



Handy Man (West Wales Romance #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: James

As a professional financier and stockbroker, being mugged and left for dead on a London street had not been at the top of my agenda.

But an increasing sense of fear and a need to recover peacefully leads me to call my old Welsh grandmother in the sleepy village of Hiraeth and beg her for a place to stay.

I anticipate a boring week of sea air and soap operas.

What I don't anticipate is meeting the most gorgeous man I've ever seen.

A week of fun leads to me questioning the life I've built my entire identity around.

Llywelyn

Having lived a slow and peaceful (if boring) life, what I don't anticipate is for an attractive and career-focused man to fall out of the sky and into my little village.

30 years of quiet servitude to the village in which I grew up seem rewarded by just a few days of his company.

But when feelings rapidly get deeper and more complex, how could I possibly let him go back to the city life he came from?

Handy Man is a 40,000 word novel with insta-love, steamy scenes and sweet, fluffy countryside romance.

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Chapter One

James

The music was so loud I couldn't actually hear what was playing, just the steady thud of the bass.

I headed straight to the bar and gave the young guy serving my flashiest smile.

He smiled back, and busied himself preparing a double vodka and soda, just as he always did.

I caught glance of myself in the mirror that ran behind the drinks at the bar and quickly looked down at my nails to distract myself.

Even drunk and from a distance, I could tell I looked haggard.

"Eight quid, mate," said the bartender over the music, and I passed him my card.

Eight quid? How long has it been that expensive?

I'd been coming here a long time, ever since I'd started uni in London.

How long had it been? Long enough to see several young and sexy bartenders age out of being young and sexy enough to work in this club.

I gave the bartender a tight smile as he passed back my card and I pocketed it,

grabbing my vodka and heading into the throng.

The club was sweaty and between the groping and bumping going on, about half my drink ended up either on the floor or on the front of my shirt.

A guy much bigger than me bumped up against my arse a few more times than anyone else did to the point where I knew it could no longer be an accident.

I ground up against him and felt his hands touch my waist, pinky fingers hooking into the waistband of my jeans as he held me possessively like I was his.

Another man, almost identical, moved toward my front.

“You’re a sexy little bastard, aren’t you?” the one man whispered from behind. He pressed a quick kiss to my neck, then kissed the other man. “I’d like to take you home.”

I turned to see him looking at me with hunger in his eyes that I didn’t really like, and suddenly the space between us turned from sexy to uncomfortable and intimidating.

“Just...getting a drink,” I muttered and slipped away from him.

I knew from experience that in such a crowded club it would be very difficult to find me, and if people had had enough to drink, or snorted whatever up their nose, they would lose interest or forget anyway.

Let them find fresher meat than a tired financier nearing 30.

I headed to the bar anyway, and the bartender winked and started getting my drink ready.

I was a regular here, usually Friday and Saturday every week, and all the staff knew me.

It didn't hurt that I put a tenner on the bar as a tip at the end of some nights.

I skipped the bar queue every single time, and the bar staff knew the one drink that I really liked.

A younger, shorter guy than me with dirty blond hair sidled up to the bar.

He must have been no older than twenty and wore jeans and a denim jacket, buttons open to show he wasn't wearing anything underneath.

I wished I had been that confident when I was his age.

"Going to buy me a drink, then?" he asked with a sly smile.

"Come to ask the geriatric for a drink? How original," I said.

If I had a penny for every skinny little twink that had asked for a drink only to disappear I'd never need to work again...

then again if I had a penny taken away for every time I'd done the same to older men when I was a uni student I'd have no money.

"What are you, 23?" the young guy batted his eyelashes.

"Smooth," I said, flattered even though my job in the City made me feel a million years older. "I'm 29, so I've been gay dead for at least 5 years."

"I'd never have guessed," he said. One hand crossed the inches between us to stroke

my own hand. I rolled my eyes. If he was determined to flirt this hard, then he deserved a bloody drink.

As the bartender came over with my vodka soda, I gestured toward the young man. “Get him whatever he wants,” I said, holding out my card once again.

“I’ll have a double vodka Red Bull and two shots of Sambuca,” he said.

A silence fell between us as the bartender prepared his drink.

The bartender put the drinks down in front of the young guy and slid my card very deliberately in my direction. He glanced awkwardly at the young man and then back at me, as if afraid he was going to take my card for himself.

The young man pushed one of the shots of Sambuca to me and grinned. “Drink up,” he said.

“Oh god no, I don’t do shots.”

“C’mon, or are you older than you look?”

I rolled my eyes and drank the Sambuca down in one, gagging on the burning-sweet taste as it hit my throat.

The young man grabbed the vodka and soda that I had left on the bar before I could and stepped away, jerking his head to ask me to follow him into the crowd.

As I grabbed my card from the bar, the bartender almost imperceptibly shook his head at me.

Did he think the young guy was going to try and steal my card?

I grimaced and put the card back into my wallet with exaggerated motions, then took out a five pound note and put it down on the bar with a wink.

When I turned back, the young guy was standing at the edge of the dancefloor with drinks in his hand and a twinkle in his eye.

Maybe I was still young enough to attract twinkies - and if I wasn't, it seemed that my money was at the very least. What was the point of working long and inhospitable hours if I couldn't splash the cash for a bit of fun?

I followed him into the throng, and once we'd reached a point far into the middle of the crowd he started to grind up against me to the beat of the music.

I grinned and put my hands on his waist. He held out my drink for me to take a sip and I drank it down eagerly.

He was short and slim, surely no taller than 5'4 to my relatively short 5'8, and his hips gyrated like nothing I'd ever seen.

His skin was pale and beautiful under the flashing lights.

I took another sip and went in to kiss him, but he put a finger to my lips to stop me.

He continued to grind against me though, so my drink-addled brain wasn't too put out.

I felt thirsty, so took another greedy sip from the glass in his hands, and he passed it to me to continue dancing.

One of his hands strayed to my waist, feeling along the front of my waistband and dipping down to brush below.

“N-not here,” I said, but my words seemed to come out as more of a mumble. His hand reached deeper, grabbing at me in the middle of the dance floor in front of so many people.

“No,” I said again, but my lips didn’t seem to want to move.

I was so thirsty , I took another big gulp of my drink to loosen my lips.

I tried to say ‘seriously, stop’ but my brain and lips didn’t seem to want to work together.

I jerked away from him and his hand slid out from my jeans.

I stumbled and almost fell to the floor, dropped my drink to grab onto the nearest person to hold me up.

They shrugged off my hand with a shouted fuck off and I fell to the floor.

The young guy’s face appeared above me, and alongside him another familiar face - the big guy who had tried it on with me earlier. They smirked down at me.

“C’mon, old man,” the young guy said. “Let’s get you safely to bed.”

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My head hurt, my tongue was fuzzy, but most of all I felt cold.

And wet. And...dirty. What a hangover . I tried to open my eyes, but even that hurt.

It had been a long time since I had been this bad.

How much did I drink last night? I couldn't remember.

I reached one hand out to grab my phone from the bedside table, but only touched...

hard concrete. What the fuck? I opened my eyes with some effort, and the sun filtering through London clouds felt blinding.

I was laying in an alleyway, my shirt jacket covered in mud and gunk. My mouth felt dry and fuzzy. I'd been drunk plenty of times before, but this time I felt really, really fucked. How was it possible I hadn't even made it back to the flat?

I got to my feet, and almost fainted. Dark spots danced in front of my eyes as my heart struggled to pump blood to my head.

I braced myself against a the rough brick wall at the side of the alley and searched my pockets for my phone with the other.

It was gone, as well as my wallet and keys.

I cast tired eyes across the dirty ground but couldn't see where they had gone.

Shit. I stumbled forwards, still bracing myself against the wall to get to the main street.

One side of my stomach was in real pain, like I'd fallen directly onto it.

As I had thought, the alleyway was just down the road from the club. Had I tried to drunkenly walk home and had my stuff stolen after I fell asleep in the alley? Surely not.

And then it hit me. I remembered being on my second drink, the thirst I had, the need

to drink more, and falling to the floor. The three gleeful faces looking down at me as I lay there helpless. I stopped the sob even as it reached my throat. Stay strong, I thought. It was easier thought than done.

My best friend Owen lived just a couple of streets away in a flat-share, so I stumbled along the main street towards the block where he lived.

I could see the way that people were staring at me.

“Walk of shame, is it mate?” one builder called and laughed.

I ignored him and walked on. Every time it felt like my throat was about to close up, or my eyes started to prick with tears I stopped for a second and took deep breaths.

It had been months since I had an anxiety attack, and I didn’t intend to start now.

I made it to the swanky building in which Owen lived and rang the intercom. It took a minute before his crackly voice replied.

“Hey, who is it?” he asked.

“It’s me. It’s James.”

“Bloody hell, what are you doing up at eight am? Thought you’d be out last night.”

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“I was...it’s hard to explain. Can I come up?” I waited for a second and the door clicked. I pushed it open and headed straight for the lift. A woman walked into the lobby behind me, took one look at me in the lift and took a step back. I gave her a weak smile as the doors closed between us.

The lift dinged as it got to Owen’s floor. I realised my shoes were making muddy prints on the carpet just a little bit too late, and knocked on his door. When he opened it, his eyes widened.. “What the hell happened to you?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said as he closed the door behind me. “I think...” I hesitated for a second before continuing. “I think I got spiked. They’ve taken my wallet, house keys, phone. I don’t have any way to get home.”

“You shouldn’t want to go home,” he said. “If they have your wallet, they have your address. They have your keys to get in, they can just...” he tailed off as he saw the look of dawning horror on my face.

Crap . I genuinely hadn’t thought of that, thought much of anything.

“Can I at least use your shower?” I asked.

“Nope. C’mon.” Owen was already getting his coat on, grabbed his own keys and wallet from the side. “We’re going out.”

“I can’t go back out looking like this!” I said. Owen just ignored me. He opened the door and gestured with his head for me to follow, so I did.

“We’re taking you to A&E, and I’m calling the police on the way. You need to get checked over, and you need to give a statement.”

My mind froze up a bit then - what had started as a night out to get over the stress of Saturday working had turned into an absolute nightmare.

I was aware, but didn’t say or do anything as Owen took my arm and led me to the lift.

