms and bakery?"

"You ask a lot of questions don't you?"

"I'm sorry. It's just...well, you know..." Clare raised an arm and slumped it back down on the bed. "You're kind of special to me." She snorted. "No idea why — your feet stink and you fart in bed."

Sophie laughed.

"Seriously though, I admire you."

"You do?"

"Yes. This thing, here." Clare waved her hand in the air, gesturing at the house. "What you're doing. This is you — all you. You're making your own way in the world. You're super-Sophie!"

"More like stupid-Sophie." She sighed. "And I'm stumbling my way — probably backwards."

"No! You have everything going for you."

"I'm not going to be able to do it on my own."

“You’re not on your own.”

“True. The locals and my friends here — they’re a good bunch.”

“I was talking about *me*, you numpty.” Clare giggled, holding Sophie’s hand. “You’re not telling me I didn’t get the job are you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, okay, so the interview in the pub didn’t go as well as I hoped, but there’s no doubt I would have outshone any of the other candidates!”

Sophie snorted. “You should have seen them. High calibre, they were. It’s going to be hard letting them down. And besides, you can’t, you have a job back in London. A life.”

“Ah, fuck all that, I’ll take a sabbatical. Besides, my best friend needs me. She’s having a baby don’t you know?” She squeezed Sophie’s hand.

A tear trickled down Sophie’s cheek. “And your best friend thinks you’re going to be the best Auntie ever.”

“Don’t you know it!”

The girls lay there for some time, just lying and thinking, before Clare piped up again. “When will you tell him?”

Sophie sighed again. “Maybe I won’t?”

“He could help you out, at least, with money and stuff.”

“I dunno. He has a wife, her name’s Rose. He even has a rose tattooed on his bicep. God, I even asked him about it and he made up some cock-and-bull — and what if they’ve got kids? I can’t do that to her. I know what it is to lose someone.”

“How do you feel about him?”

“Honestly?” Sophie let out a long breath. *I love him.* “I was falling in love with him.” *I love him.*

“Oh Soph.” Clare rolled onto her side to face her best friend, and hugged Sophie tightly as she sobbed into her arms.

...

Sophie and Clare stood on the threshold of The Barnacle. “Are you ready to meet the gang? They’re always here Sunday lunchtime. To be honest, there’s not a lot else to do.”

“This place looks like something out of Pirates of the Caribbean. Is it a themed pub?”

“No. Just run down, but the people are fab. Just try and keep a straight face. No giggling.” Sophie smiled. “Some of them are...um...a little eccentric.”

“Got it.”

The locals turned in unison as the girls entered the pub, watching them expectantly.

Sophie coughed. “I’d like to introduce my new assistant, Clare, who also happens to be my best friend!” There were nods and murmurs of welcome from those assembled in the pub. Sophie then introduced them each in turn: Maggie — who looked relieved — Robert, Cynthia, Terry, and finally Tom.

When Tom was introduced, he rose from his chair and dashed towards Clare, his big frame causing Clare to lean back in surprise. He beamed,

holding out his hand. “Hi, I’m Tom. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Any friend of Sophie’s is a friend of mine.”

Clare, limply, took his hand, blushed, and glanced nervously at his body, before fixing on his big, blue eyes. She made a noise that sounded like something was stuck in her throat, then managed to squeak. “Hi”

Tom let his gaze linger on her a little longer, and continued to hold her hand. “Can I buy you a drink?”

Clare just swayed, and nodded, without replying.

“Right then. A cider for Clare — just a half. We don’t want a repeat performance of one of Sophie’s first encounters with *The Widow Maker*.”

Sophie whacked Tom on his arm. “Shhh, we don’t talk about that night *do we, Tom?*” She raised her eyebrows.

Tom blinked, looking bashful. “Oh, yeah, right. Good point.”

Clare came to, as if snapping out of a trance. “Eh? What?”

“Oh, nothing!” chorused Tom and Sophie.

Tom took his seat at his usual table, while Clare perched on a bar stool at the bar, drink in hand, but Sophie remained standing. “I have an announcement to make.” Her statement piqued everyone’s attention, a silence falling over the room as the locals shifted on their chairs to face her. “I’m starting a tea room and bakery here in Tremellen.” There was a slight pause, before the room erupted into a great cheer. Once the room had calmed, Sophie corrected herself, “Well, actually, it’s going to be a French pâtisserie!”

Tom frowned. “In Cornwall?”

Sophie nodded.

Maggie smiled. “Good for you, cowgirl.”

“Clare’s going to help me run it.” She chortled. “She’s going to be my *not-so-silent* partner!”

“Oi! Oi!” remonstrated Clare.

Rob held up his pint. “Well, this is great news. When do you hope to open, love?”

Sophie bit her lip and hesitated. “Hopefully in a few weeks.”

Clare piped up, “Saturday, August the third.”

Sophie turned to Clare. “Really? That soon?”

Clare smiled. “Sure! We’ve got a heap to do, but I reckon we can do it. We’ll have almost the whole of August to get the business off the ground — as far as tourists are concerned — and if we have good weather in September and October, we might even attract some late season visitors.”