Out into the street. Into a crowded Tube train, where people kept as much distance as they could from me.

Off the train, and towards City of London Accident and Emergency .

I let him guide me up the steps and into a busy waiting room, and watched as he argued with the receptionist. He needn’t have bothered — the second I walked up to see if I could do anything to help, she took one look at me and called one of the nurses.

I was led to a quiet space, away from everyone else and a curtain drawn around the hospital bed.

“James.” I looked up at Owen as he said my name, but it didn’t quite register. “James, you in there?” I nodded. “James, seriously. This is Detective Inspector Butt.”

I giggled slightly at the name, and that snapped me from my stupor. “Sorry,” I said. “Hello.”

Detective Butt was a stern looking man, probably in his early forties at the latest. He looked down at me with some pity and took out a pen and pad.

“Your friend tells me you think you were spiked and robbed. Could you please tell me the whole story?”

I relayed it as best I could. Owen took a seat next to me on the bed and rubbed little circles on my back whenever I felt like I was getting overwhelmed. I finally finished the story by talking about how I’d woken up in the alleyway when PC Butt frowned.

“Thank you,” he said. “I don’t want to panic you, but this isn’t the first story we’ve heard like this.

We were warned by other police forces that something like this might happen.

There have been a series of spiking and mugging incidents from Swansea all the way up to Northumbria, and a couple of them have had attackers that match the description you gave. ”

“Shit.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Quite. Now, I’m going to ask a few things of you. We’ll need a sample of your urine to test for drugs - if you’ve got anything else in your system, now is the time to say. You won’t be in any trouble, it just helps us to rule out any other kind of drug causing this.”

I nodded.

“And I’m also going to ask that we take your clothes so that we can test them for DNA or blood matches. I’ll take a couple of pictures of your injuries too.”

“Injuries?” I asked. PC Butt shared a significant look with Owen, who put one arm around me.

“Let’s get you to a shower room, shall we?” Owen said. “You can pee in a cup there and get your clothes off, then if it’s OK with PC Butt we’ll get you properly cleaned up.”

I nodded, and allowed Owen and a nurse to guide me down the hallway to the nearest shower room.

It was old fashioned, with faded blue tiles and an old cream sink and porcelain shower tray.

The nurse put a small plastic jar into Owen’s hand and left.

Owen turned around to give me some privacy as I peed, then he helped me to get my jeans, shirt and jacket off.

He gently folded them on the edge of the sink.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and recoiled.

There was mud caked into my hair and dirt all over my face. I could see that my lip had split, but somehow I hadn’t felt it through the fuzziness. One side of my jaw was swollen and blue. All down my side from my armpit to my boxers there were purplish bruises that mottled my skin.

“Oh my God.” I said quietly. People had done this to me?

“Oh my God,” Owen agreed. I wasn’t sure if he thought I wouldn’t hear him, he muttered it so quietly. “I’m just going to get PC Butt. Are you sure you’re OK with him coming in to take pictures of your injuries?”

I nodded mutely, not taking my eyes off myself in the mirror. I looked horrific, stood

there in my boxers. Even through the bruises, I could see how ragged I looked anyway. I heard the door open and Owen let PC Butt into the room. I stood still as he used a phone to take photos of the injuries.

“Thank you,” said PC Butt after he had finished. “I’m sorry this happened to you, and we’ll do everything we can to bring the perpetrators to justice.”

I nodded. PC Butt grabbed the clothes from the sink and put them into an evidence bag, and exchange numbers with Owen. “I’m just going to get you some clothes. PC Butt says it’s OK to clean yourself up now, and then the doctors want to check you over for any breakages.”

Yet again, I nodded. I wondered if that’s all I was capable of doing at the moment.

Owen left the room and I allowed myself one last long look in the mirror.

I looked a state, but then again, I felt like I hadn’t been looking my best for a long time.

Constant work had taken its toll on me. I honestly couldn’t tell if one of my eyes was bruising or if it was just bags from early morning working and late night partying every single weekend.

I shucked off my boxers and turned on the shower.

It let out a weak trickle of water, which I let warm up as much as it would before stepping underneath and doing my best to get the mud and grime off with cheap hotel shampoo.

There were parts of my body more tender than I had realised and I hissed as I scrubbed gently at my ribs.

The door opened and I instinctively cringed and covered myself.

“Relax, it’s only me and I’ve seen it all before.

” Owen was carrying a bundle of what looked to be light-washed denim which he set on the sink and a towel which he held out to me as I stepped out of the shower.

It was scratchy and thin, so I gave myself a quick once over with it then reached for my boxers and put them back on.

“Double denim? This isn’t the nineties,” I muttered as I took the clothes from the sink.

“There’s the James Evans we all know and love,” said Owen with a smile. “And yes, you’re right. It probably has been there since the nineties. It was in the hospital lost and found.”

I stopped myself from cringing as I put on the jeans and t-shirt, tying the matching denim jacket around my waist. They smelled and looked clean at least.

“You could rock that, you know.” Owen smiled and looked me up and down. I looked in the mirror more doubtfully and shrugged. It was better than a jacket covered in shit from a dirty London alley.

Owen led me from the shower room back to the bed, where PC Butt still stood alongside an elderly and kind looking doctor.

“I hear you’ve had quite the ordeal,” said the doctor. “Let me just look you over to check for concussion or breakages and you’ll be good to go.”

He checked my ribs, poking at them painfully but not unkindly, and shone lights into

my eyes. I let him, but could feel myself slipping back into my shell slightly as the day caught up with me.

“I’m going to have to advise you to cancel all your cards and identification,” PC Butt said. “And if you can find somewhere to stay for a couple of days that would be ideal. As of now, your flat is accessible to the people who took your things and there are officers on their way there right now.”

I nodded mutely. What if they had already gotten to my flat? Ransacked the place? What would they have taken?

“You can stay with me for the night,” Owen said. “We’ll find you somewhere to stay in the morning.”

“I’ll be honest,” started PC Butt. “I’d advise you to get out of London altogether.

You don’t know who’s around the corner at the moment, or what they might have discerned about you — your job, where you go to the gym, where you like to go for a good time.

It’s not uncommon in violent theft or fraud cases for the perpetrators to come back for more information. ”

“But-my job,-I-I don’t really have anywhere to go,” I stuttered.

“C’mon, mate,” said Owen. “Let’s get you back to mine. We’ll figure out what to do there.”

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I sat in stunned silence, hoping Owen would crack into a grin after he told me what

he had just said. His face stayed neutral, perhaps even pitying.

“Everything?” I asked. “They took everything?”

He nodded. We had each used his phone throughout the day to phone through to the banks, driver’s license, even the gym to cancel cards and identification.

I had found out very quickly that they had emptied my two main bank accounts at ATMs, but thankfully couldn’t get access to the thirty thousand or so that I had in savings.

It had been a big loss, but not as big as what Owen had just revealed.

Sometime before the police had gotten to my flat, the thieves had stolen everything - TV, games consoles, jewellery.

They had even managed to get away with some of the smaller items of clothing.

I had almost nothing to my name and no way to buy anything new for myself.

I had five figures tucked away in savings accounts but with no ID, no bank cards and no way of proving I was who I said I was no bank would give me access.

If only they had been so scrupulous before letting thieves get away with taking so much of my other money...

Owen’s room was messy, filled with so many ideas and posters from his job in marketing. He’d recently been co-ordinating between the tourism boards across the UK.

“I’d go and lie low in the Cayman Islands for a week,” I joked weakly, “If I was a

sensible enough financier to have kept all my money locked away there. Not only am I broke, but it proves I'm shit at my job."

"Hey, don't say that now," Owen said. He put one hand on my good shoulder. "I can give you a little bit of money 'til you have access to your savings accounts. I can't quite afford to send you to the Cayman Islands..."

"Oh don't worry about that," I said quietly. I had looked behind him and realised there was somewhere I could go for very little money if I played my cards right. On the wall, in amongst adverts for holidays to Tuvalu and Egypt, was a big bright poster. Visit Wales.

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Chapter Two

Llywelyn

I couldn't tell you how many times old Beca Price's cat got stuck on the roof. What I could tell you is that she should have bought a lock long ago, and the cat should have learned that it was afraid of heights almost as immediately as it got up there the first time, not the umpteenth.

"Come on now, puss. Don't make this too difficult for Uncle Llywelyn," I said. "Just come to my arms and I can get you back down." The ladder wobbled precariously under me as the cat inched slowly closer toward me. "Come on now, just a few inches closer..."

The cat eventually crept close enough over the old thatched roof for me to grab her, and I took her under one arm. She growled angrily at me.

"Well, Tibs, if you wouldn't get yourself into so many silly situations we wouldn't have to be angry at each other, now would we." The ladder was a shaky one at the best of times but shuffling down it with a cat in one hand and using the other to grip on felt even more dangerous.

When we reached the ground, I breathed a sigh of relief and let Tibs go. She immediately ran in through Beca's back door. I folded my ladders down, leaned them against the van and followed her.

Beca was sat at the dining table, holding Tibs and looking her over for damage or

injury. They both looked up at me when I came in; Beca with a smile and Tibs with a typical glare.

“Thank you, cariad, ” she said. “I don’t know what we’d do without you sometimes, do we Tibs?”

“Call the firemen?” I suggested, knowing she would never.

“And have them tell me off? No thank you, you’ll do just fine.” Beca reached into the purse sat on the table and took out a 20 pound note. “Thank you, I really appreciate it.”

“No, no.” I waved the note away as it was offered. Beca stood up and hobbled the couple of steps to me, then stuffed the note in my pocket.

“I will not take no for an answer,” she said. For a woman five feet tall - a good one and a half feet shorter than me - she cut an intimidating figure. I nodded, and resisted the urge to take the note and put it on the kitchen counter.

Beca’s house was one of the oldest in the village - almost as old as mine, with a thatched roof, dark wooden beams and an old gas-fired stove.

A kettle sat on the stove, obviously recently boiled.

“You’ll have a cuppa, love?” she asked. She popped teabags into 3 separate mugs before I could answer.

“Glynis Ifans is coming round soon, and she has some favours she wants to ask you anyway.”

I nodded and took my seat at the old wooden table as Beca fussed around with the

mugs.

It wasn't all that strange for me to be at the beck and call of the old ladies of the village.

As if summoned, Glynis popped her head through the back door.

Beca kept the door unlocked and open even in the cold winter months, always ready to entertain or summon someone for a telling off...

or make me a cuppa after I'd saved her cat or changed a lightbulb again.

Beca plonked three chipped mugs on the table and then hobbled back to grab the biscuit bowl.

"Hiya, love," said Glynis. "You having a good day?"

"Not the worst start to my Sunday, seeing you lovely ladies," I smiled.

Glynis giggled and took her seat. She was taller, fitter and more imposing than Beca - but everyone knew that Beca was the matriarch of the town.

There was no question about that. Glynis was like a henchman on the Community Council, and if there was gossip she didn't know it wasn't worth knowing.

"I think you were right about Sally Griffiths," Glynis muttered to Beca. She grabbed a biscuit and dunked it before continuing. "She is showing a bit of a bump, so she's either pregnant or Glyn the baker has been feeding her."

"Or both," said Beca. They both shared significant looks with each other.

They would find out which of those was true.

Sally wasn't married or seeing anyone seriously, so a pregnancy was always going to make her the subject of gossip.

I prayed for her sake that she was just getting fat, though that would be just as much cause for talk in the little village of Hiraeth.

"Beca says you had a favour to ask of me?" I asked, cutting them off before they could get any bitchier.

"Ah, yes," said Glynis. "My grandson is visiting from London, he's coming in on the train later today and I need you to pick him up...that is, if you're not too busy of course."

She knew I wasn't busy, she would have checked with the other elderly ladies of town, the church and the school if I was working for them today. It was a very quiet Monday.

"What's his name again? Jim? Jack?" Beca asked.

"James, silly." Glynis said, then turned to me. "You remember James, don't you?"

I racked my brains - I had vague memories of Glynis' grandson coming to the village when I was younger - was he a couple of years younger than me?

I was sure that he was. He was a skinny little guy, and his parents had always seemed like they didn't fit in, much more buttoned up than the rest of the village.

They must have stopped coming after a while, because I couldn't remember him around in my high school years.

“You won’t have seen them for a while,” Glynis said, confirming what I thought.

“Once they moved properly to London they insisted on me meeting them half-way for Christmas, in Cardiff or Bristol. Been busy the last couple of years though. Even changed their last names to Evans to ‘fit in’.” Glynis looked downtrodden at that, her usually stoic face showing signs of sadness.

“What’s brought him down now then?” I asked.

“Oh, he wouldn’t say. Said he would tell me when he got here, but he should be here until Thursday at least.”

“He’s gay like you, Llyw, isn’t he?” Beca said. I had just taken a gulp, and almost spit out my tea.

“How should I know?” I spluttered, perhaps too indignantly. “I haven’t seen him in twenty years.”

“Yes, he is,” said Glynis. “He grew into quite a handsome man too. Looked awful stressed last I saw him though, I told him he should take a holiday up this way.” She looked smug as she spoke, the air of a grandmother who’s always right. “Nothing like a bit of sun and sea.”

“And a town with more men who fancy men than you can shake a stick at,” muttered Beca under her breath.

I stood up quickly — maybe too quickly. “When was it you wanted me to pick him up, Glynis?” I asked.

“His train will be at Aberystwyth at about 2 in the afternoon, that OK love?”

“Yes, fine.” Aberystwyth was about 10 minutes drive away, so I could fill my day with whatever I wanted until then.

“Oh, and Llywelyn?” Glynis beckoned me closer to her and I took a step forwards. “Thank you.” She stuffed a ten pound note into my pocket before I could complain.

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Hours later I pulled down the mirror in front of me in the van and tried my best to look presentable.

It wasn't that I was all that worried about how a stranger thought I looked, but...

it couldn't hurt to make a good first impression.

I straightened the collar of my tartan shirt and pushed my beanie hat upwards.

My beard wasn't savable at this point. I had left it grow just that little bit too long for a few days and a quick comb right now wouldn't possibly make it look all that much better.

I checked my phone. The train was 2 minutes late, but that was par for the course.

I had parked up 10 minutes early on the off chance it would be early.

As I put my phone back into my pocket the train pulled into the station.

I hopped out of the van to greet our new visitor.

It was a windy, cloudy day. I pulled my shirt at the front like it would help me warm up.

Only one person got off at the station, and my heart thumped.

I hadn't expected him to look so lost, or vulnerable.

Or beautiful. He was shorter and thinner than me, and wore a denim jacket and jeans.

He had mousy brown hair and green eyes that sparkled even on this cloudy day.

He looked around himself as if unsure, and when his eyes landed on me he looked almost taken aback.

Or scared? I instinctively wanted to protect him. But that was stupid.

He walked slowly toward me, as if unsure I was who he should be meeting.

"James?" I asked. He smiled hesitantly and nodded.

"I'm Llywelyn. Your Nain asked me to come and get you." I crossed the distance between us and held out a hand for him to shake. He took it after a moment. His hands were smaller and smoother than mine like they hadn't ever done much manual labour. I felt a bit inadequate and scruffy immediately.

Now I was closer, I could see the a light shadow along his jawline, along with what looked like yellowing bruises. "What happened?" I asked, and immediately felt stupid. It wasn't my place to ask.

"You should see the other guy," James said quietly and with a grim smile. I smiled back tightly, but for some reason felt angry more than anything else. I wanted to find out who had hurt him and hurt them. "Is this your van?" he asked, pointing.

"Um, yes. Do you have luggage with you?"

“No. I don’t have anything with me.” James went straight to the passenger side of the van and climbed in.

I felt embarrassed looking at him in my shoddy work van.

He looked very out of place in the passenger seat.

I jumped in and turned the engine on. It was cold, not yet spring, so I pumped up the heating.

James shivered lightly. After making sure he was belted in I drove from the train station and down the little country lane that would lead back to Hiraeth.

After a minute, James spoke. “I think I remember seeing you here when I was little. My parents weren’t entirely for me socialising with the kids in the village, so we never played. You look the same, though.”

“Not sure I do,” I snorted. “I’m older, hairier and uglier than I was when we last met I’m sure.”

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“Not uglier,” Jamie muttered under his breath. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been back to Hiraeth. Must be at least fifteen years. Has it changed at all?”

“Not really,” I said. “If anything, it’s quieter. A lot of the old businesses have closed down and no one is coming in to replace them. A couple of the shops are boarded up.”

“That’s sad, I always remembered it being nice.” Jamie looked out of the window as if hoping to catch a glimpse, but we were still at least five minutes out.

“It is still that,” I said. “I like it, at least. It’s where I grew up. I’ve stayed, even if others have moved on.”

We sat in silence for a while before I plucked up the courage to ask the question that had been eating away at me. “So, what brings you back after so long?”

“It’s...complicated.” I could feel him weighing up what to tell me, whether he could trust me — or whether I was worthy of the information.

When he spoke, he was quiet and slow in his wording.

“I needed to get out of London for my health. A doctor recommended I take a break, and I’m not exactly in a position to go abroad right now. ”

“Fair enough.” I could sense there were things he wasn’t telling me, but it wasn’t my business to pry. “We’re almost in view of the village now,” I said. “I’ll get you to Glynis in no time. She’s looking forward to seeing you.”

James craned his head as we came into view of the village.

Even under the winter clouds, it was a pretty little place.

The road we were on snaked from the top of the hill down toward Hiraeth.

All the main streets in Hiraeth ran parallel to the small river which ran through it.

High Street sat directly next to the river, and even from up above it was obvious it had seen better days.

There were still a few businesses trading though, and there were people criss-crossing the pedestrianised road to talk to each other, exchange gossip and wish each other well.

The river widened towards the end of the village which lay closest to the little cove.

The river itself ran directly onto the yellow sand.

A couple of old boats, mine among them, sat in the sand.

Lots weren't being used so much any more and had been left to rust. The cove was enclosed by tall black cliffs, with several large caves jotted around the edges.

We'd all played there as kids, ignoring the DANGER and ROCKS FALLING signs.

It seemed James was having similar thoughts. "I always wanted to explore the caves when I was younger. I knew all the teenagers went there to smoke and I thought it was so cool. Mum wasn't so keen though, so I never got to."

"Never too late to go now," I said. "Mum can't stop you if she's not here to tell you

off.”

That got him to smile. “Think I’m a little bit old now, don’t you?”

“Not at all.” I focused on the road ahead, but he’d made me think about the last time I had wanted to explore those caves. I remembered then, trying not to make my blush too obvious in the confines of the van. I snuck a glance at James, but he was staring out at Hiraeth.

I took the sharp hair pin turns down towards Hiraeth more carefully than I usually would. The road snaked dramatically down the hillside and into the centre of the village.

“What’s that up there?” James pointed, and I followed where he was pointing to.

“That’s the old hotel. Run by my best friend.” The hotel, a big white manor house perched at the edge of the cliffs, had definitely seen better days. When those days were was a mystery though as it had been old and a bit run down when I was little.

“I forgot how...rustic this place was. How quaint,” James said.

“I think you mean rotting,” I replied. It wasn’t like me to disparage Hiraeth. It was my home and I loved it, but seeing James in it felt weird — like my rickety old van and the fading shop fronts just weren’t good enough now someone more refined had come along.

“No,” he said. “I think a couple of days here will do me some good.”

“A couple of days? You’re not staying long?” I tried to hide my disappointment.

“Nah. Work won’t allow me much time off, it’s all pretty hectic. I just need a little

break.”

Silence fell for a second. I didn’t know why exactly I was disappointed he wasn’t staying longer.

I wasn’t a talker, or confident enough to ask him out — and I definitely wasn’t attractive enough for a man like that, who probably spent his life in London with millionaires and businessmen.

But it was a nice thought that had been dashed.

“We’re here,” I said as I pulled up to Glynis’ bungalow. It was set a few streets back from the High Street and due to its elevation I could just about see the beach and the sea from my van.

“Well, thanks.” James smiled as he got out of the van. “I owe you one.”

“Anytime.” I smiled. “Oh, wait.” I grabbed a little card from my pocket. “I’m not always about but the local taxi driver is lovely. Here’s his number if you need it.”