Sophie admired her friend and blinked. “Of course, the plan is to do catering — that’ll be the bread and butter of the business.”

Cynthia beamed at the girls. “What’s it going to be called?”

“It’s going to be called, *A Slice of Cake!*”

Maggie held up her rum and coke and made a toast. “Here’s to *A Slice of Cake.*”

Everyone cheered. “*A Slice of Cake!*”

Maggie placed a gin and tonic in front of Clare and addressed Sophie, who had since taken a seat next to Clare at the bar. “Have you decided yet, love?”

Sophie looked at Clare, who looked pointedly at Sophie. “Still got that bit of a headache Soph? Probably best to stick to a soft drink, don’t you reckon?”

“Oh yes, right. Yes. Um...I’ll have a lemonade, thanks.”

Terry approached the two girls sitting at the bar. “We’ve all been chatting, and seeing as you’re not exactly flush, I reckon we’d all like to help you, like? You know...get ready ‘n’ that.”

“Really? That’d be lovely.”

He grinned. “I’ll do any woodwork ‘n’ carpentry ‘n’ that.”

“You can use my van for any bits you need,” offered Tom.

Maggie placed a lemonade in front of Sophie. “And I wondered if you’d like any help painting the sign, I’d love to give it a go, if you’ll let me?”

“That’d be amazing Maggie, thank you.”

Maggie put her finger to her chin and thought for a moment. “I have a beer fridge down in the cellar. It’s virtually brand new. You could use it for drinks, displaying cakes, and stuff — if you like?”

Clare nodded. “Could be useful.”

Sophie agreed. “Thank you. We’ve not made a plan yet.”

“I can help you with some hanging baskets for outside,” offered Cynthia, “It’ll give me an excuse to have a day trip to the garden centres in Hayle.”

Rob scratched his chin. “And I’ve got a small box of French items somewhere left over from one of our parties. Can’t remember what’s in it, but you’re welcome to it.”

Sophie beamed. “Thank you! All of you. Thank you!”



The girls returned to the cottage, and Sophie poured them both a glass of red wine. Clare watched with her eyebrows raised, moving Sophie's full glass towards her. "There'll be none of that for you any more. Sorry."

Sophie moaned. "Oh pants, I keep forgetting." She sighed and slumped her shoulders, looking down at her flat tummy. "It's hard to believe there's anything in there." She looked up. "Anyway, what was all that between you and Tom, then?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you went all coy and quiet! You're never coy, or quiet, ever!"

Clare held up her chin, indignantly. "I was not!"

"You so were. Oh my God, you fancy him!"

Clare blushed.

"You're blushing. You're actually blushing! I don't think I've ever seen you blush!"

Clare picked up one of the glasses. "I am so not. Now change the subject." She took a large swig of the wine.

"Oh no, this is too good for me to pass up. Has Clare Adebayo met her match — a man who makes her weak at the knees? What happened to *Go in strong, be assertive, be bold?*"

"Okay, okay, so, I might have felt something. Something. Fuck, I didn't know what to say. The words wouldn't come out. What's the matter with me? I don't do that!"

Sophie put on a sing-song-voice. "Cupid's plucked his bow?"

"But he's a hunk isn't he? Looks just like his dad."

"His Dad? Tom doesn't have a dad."

"Duh! Everyone has a dad."

“No, I mean, Tom’s never known his dad. Maggie brought him up as a single parent.”

“You mean Dodgy Dave isn’t Tom’s dad?”

Sophie took a step back. “Dodgy Dave? Dodgy Dave the taxi driver?”

“Well it’s obvious isn’t it? They have the same eyes, nose, jawline. They’re practically twins, but Dave is like, way older, and not as cute.”

Sophie thought for a moment, then widened her eyes. “God, I never saw it. Now you come to mention it, there is a striking resemblance!”

# 33

With the help of their friends, Sophie and Clare prepared the cottage for a late summer opening of *A Slice of Cake*. They'd sent out invitations to everyone they could think of, including Piers Branagan at The Guardian; Clare was keen to help Sophie cash in on what could be a big scoop for the business — and a positive review from Piers could put *A Slice of Cake* and Tremellen on the map for months, or even years, to come.

The one person they hadn't invited, however, was Angus. Clare, feeling a strong sense of justice that Angus should shoulder some of the responsibility for Sophie's condition, had been trying to track Angus down. Her search had reached a dead end, because without a last name — just the name of his wife, and the knowledge that the couple lived in Aberdeen — Sophie had been unable to discover anything new.

The day before the grand opening, *A Slice of Cake* was almost ready. Clare and Sophie had transformed the living room into a small tea room: they'd kept the two armchairs, placing them near the fireplace, with a small coffee table between them, and arranged two other small tables which could seat two people each. The three tables were each adorned with a tablecloth in red, white, and blue — the colours of the French flag.

For the garden, Tom had acquired two more picnic tables to match the one he'd already sourced, and to provide some shade, he'd erected an awning made out of an old sail.

Terry had cleared out the shed to make room for extra storage and fixed up the old outhouse so it flushed and had a lockable door. It used

an antiquated system of tanks that were fed, by pump, from the sea, such that it was automatically kept topped up when the tide was in.