I watched him walk up the garden path and to the little bungalow. Once Glynis had opened the door to him and given me a little wave I drove off.

I turned the heating down a little bit. I felt like I needed a cool down.

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Chapter Three

James

“Well, you’re looking handsome. I’ve been keeping up with you on that Facebook but you definitely look much healthier now in the flesh.

” My grandmother was pottering around the kitchen like I always remembered her doing.

I could swear the woman never changed, never aged.

But the walking stick in the corner told me she might be getting a little bit further advanced in years than she would ever admit.

She plonked a cup of tea onto the table in front of me.

“Now,” she said, “tell me why you’re here. You look hurt, and as much as it pains me to say I know you’re not just here to visit your old Nain.”

Slowly, in between sips of way-too-sweet tea, I told her everything.

The club, the aftermath. I told her how I’d been inspired to come here after seeing that Owen was working on a ‘Visit Wales’ campaign and how getting holiday approved with my boss — even just for a week — had been an absolute nightmare.

It was Monday now, and I had only managed to secure guaranteed time off until

Friday.

“Well you stay for as long as you want,” my grandmother - Nain , as she insisted I still call her - said. “If I have to beat your boss in a boxing match to get you to stay here I will do it.”

I laughed quietly. “Thanks Nain.”

“Let me show you your room. I’ve kept it as you liked it, just in case you decided to pop round.

” I felt a bit guilty at her words. It was true that my parents had decided they no longer wanted to visit Hiraeth not long after they made the move to London, but there had been nothing to stop me coming here once I had turned eighteen.

“Sorry Nain,” I said.

“Don’t be silly, you had your own life, and it was always lovely to see you at Christmas. And Cardiff has a lovely market so I never begrudged going there.” I didn’t quite believe her words, and she didn’t look at me as she said them.

She led me down the hallway to my room. I knew it well, even after years of being away. Nain’s home, like her, had not significantly changed in that time.

This truth was compounded even more when she showed me the guest room.

There was a single bed pushed up against the wall, the bedding covered in space ships and stars.

The ceiling was covered in glow-in-the-dark stars and moons, and the curtains were black — I seemed to remember poking holes in them with a pin when I was little to

make it look like starlight shining through in the daytime.

“Wow, Nain. You didn’t want to redecorate?” I said.

“No, love. I wanted to remember.” Nain gave me a little smile. “Did you say you don’t have any extra clothes with you at all?”

I showed her the little backpack I’d hardly let go of since I got to Hiraeth. “I’ve got a toothbrush and some underwear I borrowed from Owen in here. The rest of his clothes wouldn’t fit me and he couldn’t exactly afford to buy me a new wardrobe.”

“Well we can’t have that, can we?” Nain said. “Pop your bag down on the bed and come with me. We’ll get you clothed.”

“There’s nowhere to shop for miles around, is there?” I asked.

“You’d be surprised, bach. ”

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I was surprised when Nain frogmarched me through the village with the odd hello to a couple of people I very vaguely recognised and into a little charity shop on the high street.

“Are you sure?” I muttered as we walked in. “I’m not exactly one for charity shopping.”

“Your father has given you airs and graces,” she said firmly. “It may not be Armani, or fancy suits for dinner, but I will have you clothed nicely for the days we’re here. Let’s have a look.”

Nain took my arm and pulled me over to the men's section - just a couple of rails and a shelf with some old trainers on.

She was right, it was Dad who had always insisted I wear nice clothes.

Even clubbing I wore a jacket and shirt even as other people were starting to wear hoodies and trainers.

It just always felt right to wear nice clothes.

But Mum and Dad had moved abroad a couple of years ago and I still couldn't bring myself to relax in slacks when walking around the city.

"Ooh, this is nice. Lovely and warm." Nain held up a cable-knit burgundy jumper to me, and without asking if I liked it threw it over her arm. She did the same with a couple of shirts and some jeans.

"You really don't have to do this, Nain. I'm only here for a couple of days."

"Nonsense. I'm not having you lounging around the house in my old dressing gown whilst you wait for me to wash the clothes off your back. Try these on." She held out a pair of hiking boots and a pair of trainers. "These will do."

"I'm only here for three more days..." I muttered.

"Well if you discover a new love of country walks when you're here, maybe you'll come back," she said.

The guilt at not seeing her for so long shut me up, and I tried the shoes on after a careful sniff.

They were comfortable and fit fine, so I took them off.

Nain gestured for me to follow her to the till.

A few jumpers I'd hardly looked at, the jeans and the trainers all came to less than ten pounds.

Nain handed over the cash and smiled at the woman behind the till.

"You're certainly looking well, Sally." Something in her tone was different though, like she wasn't just being friendly.

"Have you seen at the bakery they've got a new special on buns?"

Do you ever head over on your lunch break? "

"Oh, no. I always bring a packed lunch," said the woman, presumably Sally.

"I see. Well, have a lovely day!" Nain pushed the carrier bag with all my new stuff into my hand and sauntered out of the shop like a woman half her age. I muttered a thanks to Sally and followed her.

Outside the shop Nain linked her arm into mine and gestured the opposite way from where we'd came. "Do you fancy a walk down the river?"

"Sure," I said. There were plenty of people on High Street, but most of the shops were closed, or even boarded up. In a row of about ten shopfronts I counted four open — the charity shop at the end, a bakery, butchers and one at the other end I couldn't make out yet.

Nain walked slower than I expected. "Why didn't you bring your stick?" I enquired.

“Oh, that? The doctor recommended it. I told him to piss off, I’ve never needed help walking and I’m not about to start.” Her tone told me there was no point pushing the argument. “Oh look, there’s Llywelyn!” she pointed towards the end shop, and I tried my best not to stop and stare.

The second I had seen him at the train station, I had flinched away - at first because he reminded me of the bigger man who had been a part of my mugging.

But then he smiled and it reached lovely blue eyes.

I melted just a little bit inside then. And when he spoke with a low and steady voice with an accent that made me think of home I felt safe.

In the van, he had interest in me and I thought I caught him looking at me once or twice, which was likely my own wishful thinking.

He was stood on a ladder and reaching up to a sign above the last shop, screwing in a lightbulb.

He wore a beanie hat and a chequered blue shirt.

His face was pale with dark brows and a brown beard.

In the van I’d noticed it was speckled with little orange flecks.

My eyes roamed down his body almost involuntarily.

Where he was stood and stretching upwards he had exposed a strip of skin between his jeans and shirt, and as we walked even closer I could see a dark happy trail.

It was all I could do not to lick my lips.

Somehow, I'd ended up lusting after the sexiest man in Hiraeth.

"Hey, Llywelyn!" Nain shouted far too loudly as we approached. I winced. Llywelyn looked over and stepped down and off the ladder. My moment of perversion had been curtailed.

"Hello, Glynis. Hi James." Llywelyn dusted off his hands on his jeans. "Out shopping?"

"Yes, we bought James a whole new set of clothes. He'll look very dashing."

I could feel my cheeks warming with embarrassment like I was 12 again. Did I imagine Llywelyn looking me up and down? His eyes seemed to linger on me, and his mouth curved upward at the edges. He looked away, back into the shop. "Try now, Gwyn!" he shouted through the door.

The sign lit up, and Llywelyn smiled wider. "That seems to have worked."

I tore my eyes away from him to look at the sign, and into the shop for the first time.

My eyes must have been like saucers as I took in what I saw.

The shop inside was chaotic but kitsch, with all manner of crafting supplies.

A pale, red-headed man of about 50 — Gwyn, I presumed — was stood grinning inside.

The sign above the shop, now lit up in all its glory, read G&G Craft Supplies.

"Want to go in and have a look?" Nain asked.

I was already walking towards the door and into the shop.

The walls were panelled in light wood, but mostly covered up by the merchandise.

In the window were baskets with skeins of colourful and soft wool, which I idly touched.

Along the leftmost wall were rolls of patterned and strange fabrics, and along the right were paper crafting supplies and card in every colour.

“Creative soul, are you?” Gwyn approached me with a hand outstretched.

“You could say that,” I replied. “But it’s been a long time.” I shook his hand.

“This is James, my grandson,” Nain interrupted, almost getting in between us. “James, meet Gwyn. He and his husband moved to the village last year, they’ve been doing very well for themselves with this little shop.”

“Husband?” I asked automatically, then winced. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to sound...I mean...”

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“Don’t worry James, I didn’t take any offence.

Glynis is a keen knitter and one of our best local customers, she’s told us a lot about you.

” There it was again, that big smile. The man seemed to be permanently happy.

He had a bit of weight to him and grey in his ginger hair.

“I’m just closing up. We never stay open after 4pm, but if there’s anything you want let me know and we’ll get it bagged up. ”

I thanked him and he went toward the back of the shop where there was a little till set up. I eyed the skeins of wool but shook myself.

“Want anything?” Nain asked. I looked up, beyond the wool, to where Llywelyn was putting his ladders back in the van. I looked back down at the wool, at the collection of needles and crochet hooks on the wall.

“No, I’m all good thanks. It’s been a long while since I’ve done anything like this.”

“Do you have any hobbies outside of work?” Nain asked. I didn’t answer. After a few seconds of silence she turned to Gwyn. “Nothing for us today, but I’ll be back in soon. I’m almost out of supplies.”

We exited the shop and Llywelyn turned to us just as he was getting into his van. “Much more on today, Llyw?” Nain asked.

“Nothing today, just going to head home and let the dog out.” Llywelyn leaned against the van. “Anything for you tonight?”

“Oh, I’ve got all the soaps tonight. English and Welsh language. We’re going to have hours of fun.”

I groaned, and Llywelyn gave me a significant look. “Send a flare if you need assistance.”

I smiled back. Nain tugged on my arm “Come on, James. We’re going to miss Pobl y Cwm !”

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“And get out of my pub!” the woman on the television shouted at yet another unfortunate punter, and I stifled a yawn.

I looked up at the clock. We had eaten food, and were on our third episode of some soap.

They had all blended into one at this point and I no longer had any idea which character was which.

I tried to stifle another yawn, but failed. Nain paused the TV and gave me a long stare. “If you make another noise like that I’ll be kicking you out on your arse. Soap time is sacred time.”

“I’m...going to head out for a walk,” I said. I grabbed the knitted jumper from the carrier bag where it still sat by the lounge door. “I’ll see you soon.”

I didn’t know where I was planning on going when I left the house, but my eyes

immediately were drawn to the moon reflecting off the sea below.

I walked down toward the beach - or at least where the beach had been.

The tide had come in, and the couple of boats in the harbour bobbed up and down on the waves.

It seemed the whole village fell silent at night.

I was the only person around, and most of the houses leading down to the beach had their curtains drawn.

It was only 8pm at the latest, but the sun had set.

I sat on the sea wall and dangled my feet over the water below. The caves I had seen on the beach earlier were now halfway full with water. I could see why my parents never wanted me to play in them.

“Thinking hard?” asked a familiar voice from behind me, and I jumped. I looked back to see Llywelyn stood bundled up in a big coat. He had on lead a little grey dog that I couldn’t identify. “This is Dinky, and she’s a mutt,” he said as if sensing my thoughts.

“Dinky?” I tried not to make my laugh too obvious.

“I rescued her from an older lady who couldn’t look after her any more.

It seemed cruel to change the name...can she come and say hello?

” He looked down at Dinky, who was straining against her harness toward me.

I nodded, and Llywelyn walked toward me.

As soon as she could Dinky jumped up on to me and started to lick my face. I giggled and played with her ears.

“You’re a gorgeous little thing, aren’t you? Who gave you that silly name, huh? You should be called Boudica, or Caligula. Something that suits such a fierce little girl.” She lapped at my face again. I pushed her face away gently and she curled up on my lap. “She likes me...”

“Good judges of character, dogs,” Llywelyn said. I couldn’t tell if the statement was meant as a compliment or if he was just being matter-of-fact, as seemed to be normal around here. “Can I sit by here for a minute?”

I shifted to the side to let him sit down.

Now, without anyone else around and without the awkwardness of the first time in the van, I could study his face properly as he looked out to sea.

He was gorgeous. His beard was a little scruffy, sure, but it added a roughness to his face that was just nice.

His eyes twinkled blue and his skin practically glowed under the moonlight.

He turned to look directly at me, but I didn’t tear my eyes away.

“I saw you in the shop earlier. You looked like a kid in a sweet shop,” he said. I looked away in embarrassment so he continued. “No, it’s a good thing. Just didn’t have you down as the crafty type.”

“I’m not any more,” I said. “Nain taught me the basics when I was younger and used

to buy me something new like that every Christmas - yarn, or a kids' sewing machine.

Then on my birthday she would buy me top ups and little supplies.

It kept me creative. Then once I got to university it all sort of faded into the background.

I haven't started a scarf in about ten years.

Could use one now, though." I pulled at my jumper, shivering.

"Do you want my coat?" Llywelyn asked, already taking it off.

"No, don't be stupid. You'll be cold then."

"It's big, we can share if you scoot close enough." Llywelyn said it without thought as if it was the most normal thing in the world. He inched closer in when I didn't and swung one half of the coat over my shoulder, leaning even further in for warmth.

His one hand rested almost on mine on the harbour wall. Dinky cuddled between us for the warmth, and everything seemed to slow down. Was he interested, in some way? Surely not. I'd grown up in London, a hub for the gay community. Small towns like this didn't have gay people. Except...

"So, Gwyn and his husband run the craft shop? And people around here are fine with that?" I asked, trying to keep my tone as casual as possible.

"Oh yeah, this place is very welcoming." Llywelyn looked down at his hands.

"There's actually a bit of a joke about there being something in the water.

The village has been pretty progressive since Mr Prentis and his partner started seeing each other back in the 60s.

See, there are quite a few gay men in the village.

The headmaster of the school is, some people say the local baker is screwing the local mechanic, my best friend Tudor is gay... and so am I.”

The words I’d been waiting to hear. And I didn’t know why, because I certainly wasn’t going to do anything about it. “Me too,” I said as casually as I could.

“I know. Your Nain and her best friend have already probably told half the village that much,” he said. “Think they were hoping to set you up with a good Hiraeth man.”

“Fat chance,” I chuckled. “I’m a city boy.”

“You fit in pretty nicely in the country too,” Llywelyn said quietly. I pretended I hadn’t heard anything. No point fantasising about having lovely country babies with lovely country men. That wasn’t my dream, anyway.

“Right,” Llywelyn said once the silence had stretched into something awkward. “Let’s go Dinky. Don’t want to be out too late. Do you want me to walk you home, James?”

“Nah, I’m all good for a bit. Just want to look out to sea.” I shivered as Llywelyn stood up. He noticed and draped the coat back over my shoulders.

“You need it more than me,” he said as he brushed off his jeans. Dinky jumped off my lap and stood by him.

“When will I give it back?” I asked.

“It’s a little village, you’ll run into me.”

“Well...thanks for the chat tonight,” I said. “It’s nice getting to know people here. Even if I won’t be around for long.”

“Any time.” Llywelyn smiled, then tugged at Dinky’s lead as he turned to walk away. I looked back out to sea and at the moon’s bright reflection on rippling waves. The boats bobbed in the wind. It was a beautiful night.

Chapter Four

Llywelyn

When I woke up, the first thing that came into my mind was him .

James. The way he looked under the moonlight, how sad and lost he had looked.

How nice it was to help keep him warm and to make him smile.

How I wanted to do it again. Thinking of him also led to another problem this early in the morning, and I could see it tenting the duvet.

When I moved my hand downwards to do something about it I accidentally disturbed the covers, letting a draft of cold air in and killing the mood completely.

I groped down toward the carpet and grabbed the pyjama trousers covered in rainbow coloured elephants and pulled them on under the covers. I might have been living by myself for a couple of years now but I still couldn't walk around my own house naked.

I rolled out of bed and shivered. It was definitely a very cold morning.

I crossed my arms over my chest and walked into the kitchen.

Dinky got out of bed and ran around my feet until I let her out into the garden for a pee.

I put the kettle on top of the stove and turned on the gas, holding my hands nearby for just a little bit more heat.

The kitchen, like the rest of the house, was old fashioned with rough whitewashed walls and dark beams crossing the ceiling.

The tiny table for two in the corner was all I had space for. I usually ate alone anyway.

The kettle started whistling and I poured myself a cup of tea. I grabbed a piece of bread and started eating it. Some days toast just felt like too much effort.

There was a knock at the door and Dinky ran back in, yapping at the door like she could intimidate anyone.

“C’mon, guard dog,” I said as I nudged her aside with my foot.

I checked through the frosted glass at the top of the door before opening just in case I needed to put a t-shirt on. Seeing who it was I unlatched the door.

“Hey!” said my sister as she sauntered in like she owned the place. She had always been very self-confident and brash and wasted no time now. She brushed past me into the kitchen, touched the side of the kettle to check it was still hot and helped herself to the coffee in the cupboard.

“Alaw, how lovely to see you, make yourself at home.” I gave her a mock-glare but she didn’t even bother to pretend being sheepish. She set her mug down on the side and picked up Dinky, who was jumping desperately up at her and scratching what looked like expensive leather leggings.

“Sorry Llyw, you know how it is. Busy busy busy.” She smiled and scratched

between Dinky's ears.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" I asked. "I didn't think you'd be back here 'til Christmas."

"Oh, just stopping by..." she said idly. Her ears went red, so I could tell she was holding something back. She'd tell me the truth soon enough anyway so I didn't push. "I just wanted to come and see my little furry niece whilst I was in the area."

"Do you want me to go to your car and grab your luggage?" I asked. "Will you be staying tonight?"

"No, no worries. I have somewhere to stay."

"Seriously, I'll sleep on the sofa and you can have my bed. It's no worry."

"You still haven't moved into Mam and Dad's room?" Alaw's voice was full of pity.

"No, not yet. Just got some stuff to sort out." I didn't want to talk about it past that. "Anyway, if you have somewhere else to stay it doesn't really matter."

"Yes, I do." Alaw's tone also said she didn't want to talk further on the matter. I reached for my mug, she reached for hers, and we both took a sip. I waited for one of us to break the stalemate but she didn't seem inclined to move. I took another gulp before opening my mouth.

"Fine, you're right. I don't want to sort Mam and Dad's room because it feels too soon."

"You're still sleeping in your single bed?"

“...yes.”

“We need to find you someone to share that bed with, maybe that will kick you into gear,” Alaw said. I very deliberately didn’t say anything, tried looking like I had nothing to hide.

“Oh my God. There is someone isn’t there? Where is he?” Alaw plonked Dinky down on the kitchen floor and ran with cuppa in hand to check my room. Disappointed, she snuck a cautious glance into Mam and Dad’s room too. She turned to look at me, and walked slowly back into the kitchen.

“So,” she started, “who is he? Are you serious? Is it Tudor, because you said you were only friends but I’d get it if you did fancy him, he’s pretty fit isn’t he?”

“It’s not Tudor.” I hesitated before continuing. “It’s not anyone really, I’ve got no chance.”

“Hm. Seems likely. What’s his name?”

“No, no. We’re not having this conversation,” I said.

“You keep your secrets and I’ll keep mine.

Anyway, I’ve got to get going. I have a school building to fix up and things to do.

” I locked the back door and put my mug in the sink.

“Text me if you want a catch up, or just come over. I’m always here in the evenings. When are you heading back to Swansea?”

“I...I don’t know yet,” said Alaw. When she saw the concern that must have been

obvious on my face she continued. “Honestly, it’s nothing to worry about. I just want to check that I’m right before I make any big pronouncements. Please don’t stress.”

I would worry, of course. I always worried about my little sister even if she was much more accomplished than I would ever be, much richer and more independent living in Swansea.

It was my job as an older brother. But if she told me to stop worrying, I’d try my very best to.

I kissed her on the cheek. “Seriously, I have to get dressed and go. I’ll see you later. Don’t get into too much trouble now.”

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I drove the van into the middle of the village, where the little school sat right on the edge of the river.

I, like everyone else who had grown up in the village had gone to Hiraeth’s only primary school.

I hopped out of the van and grabbed my tool bag, and went to walk through the school gates before spotting a familiar face, looking very lost.

James was stood by the edge of the river and gazing in like he was hoping it held the answer to life itself.