The girls had bought a chalkboard to go outside, and Maggie had hand-painted a beautiful rustic sign which read, *A Slice of Cake - pâtisserie*. She had also painted *OPEN* and *CLOSED* on two sides of a piece of Cornish slate, which hung to the right of the front door.

The most magnificent addition to *La Canelé*, however, was the counter. It protruded from the rear wall in the living room, forming a barrier between the living room and the kitchen, and was made out of a large, mahogany ship's rudder that Terry had masterfully worked, planed, and varnished.

While Clare and the others had been busy in the new tea room and garden, Sophie had been busy in the kitchen, preparing cakes and pastries for the opening day, including, of course, her signature canelés.

Cynthia and Robert pulled up in an old-fashioned brown-and-cream Bentley while Sophie and Clare were standing in the lane with Harvey.

Clare's mouth fell open. "Bloody hell, is it the queen?"

Rob exited the vehicle. "Aloha!"

Cynthia closed her passenger door. "Hello!"

Rob immediately opened the boot and pulled out a hanging basket, painted blue, and full of red and white geraniums. "Here you go. I have three more in here too."

Sophie's eyes grew wide and she smiled. "They look amazing!"

Cynthia was beaming with pride. "And Terry's already put up hooks."

Clare glanced at the wall of the cottage and slowly nodded, impressed. “I hadn’t noticed those.”

Sophie followed her gaze. “How did we miss them? He must’ve done it last night. Sneaky!”

The girls and Cynthia, with some help from Rob, hung the four hanging baskets on the walls. Three between the windows along the front of the cottage, and one near the garden door, at the rear.

Rob then returned to the car, and lifted from the back seat a large cardboard box which he handed to Clare. “These are those French bits I was talking about.”

Clare took the box. “Oh, thanks.”

“Hello everyone!” The four turned to see Claudia approaching on foot, clutching a large carrier bag in one hand, and Pixie’s lead in the other. The two dogs eyed each other wagging their little tails. Claudia eyed the sign and the hanging baskets, appreciatively. “How splendid! I’ve brought you some bunting left over from the St. Bunyan church fete — and it’s in red, white, and blue! I thought it would go well with the French theme.”

Sophie accepted the bag and took a quick peek inside. “Perfect. Thank you!”

Clare smiled at Claudia. “I’ll get this inside,” and she carried the cardboard box into the cottage.

Harvey wandered over to Pixie and they were nose-to-nose. Sophie couldn’t help but notice that Pixie was rather rotund, even under all that fur. *I suppose she’s not the only dog that likes cake around here.*

Claudia tightened her grip on Pixie's lead. "Righto, I must dash. See you all tomorrow! I can't wait!"

Cynthia glanced at her gold watch. "Yes, we should be going too. Eleven o'clock tomorrow isn't it?"

Sophie nodded.

The three visitors said their goodbyes and Robert reversed his Bentley back down the lane towards the pub.

*Who'd have thought it, thought Sophie. Rob and Cyn are loaded!*

The cardboard box, sporting the words *FRENCH BITS* written in marker pen, sat on the kitchen counter. Clare opened it and pulled out the first items. "Ooh, French waitress uniforms. Oh, no, hang on, these aren't uniforms, they're dressing up clothes!"

"You're kidding? What, like for children?"

"Um...no, I don't think so." Clare held up a short, black, satin pinafore with frilly, white lace hems. "These are *definitely* for adults, and there's several in here."

Sophie burst out laughing. "Reckon we should wear them for the grand opening?"

"Bloody hell, what's this?" Clare pulled out a long hollow rubber tube covered in soft rubber spikes. "And this? Looks like some kind of fly swat?"

Sophie slapped her hand over her mouth. "Oh my God! Rob said they were left over from one of their parties."

Clare held one of the costumes to her body and put on a French accent. "Monsieur, with these Ferrero Rocher you are really spoiling us.

And I need to be spoiled, Monsieur.” She picked up the fly swat. “And I have been a *very* bad girl, Monsieur, don’t you think? Monsieur!” She swatted her own thigh, and the two girls burst out laughing.

For the rest of the day, Clare and Sophie were making the final food preparations for the grand opening, and in the late afternoon, Sophie needed some more cream, so she asked Clare to pick some up from the farm shop.

Clare agreed, and drove the little Mini up the lane towards St. Buryan, with directions to Holly’s Farm Shop: a fridge by the side of the road at Holly’s Farm. As she approached Shoehorn Lane, she decided to take a detour and visit Angus’s Aunt May, in a hope she could glean some more information on how to get in touch with him.

As Sophie had done before her, Clare found the entrance to Glen Mornay, and wound up the single track lane to the house. Aunt May was outside in the garden, by the front door, pruning her roses. *Roses*, thought Clare, *how ironic*. Aunt May stopped what she was doing as Clare exited the car and approached her. “Hello, are you Aunt May?”

“Aye, I am. And who might you be, my dear?”

“I’m Clare. I’m Sophie’s friend, I think you’ve met her?”

“Oh yes, a charming girl. Very pretty, but I dare say she doesn’t know it.”