“Hi,” I said lamely. Every time I saw him he looked even better, and felt more tongue tied.

The winter wind rippled through his light brown hair and slightly reddened his

cheeks.

He was wearing a different pair of jeans - ones that fit him well, as well as a cable-knit cream jumper over a shirt.

He turned to look at me and smiled. My breath caught. “Hi,” he said back. “We need to stop meeting like this.”

“What brings you to this part of the village?” I asked.

“Boredom. Nain is watching Loose Women and I’m stuck using this phone at the moment so I can’t even browse Facebook for the latest.” He held up an old looking flip phone.

I put the tool bag down and walked nearer to him. Close up I could see that the bruises I had noticed before had started ever so slightly fading. As if by some instinct, I reached my hand to his face and brushed along his jawline. He looked at me with an expression I couldn’t work out.

“Sorry,” I muttered. “Don’t know what made me do that.”

“No, it’s fine.” James smiled. “I suppose I should tell you what brought me here.”

So he did. He explained his clubbing, being mugged, being left with nothing.

“So I came here in clothes borrowed from the hospital with fuck all money to my name, because funnily enough the banks don’t want to take money from your savings when you have no driver’s licence or passport,” James said.

His cheeks had flushed even more now, from cold or anger I didn’t know.

I put one arm around him with a bit of hesitation and rubbed one shoulder.

He relaxed into my grip and leaned into me a little bit.

“What makes me really angry,” he said with a sniff, “Is that they didn’t need to do this.

” He pointed at his face, where the bruising was.

“The doctors have confirmed there was rohypnol in my system. I couldn’t have fought back.

They must have dragged me into the alley, stole my stuff and kicked the shit into me because they could.

” He stiffened a little bit and leaned away, like he had realised he was still talking. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have...”

“It’s fine, honestly. Whenever you need a friend to talk to I’m here.” I gave him my most convincing smile. Inside I wanted to hunt down whoever had hurt him and make them regret it.

“Thank you,” he said. I felt like the smile I got in return was just as fake.

“Llywelyn!” called a female voice. I turned to see Mrs Hayward, the deputy head of the school, walking toward us at a brisk pace in her little stiletto heels. “Ah, and Mr Brown! I was wondering when you’d turn up, why don’t you come inside to the staff room. I’ll introduce you to everyone.”

She was looking right at James, who spluttered and seemed to be trying to form a response.

Before either of us could say anything, she had grabbed into his arm and pulled him towards the school, chatting about the staff without giving him room to correct her mistake.

He looked back briefly at me with panic in his eyes.

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Chapter Five

James

“So,” the lady who had introduced herself to me as Mrs Angela Hayward said, “we understand that you’re from an English-language agency and that’s fine, just understand that we are a bilingual school and you will hear the odd bit of Welsh throughout the day. Is that OK?”

Before I could respond she continued, walking me through the school corridor to a room from which I could hear lots of talking and laughter.

Mrs Hayward continued talking, not letting me get a single word in edgeways; “You’ll get along with all the staff, they’re lovely - just such a shame you’re only here for the day - ooh where did you get this jumper?

So chic! Bit light for your subject though, surely? Don’t want to get any paint on that.”

She opened the door and we were in the staff room.

The conversation died down as we entered.

“Hello, everyone. This is Tom Brown, and he’ll be covering art classes across the year-groups today so please give him a lovely welcome.

Mrs Ifans, I think he’ll be with your class first so if you’d like to show him where to

go. Thank you.”

She clip-clopped down the hallway to go elsewhere and a young, nervous looking lady approached me. She had blonde hair tied loosely in a bun and wore a cream cardigan and blouse. “Hello,” she said quietly. “You must be-“

“There’s been a mistake!” I heard Mrs Hayward shout, her voice rising through an octave as she said it, like there had been a murder.

Every head in the room snapped to the doorway.

Mrs Hayward was stood in front of Llywelyn, who had his hand on the shoulder of a bespectacled man about my age, if not a little bit older.

He was skinny, his glasses big and round like Harry Potter.

He had mousy brown hair and wore a tweed suit and bow tie.

“Tom Brown,” he said quietly. “Nice to meet you all.” He looked more prim and proper than any art teacher I had ever met.

“Can I have my assistant back now, Mrs Hayward?” Llywelyn asked.

“Assistant? Why, yes, of course.” Angela Hayward turned cold eyes on me. “Go on then.” She jerked her head back towards Llywelyn with an expression that said I was vermin. As if it were my deception rather than her mistake which had led to this.

I meekly followed Llywelyn from the room , muttering goodbyes to a couple of the teachers on the way. None of them seemed to know quite how to look at me.

Llywelyn was silent as we met in the hallway, and the staff room door closed behind

us. He turned away from me, and I wondered if he was angry with me for the mix up, for him having to come and rescue me. But then I saw his shoulders were shaking with laughter.

“You bastard!” I punched his arm lightly and he turned to look at me with tears of mirth in his eyes.

“I can’t believe that just happened,” he chuckled. “And you just went along with it!”

“I couldn’t get a word in edgeways.”

“That does sound like Angela.” Llywelyn said. “I’d have rescued you sooner if Tom hadn’t turned up at the same time you were dragged to your doom. I had to show him to the staff room myself then. I thought you’d hold your own until we got there.”

“Well I almost ended up teaching Year 1 art, no thanks to your speedy intervention.” It was difficult to stay annoyed at Llywelyn. He was laughing, not maliciously but out of genuine joy.

“You could have held your own,” he said. “I saw you in that craft shop the other day, looking at the walls like they were made of gold. I bet you know your way around art stuff backwards.”

“Well, that’s not the point,” I said quietly. I was mollified by his compliment, as well as the fact he had been watching me so closely. “Not so good with DIY though, so not sure I’ll be much use as your assistant in this case.”

“I’m sure I can find something...” Llywelyn smiled. “You know you’re not actually my assistant, it was just the easiest way to get you out of there. You can go home if you like.”

“Oh, did you want me to leave?” I asked.

“God no. I could use the company, I’m just trying to say-“

“Then I’ll stay.” I smiled up at him. Llywelyn scratched his beard idly for a second like he had lost his train of thought. “Right, yes. Fixing up the stage. Come along?”

Llywelyn led me down the corridor to the school hall.

It reminded me of my own primary school, before my parents had earned enough money to send me private.

The floor was worn wood and the walls painted magnolia.

Around the walls, just above head height there were words painted in Welsh that I couldn’t understand.

At the end of the room there was a little wooden stage which Llywelyn had climbed up onto.

I joined him, and sat with my legs dangling over the edge.

He was testing each beam of wood with his feet and when one creaked extra loud he grinned at me.

His smiles were impossible not to return, and I found myself smiling back.

Llywelyn took a hammer and a box full of nails from his toolbag and started hammering at the offending plank until it was no longer creaking. “Just loose, easy job,” he said. I wasn’t sure if he was talking to me or himself.

“I’ve been called worse,” I replied without thinking. He looked at me with wide eyes and blushed. “Sorry, automatic response.”

“N-no, it’s fine.” Llywelyn looked down and banged a nail with the hammer that I was sure had already been nailed in.

We sat in silence for a few seconds, until I found a way to get the conversation going again. “What’s written on the walls? School motto or something?”

“Would be a very long motto,” he said. “It’s the story of Dwynwen, Welsh patron saint of love. Like our St Valentine, I guess.”

“I see,” I said. “Why?”

“Because they say she blessed a spring somewhere in Hiraeth or near here. She was very unlucky in love, and wanted anyone who drank from the spring not to have the same fate.” Llywelyn scooted over and sat next to me on the edge of the stage.

“Hiraeth . They say it has no direct English translation, but that’s not true.

It means longing, pining for a lost love or longing for home.

This village is said to be longing for love, just like Dwynwen. ”

I sat quiet for a second, well aware of how close we were. “And where is the-“ The peeling of my own phone cut me off, the shrill polyphonic ringtone like something out of the early 2000s. I flipped it open. No Caller ID. “Is there somewhere I can take this?” I asked Llywelyn.

“PE supply cupboard.” Llywelyn nodded at a door in the corner of the room. “The lights don’t work though, so be careful.”

I nodded and brought the phone to my ear as I walked towards the storage cupboard. When I opened the door, I caught a glimpse of what looked like a pommel horse and some gymnastics mats on the floor. When the door closed, I was plunged into darkness.

“Hello?” I spoke into the phone.

“Ah, hello. This is Detective Butt.” I tried not to giggle again at the name but I had to pull the phone away from my mouth in case he heard me.

“Do you have any updates?” I asked. I paced small circles in the little space to make sure I didn’t knock anything over.

“Yes, only that they attempted to get back into your flat. We only know this because they tripped an alarm, but by the time an officer had gotten there they were gone.”

My blood ran cold. So they weren’t done with me. Weren’t content with robbing me and leaving me for dead. They wanted more.

“Are you still there?” PC Butt asked.

“Yes, sorry. Yes. I’m here. It’s just-”

“I understand, Mr Evans. Are you happy to stay put where you are for now?” PC Butt sounded professional but I thought I detected a note of genuine concern under it all.

“Yes, I can stay here another few days before I get back to work.”

“Thank you. We’ll keep you updated.” PC Butt hung up, and I flipped the phone back down and shoved it in my pocket.

I walked towards the door— or where I thought the door was, but must have walked in completely the wrong direction because I tripped over something and fell hard onto the gym mats. I shouted as I went down, more out of shock than anything else.

“Are you OK?” Llywelyn called. I saw the door open — so that’s where it was — and then close behind Llywelyn. “Where are you? Are you hurt?”

“Don’t step forwards,” I started, but my warning came way too late. I heard a shout and then had the wind knocked out of me as Llywelyn landed on top of me in a heap.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to-” Llywelyn stopped.

We seemed to have both become aware in the same moment exactly what was going on.

As I recovered my breath, I could focus more and more on Llywelyn lying on top of me, his whole body pressed on mine.

One leg had fallen between both of mine and was pushing between my legs in a way that was starting to excite me, and I knew he could feel it.

In the pitch dark, one of his hands found my face and stroked down my cheek. I felt his breath hot on my face, and then his lips tentatively found mine. I knew I shouldn’t — not worth causing gossip or drama in Nain’s little village — but it was happening anyway, and I was powerless to stop it.