“Right... I don’t know if you got the invite to the opening of Sophie’s tea room tomorrow? I was, um...just checking.”

“Aye, I hope to be there if I can.”

“Great!” Clare racked her brain, desperate for a way in to talk about Angus. “So...I heard your nephew, Angus, helped Sophie with a party?”

“Och aye, a posh affair. I believe it went well.”

“Right... Then, afterwards, Angus went back up to Scotland to be with his wife?” It sounded clunky, and Clare knew it.

May clicked her tongue, “His wife? You mean Rose?”

Clare bit her lip and shifted, uncomfortably. “Yes.”

Aunt May thought for a moment. “And why would he go and stay with her then?”

Clare was now feeling awkward and confused, and it clearly showed on her face.

“You do know they’re nae longer married? Och, I don’t suppose yae do.” May looked around, leant towards Clare, and whispered. “The poor lad. She left him — on his wedding day.”

Clare’s eyes were like saucers. “No?”

“Aye, with his best man. Got stone drunk and told Angus she’d been having an affair. Wanted to come clean — *get it off her chest*, I think she said.”

Clare gasped. “On their wedding night?”

May’s face fell. “Aye. Utterly destroyed him, it did.”

Clare tensed up. “But Sophie’s in love with him, and she thinks he’s married!” It was too late, she’d blurted it out before she could stop herself. Clare put her hand to her mouth and spun around in a circle. The news was too incredible to hear. She turned back to May. “You have to tell Angus he needs to call...no, see Sophie, urgently. It’s vitally important.”



May contemplated Clare for a second, then smiled. “Why don’t you tell him yourself, my dear?” She called out, “Angus! Come outside, there’s someone here to see you!”

# 34

Angus emerged from the house through the open front door and stood next to his Aunt, whose eyes sparkled, and who wore a half-smile. He looked warily at Clare, noticing the parked Mini behind her. “Good afternoon. Can I help you?”

Clare quickly composed herself and held out a hand. “Hi. I’m Clare — Sophie’s friend from London.”

Angus took her hand and shook it. “*The* Clare from London?” He let go of Clare’s hand. “Aren’t *you* the reason Sophie’s here in the first place?”

Clare shuffled from one foot to the other. “She told you?”

Angus stiffened. “Aye, and she spared no details.”

“Well, it’s not what you think. It’s a long story — it was all a misunderstanding, but we’re friends again. Anyway, I was here to invite your Aunt to the grand opening of Sophie’s tea room and bakery tomorrow.” Angus raised his eyebrows in surprise. “In fact, why don’t you both come along?” She gave Angus a hard stare.

He scratched his chin. “Aye, well, that’s kind of yae, and I would, but I’ve quite a bit of work to be getting on with. Please send Miss Kingsman my regards.”

Aunt May caught Clare’s eye and winked. She turned to her nephew and asked, “And how d’you expect me to get there on my own? Yae gonna make an old woman walk?”

Angus looked uncomfortable and shifted slightly from foot to foot.

May smiled at Clare. “We’ll see you tomorrow, my dear.”

Clare smiled in return. “Great! See you tomorrow then.” She headed back to the parked Mini, and as she drove to the farm shop, she fist-pumped the air and let out a whoop.

...

The day arrived — the grand opening of *A Slice of Cake*. The red, white, and blue bunting was strung along the sides of *La Canelé*, the chalkboard was out on the lane reading *Welcome, French pâtisserie*, and the sign by the front door read *OPEN*.

From inside the cottage came the buzz of a small party in full swing. Clare and Sophie had pushed the two living room tables together for teas and coffees, and outside, the picnic tables were all covered with white linen tablecloths — one of which was laden with sumptuous delicacies. There was an assortment of dainty sandwiches, English cakes, French pastries, and, of course, Sophie’s famous canelés.

*Thank goodness it’s not raining*, thought Sophie, as she glanced up at the overcast sky that was keeping off the worst of the sun’s heat.

The girls used the counter — made from the ship’s rudder — to serve champagne, and Sophie greeted each guest with a chilled glass as they arrived. Her heart soared as she saw all her favourite people in one place; people colliding from two very different worlds. Dodgy Dave, Rob and Cyn, Claudia and her friend Jessica, Maggie, Tom, Terry, and a family from one of the holiday cottages were all happily drinking and munching. Piers and his partner James had arrived early as they had stayed overnight in Penzance, and Piers was eager to show James the

area. JJ had arrived at near enough eleven on the dot. They had booked a room at The Barnacle, set off in the early hours, and driven down from London. Even Mr. Harris attended. He had a client in Truro that he'd visited the previous day, and so decided to make a weekend of it and make the extra journey down to the very tip of Cornwall.

Jeffery admired the cottage and looked proudly at Sophie. "So, this is your new home? I love it. Well done you!"

Sophie smiled and nodded in thanks. She'd missed him so much and there was so much to tell him, but now he was here, she found it difficult to get the words out.

"I have something for you." He handed Sophie a copy of *Staying In* magazine whilst wiggling his eyebrows, Groucho Marx style. "Open it to page thirty-four."

Sophie fumbled through the magazine looking for page thirty-four, and then she saw the title, *Battersea Bake Off Winner Stripped of Title*. Sophie scanned the article. Mrs Braithwaite, it emerged, had admitted to cheating; swapping out the sugar in Sophie's ingredients box for salt, all because of a long-running feud with the late Ms. Gwendoline Humphreys. She let out a little squeal, and as she did so, Clare sidled up alongside her.

Sophie frowned. "You knew about this?"

Clare nodded. "I've been so desperate to let on — you have no idea how hard it's been! But Dad wanted to be the one to tell you. After all, it was *his* investigative journalism that got the scoop!"

"I don't know what to say." Sophie felt such a mixture of feelings welling up inside her, but she had to focus — she had a French Pâtisserie

to open. “Thanks, dad! I’ll read the whole thing later and savour every last drop!” She gave Jeffrey a massive hug but it was cut short by Harvey. The dog who had previously been doing his best vacuum-cleaner impersonation — both inside and outside the cottage — was now snorting and whining at the closed front door. It opened and in walked Aunt May, closely followed by Angus. Harvey dropped both his ears and tail when he realised Bonnie wasn’t with them.

Angus looked at the forlorn dog. “It’s alright pooch, she’s just tied up outside. You can see her later.”

*Bloody hell! What’s he doing here?* Sophie forced a smile. “Welcome.” She took two glasses of champagne from the counter and held them out to the newcomers.

May quivered, shrugging her shoulders and scrunching her face up in a wide smile. “Oooh, this is a bit swanky eh, Angus?”

Sophie swallowed. “There are teas and coffee in here, and the food’s outside. Please help yourself. There’s plenty of places to sit out there too.” She slipped into the kitchen to catch some air. Leaning up against a counter, Sophie let out a long breath.

Clare walked in with a small pile of empty plates, letting the paper napkins slide off into a bin, before placing the plates on the drainer. “You okay?”

Sophie’s face was deadpan. “Angus is here.”

Clare feigned incredulity. “He is? But he wasn’t invited, was he?”

“Exactly.”

“Well come on, you can’t avoid him, but you don’t have to talk to him.” She grabbed Sophie by the arm and gently led her back into the living room.

Sophie couldn’t see Angus or May, so she assumed they must have moved into the garden. She groaned. “I need a drink.” She turned to the champagne on the counter, took glass, and was just about to take a swig when Clare interrupted her, resting her hand on Sophie’s arm. Sophie glared at her friend. “What are you, the alcohol police? One small glass won’t hurt, will it?”

Clare winced. “Soph.”

Sophie kept her voice calm but firm. “I’m a grown up, Clare. I can do what I like.”

“But hun, seriously, you shouldn’t.”

“Oh yes? Just try and stop me.” Sophie lifted the glass to her lips.

Clare saw red. She loved her friend and would do anything to protect her and her unborn child. She flung her arms in the air and yelled, “Okay, go ahead then! I’m just looking out for you and your baby!”

The two girls stared at each other in silence.

They turned to see Angus and Piers, standing just inside the doorway to the garden, looking at them — both wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

Clare slumped and sighed. Sophie was close to tears.

Piers, in an attempt to break the tension, approached Sophie. “Darling, it’s okay.” He put an arm around her. “Let me take that from you.” He placed Sophie’s glass on a nearby table and gave her a peck on the cheek, before turning to lead her out into the garden.

Angus blocked his way, and gave a long hard look at Sophie. With a shake of his head he looked down at Piers, and between gritted teeth he forced a smile. “Congratulations to you both.”

Piers raised his eyebrows and looked at Angus in confusion. “I beg your pardon?”

Angus rolled his eyes and clicked his tongue, impatiently. “Sophie’s baby. Your baby.”

Piers looked suddenly, very worried, and he stuttered. “Excuse me? *My* baby?” His mouth dropped open and he turned to look back at Sophie, before returning his eyes to Angus. “Good God man! I think not! I’m blissfully married.” He looked past Angus to the doorway. “Here he comes now. This is my husband, James.”

Angus stepped aside as James entered the room.

James glanced around at the anxious faces. “Whose cat died?”

Sophie went bright red, let go of Piers’ hand, turned and dived past Clare and the counter, into the kitchen, followed closely by Angus. The two stood, arms folded, facing each other. Sophie spoke first, “You’ve got a nerve coming back here.”

Angus let his eyes wander around the room in which they had made food and love, and sighed. When his gaze fell on Sophie, he shook his head. “I got your message, loud and clear.” Another sigh escaped his mouth, and with a defeated slump of his shoulders, he asked, “How’ve you been?”

Sophie didn’t know what to say. She wanted to tell him she’d missed him every day since he’d left. She wanted to burst into tears, and for him

to hold her in his arms. Taking a deep breath, she asked, “How could you do it to me?”

“I’m sorry. I thought you and Piers were...that day. I saw him kissing you.”

“Me and Piers? You thought *I* was with someone else?” Sophie snorted harshly and flung her arm in the air. “And all this time you’ve been with me you’ve been cheating on your wife. You’re fucking *married* Angus!”