I reached one of my own hands upward to tangle in the curls at the back of his head and deepened the kiss.

Our tongues clashed and teeth knocked together, and Llywelyn’s leg rubbed up against my groin through my jeans.

For a sweet, sweet moment it was just him and me in the darkness. Just for a moment, though.

“Come on in kids, form an orderly line!” Mrs Hayward’s voice echoed from outside the room, in the main hall. “Don’t want to be late for assembly now, do we?”

“Shit,” Llywelyn muttered. “Sorry.” He extricated himself from my arms and reached to pull me up. This moment felt suddenly very un-sexy and I readjusted myself in my pants.

“Do we...leave?” I asked.

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“I think that may be the only option,” Llywelyn muttered ruefully.

Was he regretting things? “Ah, there it is.” He pushed the door open and light flooded the room.

I exited sheepishly, trying not to pat my hair down and make it even more obvious that untoward things had gone on.

A hundred sets of eyes swivelled our way, the children obviously not knowing what had gone on but a couple of the teachers staring at us.

The real Tom Brown sat next to Mrs Ifans and blushed. He was definitely ogling us for some reason. Mrs Hayward was stood on the stage, obviously about to start her assembly.

“Sorry,” Llywelyn said as he climbed up on to the stage. “Just...grabbing my tools.”

I heard a snort come from the other side of the hall, and knew before I even looked that it was Tom Brown. When I did look, he had his face in his hands and Mrs Ifans was looking at him like he was gone off. I liked him.

“Come on,” Llywelyn muttered to me as he walked past and toward the double doors that led into hall. I sheepishly followed, well aware still of how many of the teachers were either shooting daggers or looking at us with expressions of undisguised curiosity.

He walked swiftly through the hallway, and out into the open air. “Hey,” I called after

him. He kept walking. I tried calling again, but he didn't stop. I jogged to catch up with his longer strides, and put one hand on his shoulder just as he reached his van.

"What?" he asked, his face like thunder.

"Did I do something wrong?" I asked?

"You? What could you have done wrong? I kissed you. "

"And was it that bad that you regret it?" I felt hurt.

"Not at all, I just didn't..." Llywelyn stopped for a second. "I don't imagine for a second that you're interested in me, and that's fine. I just don't want to force myself on you."

"And why would you think I wasn't interested?"

"It's just...." Llywelyn turned away again and opened the back doors in the van. He started to load his toolbar in, and spoke with his back to me. "You're some high-baller in the city, and I don't for a second think you'll be interested in a small town handy-man."

I stepped toward him. When he turned back toward me he flinched slightly at the proximity.

I took one of his rough, working hands in my own, then stood on my tip-toes to give him a quick peck on the lips.

"I am very interested in you. And very attracted to you. I'm only here for four days, but if you want to do a little bit more of..."

whatever that was, then I'm very much up for it. "

Llywelyn looked slightly shell-shocked but then leaned down to kiss me back, a brief kiss that promised more.

"If we are going to do...something," he said, then hesitated as if unsure of what to say next.

"Then I would like to do it properly. Even if you are only here for a few more days. What are your plans for tonight?"

"Nothing," I said. "Unless you count yet another soap marathon with Nain."

"Great, I'll come and get you at seven," said Llywelyn. He smiled and kissed me again. "Don't eat beforehand."

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Nain watched me as I paced her living room, two jumpers in hand.

"Which one do you think?" I asked, brandishing the cream one toward her like a weapon.

"The teal, I've said a thousand times." Nain kept twitching her head to try and get a better view of the television as I paced. "Anyway, he's just taking you out. He already likes the look of you."

"I know, but no one has taken me out in years , I don't even know what the protocol is for this." I looked at the teal jumper she had suggested and threw it aside. "I'm going with cream."

“Of course you are, cariad . Anyway, what do you mean no one has taken you out in years? You’re lovely, and a handsome boy too.” Nain looked affronted on my behalf.

“I work a lot, Nain. 12 hours a day in the week and then sometimes the weekend too. Who am I going to find to tolerate that kind of work? And if I do, when are they going to find time to take me on a date?” I didn’t want to explain that the closest I had gotten to a date in the last year had been when a guy offered me coffee at his place before we went to the bedroom.

I couldn’t remember the last time I chatted to someone for hours before sex.

If that was even what Llywelyn wanted. Or I did.

“Just relax, the man likes you. Enjoy the conversation and the food.”

“Food? Where is he taking me?”

“There are only two possible places, nowhere too fancy. You’ll find out when he gets here in...about five minutes time. Never late, that one.” Nain nodded to herself and once again tried to watch television around me. “You’d make an excellent door, James. But a terrible window.”

“Thanks Nain. I really appreciate it. But if you could-” the doorbell rang before I could finish. “Shit!” I threw the cream jumper on over my head. “How do I look?”

“As gorgeous as always.” Nain looked me up and down with pride. “Let’s get you to the ball, Cinderella.”

From the hallway I could see Llywelyn silhouetted in the light of Nain’s porch. She opened the door before I could get to it. Damn, he’s gorgeous.

Llywelyn had obviously put a bit of time into trimming his beard and taming the curls on his head.

The usual beanie was gone and he wore a freshly ironed white shirt.

His jeans, usually covered with paint splatters and a little bit messy, were clean and pressed.

I wanted to jump him right then and there.

Husband material, my mind supplied. I only had three more days before I would be back in London, and I would take every second I could.

Chapter Six

Llywelyn

“How do I look?” I asked Tudor, who stood behind the bar cleaning glasses.

“Fine,” he said. “For the seventh time tonight.”

I hesitated. Had I really asked that many times? But then Tudor smirked, and I flicked a bit of beer foam on the bar just to piss him off. “One more pint of liquid courage?” he asked and nodded at my half-full glass.

“No, I’m keeping a clear head. Don’t want to mess this up. Not under any circumstances.”

“Hoping to get lucky, are we?” Tudor smirked again, and I shook my head without keeping eye contact.

Once upon a time, people had thought he and I would make a good couple - perhaps because we were the only two openly gay 16 year olds in town and because we were best friends.

But he was too much like me, and I was not my own type.

“How’s business?” I asked. Tudor ran the only hotel in town, a beautiful old manor that was starting to fall more and more into disrepair as it saw no new visitors.

Tudor shook his head. “Not so good, Llyw.” He put one of the glasses back on the shelf. “No one visits little villages with no train link and nothing special in them to differentiate them. If you want the sea, you’ve got the whole coastline of Wales. Who’d want to visit here?”

His words hit a bit of a nerve. I’d been feeling that way with James.

I was a reflection of this town. I’d never wanted to move out, never looked beyond it.

There was so little special about this place that he’d avoided it for almost twenty years.

Would he avoid it for another twenty when he was done?

“Penny for your thoughts?” Tudor took the pint glass which I hadn’t realised I had finished, and washed it. It seemed to be a compulsion, now I thought of it. He had washed at least twenty glasses since I’d come in and I was the only customer.

“Just...feeling inadequate, is all.” I scratched at a little spot on the bar before continuing. “Why didn’t I ever want to get out of here, see the world? Study past 16, gain a trade?”

“I don’t know, Llyw. I wish I could help you there, but I’m the same.

I wish I could leave this old place to rot.

But Mam would never forgive me, and the hotel is still ours to pay for whether we look after it or not.

” Tudor looked sombre for a second. “Hey, aren’t you meant to be meeting lover-boy in five minutes? ”

“Shit.” I grabbed my coat from the back of the chair and threw a five pound note at the bar. “I’ll see you later!”

I ran from the bar, through the little lobby and out of the door. The hotel was up a steep hill from the rest of the village and that helped as I basically threw myself down it to get to Glynis’ place on time. I was never late for anything, and I wasn’t going to be late to this. Whatever this was.

I made it to Glynis’ house with a couple of minutes to spare. I let my breathing calm down for a second and knocked the door as gently as I could. I saw my reflection in the glass of the door and did my best to flatten my hair as I saw shadows approach.

Glynis opened the door and looked me up and down in a way she never had before. She judged everyone, of course - she thrived on gossip and drama — but I had never seen her look at me like she wanted to dissect me.

“You look after him now Llywelyn,” she said.

“O-of course,” I stuttered. I didn’t want to get on her bad side, but most importantly, I knew I had to look after the man stood behind her.

He wore one of the knitted jumpers I’d started to associate with him since I first saw Glynis picking them out for him in the charity shop, and his hair was ruffled, but not as wind-blown as when I’d first met him.

I wanted to mess it up even more. He was holding my coat in one hand.

“Hi,” he said quietly. The tension was thick in the air, and it seemed like neither of us knew how to talk any more after the kiss. Now we knew we both wanted more.

“Hello,” I said. Glynis looked between the two of us like she was watching the

world's slowest and most boring tennis match.

"Come on now," Glynis yanked James' arm and pulled him in front of her, out the door. "You have a key if you're back late."

The door closed behind James, and then we were out together in the cold. "Hello," I said, then realised I'd already said it.

"Hello again," James smiled. I couldn't help but smile back. "Shall we go?"

"Um, sure." I offered him my arm. He threw my coat on over his shoulders then took my arm.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked.

"Only the local pub...if that's OK with you? I don't want to presume, we can always go wherever you want to-"

"The pub is fine," James interrupted. He seemed quite calm and collected. I had no idea how he did it. I felt like more anxious than I had in years. What if I messed up? What if he didn't actually like me, and this whole thing was out of pity? Or just a thanks for the lift from the station?

"You're thinking hard, aren't you?" James said. I couldn't think of what to say, so I just nodded. "Well don't. Let's just go out for a nice evening. No weirdness, no awkward silences, no stress. Just enjoying each other's company."

"I can do that," I said, perhaps more to myself than to James.

We had walked down to the corner of High Street and I crossed us over from the pavement that ran along the shops to the one that ran down the river.

It was already dark and the river glistened in the moonlight.

The pub wasn't too far a walk, and I could see it in the distance, a squat thatched cottage on the river.

I hoped that James didn't think it was too quaint, and found myself wishing that I'd taken Tudor up on his offer of a more gourmet meal up at the hotel.