Angus swayed and put his hand to his head. Rubbing at his temples, he began to laugh to himself. “What the fuck?”

Sophie narrowed her eyes. “Yes, I found out about Rose. How could you do it to me? After everything I told you.”

“Oh Soph... You need to know—”

Clare burst into the kitchen, cutting Angus short. “Quick! Angus! It’s your Aunt. I think she’s having a heart attack!”



# 35

Angus and Sophie ran back through the empty living room and into the garden. A crowd had gathered around Aunt May, who was sitting in a chair; her face grey, her breathing laboured, holding one hand to her chest. Angus knelt down beside Maggie who was gently stroking May's arm. "She's having chest pains. An ambulance is on it's way."

Aunt May spoke between gasps. "I'm so, so sorry."

Angus held her hand. "Och, don't be daft. Save your breath. What happened, Mags?"

Maggie sighed. "I don't know, Angus. She seemed perfectly happy, then she started to complain of chest pains and found it hard to breathe. Tom called the ambulance straight away."

They heard a siren approaching. Tom stood in the lane waving, as a first responder from the coastguard pulled up in a Land Rover. She jumped out of the vehicle carrying a bag she'd lifted from the passenger seat, and followed Tom through the gate into the garden. The small crowd parted for her, and she knelt down in front of Aunt May. "Hello, I'm Gemma. What's your name?"

May took in a shallow breath. "May."

"Right, May, let's get you sorted. An ambulance will be with us shortly."

The party crowd stood in the lane, watching the paramedics wheel Aunt May onto a ramp and lift her into the rear of the ambulance. Angus climbed into the back, but before taking a seat, he turned to Sophie. "Would yae mind looking after Bonnie for me?"

“Of course. I’m sure your Aunt will be okay.” She held out her hands to Angus for reassurance, hoping that he could see how much she empathised. He held onto Sophie’s hands and squeezed them, until the paramedics closed the rear doors of the ambulance and forced them apart. Sophie watched with an ache as the paramedics drove the ambulance up the lane, blue lights flashing, heading for the West Cornwall Hospital in Penzance.

The crowd stood in the lane in silence, listening on as the sirens slowly faded away into the distance.

Clare held onto Sophie’s arm. “She’ll be alright, I’m sure.”

The girls turned to head back into the garden, and were met with a scene of utter carnage. Harvey, having been left to his own devices, was standing on the table, tucking into as many cakes as he could. The cake stands were rolling on their sides, and the table was a mess of crumbs. Bonnie had pulled loose from her collar and stood next to the table lapping cream off plates; while Pixie was under the table eating morsels that Harvey had kindly tossed to the ground.

Sophie clenched her fists and put them to the sides of her head. “Harvey!”

Piers, observing the carnage, smiled. “Oh dear.”

James took his hand. “Looks like it’s gone to the dogs.”

Claudia dashed into the garden, pulled Pixie out from under the table, and tucked her under one arm.

Jumoke and Clare put their arms around Sophie as she began to sob.

“Don’t worry, dear,” offered Cynthia, sympathetically.

“We can help clear up,” said Tom.

Sophie stiffened and flung her arms in the air, anger and disgust scalding her insides. “No! We can do it. I think it’s best if everyone just goes home.”

The crowd muttered words of thanks and expressions of sympathy, as they slowly made their way back to the pub and car park.

The two dogs were shut in the shed — partly as a punishment, and partly to keep them out of trouble — while Sophie and Clare stood alone in the garden surveying the mess. Sophie groaned. “What a total fuckfest. This was supposed to be a special day.” No sooner had she said it than a pang of guilt struck her; a woman had just been rushed to hospital, how could she be so self-absorbed. “I hope May is okay.”

Clare sighed. “I’m sure she will be.”

Sophie felt in her pocket and pulled out a small paper bag. “I almost forgot. I bought you a gift.”

She passed the bag to Clare who opened it and took out a Charlotte Tilbury lipstick. “Oh, Sophie.”

“Well, I did break your last one.”

Clare hugged and kissed her best friend.

Sophie sighed, looking again at the carnage. “Those bloody dogs — and Angus.”

Clare nodded. “I take it he told you?”

“Told me what?”

“About Rose.”

*God, she's the last person I want to talk about.* Sophie snapped. "What about her?"

"About how she left him on his wedding night and ran off with his best man!"

Sophie turned to face her friend. "What?"

"Angus. He's not married — well, he was for like, a day — but not any more!"

Sophie frowned, shock and disbelief etched across her face. "Not married?"

...

Sophie made her way along the emergency department corridor and into the waiting room. She scanned the seats until she spotted Angus sitting in a corner, leaning over, with his head in his hands. She walked over to where he was sitting and, noticing her, he looked up. Sophie looked into his tired, red eyes, and bit her lip, worried that the news was going to be bad.

He drew a deep breath, and standing, wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close.

"How is she?"

Angus sighed and smiled. "Och, she'll be fine. Turns out it was indigestion. The doctor says she'd had one too many chocolate eclairs. Apparently she'd eaten at least six." He snorted. "May said they were too delicious and should have a warning label on them! The docs are just running a couple of other tests and she'll be right along."

Sophie sighed with relief. “Thank God.”

Angus looked into Sophie’s eyes. “Soph?”

Sophie placed a finger on Angus’s lips. “It’s okay, I know about Rose.”  
She smiled at him and wrapped an arm around his waist.

Angus cupped his hand gently around the back of Sophie’s head as they pulled closer together, and whispered, “I didn’t get a chance to congratulate you on your baby.”

Sophie reached up, took Angus’s hand and placed it on her belly. “And I didn’t get a chance to congratulate you on your baby either.”

# Epilogue

## A Slice of Cake by Piers Branagan

Dear Readers

Miracle upon miracles! Praise the Lord in heaven above for the great mercies he has bestowed upon us! A star has been born, and her name is Miss Sophie Kingsman.

At the weekend, my husband and I were invited to the grand opening of a French pâtisserie called *A Slice of Cake*. Though this parlour of pastry perfection may be in a small corner of our sacred land, its radiant splendour must be enunciated to the kingdom!

It is the dream of every writer and critic to discover a talent, and be the humble equerry and emissary for culinary excellence. Miss Sophie Kingsman is the most exceptional pâtissière I have ever encountered. He that has ears let him hear! Such are the delicacies that she produces, that a single taste transports one into the heavenly realms. The good news, however, is that you too can experience the divine. Miss Kingsman's pâtisserie is open daily in the picturesque village of Tremellen in Cornwall. Look up this place at once! Flock to the doors of this establishment. Reach it by train or by bus or by taxi. Walk if you must! Make your holy pilgrimage to *A Slice of Cake* and there, savour the delights of Eden. Do it for your body, and more importantly, for your soul.

Yours affectionately, Piers Branagan.



# Another Slice of Cake

By Lottie Francis



# 1

“Bull-shitz! I can’t sell bull-shitz!” cried Claudia.

Sophie looked down at the clutch of four ugly looking puppies squirming in a cardboard whelping box. A proud Pixie watched over them, licking and tending each one in turn. Angus put his hand over his mouth, stifling a laugh, and Sophie cooed, “Oh, they’re adorable!”

“Adorable?” Claudia groaned. “They look like flipping ewoks!”

Sophie frowned. “And you think Harvey’s the dad?”

Claudia looked at Sophie and raised her eyebrows, giving her a withering look.

Sophie swallowed. The evidence was right there before her eyes, and there wasn’t another French bulldog that they knew of for miles. “How did he...?”

The pitch of Claudia’s voice reached new heights as she squawked, “I think it’s bloody obvious isn’t it?”

Angus let out a snort, his shoulders shaking uncontrollably. “I’m sorry.”

Sophie smacked him on the arm. “And don’t you bloody laugh, it’s all your fault. If you hadn’t insisted he go on a diet he wouldn’t have had the energy to...you know.” She sighed and turned to Claudia. “Of course, we’ll help you find homes for them.”

“Well, I should hope so.” Claudia put her hands on her hips, and looking down at the whimpering, squirming mass, she sighed. “I suppose they are kind of cute in their own way.”

Sophie and Angus left Claudia's house and made their way back down to Tremellen in Angus's Land Rover.

It was early September, and since Piers' article had appeared in the Guardian, the phone hadn't stopped ringing. Tourists had poured into the tiny seaside hamlet, and *A Slice of Cake* had done a roaring trade. It was as if someone had flicked a switch. The Barnacle had a full complement of guests, and Tom had been busy with his fishing charters during the daytime, and working the pub kitchen at night.

In order to help Sophie with the business, Angus had put his work as a freelance designer on hold, and moved down to Tremellen. He spent most nights with Sophie in the small bedroom above the shop, and visited Aunt May outside of opening times.

A relationship had blossomed between Tom and Clare; and Clare, who Sophie thought was a city girl through and through, had taken to rural country life like a duck to water.

Clare was staying in a spare room at Robert and Cynthia's. *It's a bloody dungeon!* she'd complained on the phone to Sophie when she'd first moved in. Sophie had laughed, but Clare then explained that it really was a dungeon; a sex dungeon. This had only made Sophie laugh more, and when she'd wiped away the tears and composed herself, she assured Clare that it was only temporary until they could sort something out that would be more permanent.

Although Clare wasn't a huge help in the kitchen, she was wonderful with the guests and enjoyed being the public face of *A Slice of Cake*. In

fact, many tourists assumed Clare was the famous Sophie Kingsman, and that was just fine with Sophie. Sophie felt most at home away from the limelight, in the kitchen, with Angus by her side. They worked and talked, and when there was a lull in trade, they greedily explored each other with hands and mouths.

Each morning and evening, they would take Bonnie and Harvey out along the coastal path, admiring the views, and feeling the wind blow the flour and sugar from their hair.

One evening, as they stood at a rocky outcrop looking down at the waves swirling and crashing down below, Angus stood behind Sophie, wrapping her in his arms. “You know, I’ve been thinking. I could move down here permanently.”

Sophie bit her lip. She’d loved having Angus with her, but it was early days, yet — despite the couple having only been together for a couple of months — she’d never felt so complete, alive, and secure.

Angus moved around to her front and held Sophie in his arms. “Penny for them?”

“How would it work? I mean, there’s not enough room at *La Canelé* for both of us as it is.”

“Well, how about we move into my house?”

“Your house?”

“Aye, my house. Glen Mornay.”

“But isn’t that Aunt May’s house?”

“Aye she lives there, but no, it’s my house. She’d always dreamed of living in Cornwall, and I inherited Glen Mornay from my grandfather when he passed away. As she’d always loved the place, we came to an

agreement — she'd live there and look after it for me. This was years ago now."

Sophie was silent.

Angus continued. "And Clare could move to *La Canelé*. It'd be good for her and would mean the place wouldn't be empty."

"It would get her out of that dungeon, I suppose. But what about Aunt May?"

"Aye, well, she could do with someone being around a bit more, but she's not ready to move into a home yet. I was thinking about whether I could convert the stone barn into a flat for her. In the meantime, the place is plenty big enough that we wouldn't get under each other's feet."

Sophie didn't know what to say. It felt like she'd be giving up *La Canelé* — but then, since the business had taken off she'd found it more difficult living over the shop and finding personal space away from the crowds. "I suppose we could give it a go?"

Angus's eyes lit up. "Really? Really?" He grinned and lifted Sophie, swinging her round and round, until one of her wellies flew off into a clump of Cornish heather, and they collapsed on the stony ground, laughing.

...

Sophie stood at the window of their bedroom at Glen Mornay. The unobstructed view over the fields and down to the cliffs was spectacular. The sea, grey and vast, stretched to the horizon, and leaden clouds studded the late afternoon sky. Angus walked up behind her, put his

hands around her waist and interlocked his fingers, resting his palms on her belly.

She placed her hands over his. “I’m scared.”

“How come?”

“I don’t want to do this on my own.”

“You’re not on your own. I’m not going any place.”

“But do *you* want a baby? Really?”

Angus breathed out slowly, and was quiet for a moment. “I want *your* baby. I want *our* baby.”

Sophie turned in his arms and looked up into his eyes.

“Soph, I love you.”

Sophie felt dizzy. He’d never said the words before. She welled up and kissed him, long and hard. “Really?”

“Really.”

She rested her head against his chest, and whispered, “Because I love you too.”

...

Sophie removed her earrings, and placed them on the bedroom dresser. As she reached behind her neck to undo the clasp of her necklace she called out, “We’ve been invited to a dinner party at Rob and Cyn’s!”

“Aye, when’s that?” replied Angus from the en-suite bathroom.

“On the 23rd. What day is that?”

“I think it’s a Friday.”

“Shall we go?”

The bathroom door opened, and Angus stood dripping in the doorway, a white towel wrapped around his waist. “I don’t see why not.”

Sophie walked over to Angus, and with one hand she deftly loosened the towel, whipping it away from his body. She sassily placed a hand on her hip, and dangled the towel in the air from her fingers. As she did so she raised her eyebrows and looked up and down his naked form.

Angus shifted from foot to foot then pushed his shoulders back defiantly. He also raised his eyebrows as they locked eyes with each other for a few seconds.

Sophie grinned, cheekily. “You’ve got some shaving cream on your mouth.” She used the towel and began to wipe away the cream from his face.

Angus reached up and gripped her arm. “Och, look! I’ve dripped on you. There’s nothing for it, we’re gonna have to get you out of those wet clothes,” He lifted a squealing Sophie, carried her over to the bed, and laid her down. “Oh yes, these jeans are very wet. They’ll need to come off straight away.” Angus unbuttoned them and pulled them down over Sophie’s legs. He looked at her as she lay there grinning. “And that T-Shirt, it’s soaking. It’ll have to come off too.” He pulled it up and over Sophie’s head, tossing it to the floor. “Now that bra...” He looked at her breasts. “You can’t be going about in a soggy bra now can you?”

He rolled her over and deftly unfastened the strap, pushed the straps off her shoulders, and whipped it away from under her. “Still...” He looked at her bum. “Those knickers can stay on. They look completely dry.”

“Oi!” Sophie giggled. “I think they might be a little damp and need to come off too.”

“Oh, right! Off they come then!” He slid Sophie’s knickers down over her legs and slowly pulled them off.

Sophie closed her eyes as she felt Angus kissing her ankles and begin to work his way up the inside of each leg.

Sophie lay in Angus’s arms, content and a little sleepy. Her phone began buzzing on the bedside table. “Who can that be at this time of the evening?”

Angus yawned. “Just leave it. They’ll go away.”

The phone, however, kept buzzing, and Sophie pulled herself out of Angus’s arms, leaning over the bed to check her phone. “It’s Clare.”

Angus groaned. “Tell her to go away, it’s sex night.”

Sophie tapped to answer the call. “Hey, wassup?” She listened, then bolted upright in bed. “You what? What the fuck? We’re on our way.” Sophie hung up, sprang out of bed and started to pull on her clothes.

Angus sat up, concerned. “What? What is it?”

“*La Canelé*. It’s on fire. We’ve got to go. Now!”