"Not that I don't find the strong and silent type incredibly attractive, but I really feel one of us should start talking," said James. As we passed the craft shop, I saw him turn his head to take a look.

"Do you want to go in there?" I asked.

"Oh...um, no. It's fine."

"Seriously, Geraint is still in, it doesn't matter that they're officially closed."

"No. Honestly, I'd only get an urge to spend money I don't have." James looked a bit dejected, and I wanted to solve that.

"Well I can buy you some stuff if you like," I said.

"No. I'm fine. Thank you though." I sensed James was done with the topic, so I stayed quiet as we approached the pub.

The pub was an old thatched cottage not unlike the one I lived in, but two storeys and much bigger. The outside walls were a knobbly, rough white and the windows were like little recesses into it.

James reached out and touched it with one hand. "Like stepping back in time," he

said quietly.

“Come and look inside then,” I replied whilst pushing open the door with one hand.

The inside of the pub was even more rustic.

James had no trouble walking through the little doorway but I had to duck, as well as below a couple of the bigger support beams that ran along the roof.

All the walls were stone, and there was a roaring fireplace on one side.

Even on a weekday, its was full of the buzz of regulars.

I ushered James towards an empty table by the fireplace.

“I’ll go and get us some drinks,” I said. “What do you want?”

“Just a lemonade please,” James gave me a tight smile. I put my jacket over the chair and walked over to the bar.

“A pint of Brains and a lemonade please, Ffion.” I put a five pound note down on the bar. Ffion, an old school friend of mine, started the drinks straight away.

“How you keeping then, love? Who’s that?” she asked. She nodded over at where James was sat. When I looked over at him, he quickly ducked his head and looked away.

“That is...no one.” I said. “I’ll tell you all about it next week, promise.” Next week when he’d be home and I’d be sat in here alone.

“As long as it is a promise,” said Ffion. She gave me the drinks and pushed the five

pound note back over the bar. “First lot on the house for a handsome face,” she said.

“Oh, thank you.” I said. She’d never done that before.

“Not you, him. Idiot.” She went back to wiping over the bar and I took the fiver and drinks, feeling a bit stupid.

“Barmaid thinks you’re pretty,” I said to James. I put the drinks down in front of him. “So if you start going up to the bar we might get our drinks for free.”

He laughed, and it felt good to be the one who’d made him happy. I sat down and took a big gulp of my pint. “Ah, that’s good.” I said. James hadn’t touched his lemonade yet.

“What’s your poison of choice?” he asked.

“Brains bitter, good Welsh beer,” I replied. “What about you?”

“Anything with vodka in it,” he said. His eyes flicked down to the lemonade.

“So why not tonight?” I asked.

James hesitated. “It’s stupid,” he said.

“I promise not to laugh.”

“It’s just...I don’t trust it. Not after what happened on Saturday night.” I realised, then, what the problem was and why he wasn’t drinking. It was hard not to be offended, but I pushed that down because I knew he meant well. And that he had been through a lot.

“Here,” I took the five pound note from my pocket. “I insist on paying as I asked you out, but go and get yourself one from the bar.”

“Thank you,” James said quietly after a moment. He took the five pounds from my outstretched hand and walked over to the bar. I saw him chatting and laughing with Ffion as she prepared the drink and once again pushed the five pound note back to him

He looked happier when he came back to the table and he took a sip of his drink.

“That hits the spot,” he said. “Sorry if I got a bit weird, it’s just...”

“I get it, don’t worry,” I replied. “Don’t stress. I have no idea what I’d be doing in your situation. Probably running around screaming my head off.”

“Nah. You seem like a pretty chill guy,” he said. He took another sip of his drink, and my eyes reflexively dipped to his mouth around the straw. I gulped down my own drink to distract myself.

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“You’d think,” I said. “But I think it’s only because I live in the world’s slowest town. I couldn’t cope a day in London.”

“Neither can I,” James chuckled ruefully. “Some days I just want to fly away from there and never go back.”

“So why don’t you?” I asked more forcefully than intended.

“Because...” James hesitated for a second, took another sip. “Because...I want to be successful. To make my parents proud. To earn my way in the world.”

“And you couldn’t do that somewhere else?” I asked. I realised how that might sound to him, so I quickly changed tact. “Not here, I mean. Anywhere but here.” Smooth, stupid.

James took another long sip through the straw, and I looked down at my nails to stop focusing on his lips. He finally spoke, and I looked up at him. “I could, I guess. Just not what my parents would ever have expected of me. Not what I expect of me.”

“Go on then,” I replied. “Tell me what you would do if you could do anything else.”

“I don’t want to sound stupid,” James said for the second time that night.

“Nothing you say to me is going to sound stupid,” I said.

“No?” James stopped for a second. “I wanted to run a little bookshop, or a cafe, or both. Just serve coffee, recommend books I think people will love, don’t pressure

anyone out of the shop. That would be perfect, you know?"

"Yeah, I know. So why not?"

"Because the rent in London is extortionate, and despite 12 hours a day 5 days a week for the last 5 years I've only just scraped five figures in savings."

I almost spat my beer out. "Only 5 figures? I might have just about a hundred quid in my account on a good day!"

James gave me an inscrutable look. Pity? I couldn't tell. I felt a bit stupid, throwing out there just how poor I was.

"Anyway, that's me. What would you do if you could?"

Now I felt even more embarrassed, but I couldn't hold back after James had just laid his dreams on the table.

"I'm...happy here. And I know I should be more ambitious, or have big dreams to put out there, but I don't.

I wouldn't mind a bit more money coming in, an extension on my bungalow, fix up some central heating...

but I don't want the world. I just want happiness here in Hiraeth. "

"And is that all it would take to make you happier here? An extension and central heating?" James' eyes seemed to look into my soul.

"No," I admitted. I finished the dregs of my beer before continuing. "It would be nice to be a bit less lonely."

James was quiet then. In an attempt to fill the silence I took out a menu from the little stand on the table and looked through quickly.

It was only recently the pub had started to do food at all, and it was rustic at best. I worried that James would be used to Michelin star restaurants and gourmet food.

James craned his head to read the menu in my hand. “Oh, I’ll have the stacked burger. Sounds lush.” He looked up and blushed.

“Lush?” I smiled. “Well, you can take the boy out of Wales...”

“Shut up,” he grinned. I pushed my chair back to go to the bar to order and noticed his empty drink. “I’ll go and order. Am I OK to grab your next drink, or would you like to?”

“If you could, that would be nice.” James said quietly.

I headed to the bar to grab the next round.

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A couple of hours later, bellies full and heads light, we both exited the pub. James pulled his borrowed coat around himself and shivered. “Even colder,” he said. His eyes looked a little glazed under the moonlight, but I knew mine would be too.

“Let me walk you back to your Nain’s place,” I said.

“Not yours?” I thought I heard him mutter. I wasn’t sure though, so didn’t reply in case I had heard wrong. We both turned simultaneously and walked back down Main Street. After some moments James threaded his fingers through mine and we held hands as we passed the row of closed shops.

“Can we head down to by the beach?” he asked. “That is, unless you have somewhere you need to be. I just liked being there with you last night.”

“No, no. I have time.” I looked down at my watch. It was 10pm. Almost bedtime , I thought, then mentally slapped myself. How old was I, 103?

When we reached the sea wall, the tide was in its way out. The sand still looked wet, but James tugged at my hand and we descended the steps to the sand. One of the bigger caves loomed dark and foreboding to the side, cut into the black cliff and seeming like an even darker blot in the night.

“I told you I always wanted to see the caves but Mum and dad wouldn’t let me,” James said. He gave my hand a little tug to make sure I was following him.

“I know that, but isn’t it a bit dangerous to go scrambling over rocks when we’ve both had a...” I started, but James was already climbing up to the cave mouth. I sighed, and did my best to follow him.

I caught up to him at the entrance to the cave. He was trying to look in, but the moonlight hardly lit up the inside.

“Hello?” I called in. “Is there anyone in there?”

I waited for a reply, but no one shouted back out.

“Who’s going to be in there at this time?” James asked.

“Why do you think all the teenagers used to come to the caves? It’s a prime spot to mess around.”

“Did you?” James asked.

I blushed. “No...I only ever messed about with my best mate, but we were too scared of getting caught to do it out here. We just used to take the keys to one of the hotel rooms when his Mum was out.”

James took a cautious step into the darkness, seemingly already moving on from the topic. “Have you got a light?” he asked.

I took my phone out and shone the torch into the cave. James wandered inwards without fear, then turned to look back at me. His teeth shone white as he grinned back at me in the torchlight.

“Come on,” he said. The inside of the cave was still wet and slippery from the tide, so he braced one hand on the wall for support.

He found a little ledge and perched on it.

He looked around the cave in wonder. I joined him where he sat and moved the torch so that he could see all around the cave.

I put the phone down next to him on the little ledge and the light made weird shapes on the walls.

“You OK?” I asked. James looked a little bit spaced out.

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s just been a weird couple of days. I don’t know which way is up half the time.”

“Well whatever you need, whether you want to talk or not. I’m here.”

“Thank you,” he said. James stood then, and his body was so close he was almost pressed against me. In front of the phone’s light he was just a black silhouette. He

stood on his tip-toes and threaded the fingers of one hand through my hair to pull my lips down to his.

The kiss started off hesitant as each of our cold lips touched, but quickly heated up as we did.

With confidence and dominance I didn't know I had, I put one hand behind his head and pushed him up against the cold cave wall.

I slipped my tongue into his mouth and he moaned, which only made me kiss deeper and harder.

Our teeth clashed as we deepened the kiss, and James' free hand snuck under my shirt.

It was so cold that I hissed and pulled back before going in for more.

"God, you're sexy," James said between kisses. His free hand snuck down to palm me over my jeans. I was rock hard and responded to his touch by pressing up against him harder, his hand a barrier between both of our erections.

I felt his hand start to slip below my belt, cold fingers reaching down towards my cock.

I did my best to unbuckle my belt with one hand, to give him access.

Once I had clumsily managed that, I reached for James' top button to undo his jeans but he batted my hand away.

The hand that had been tangled in my hair came down to help his other hand in undoing my trousers, and he wrapped his cold fingers around me.

“Fuck,” I hissed, both at his touch and at the sudden cold.

James pulled away from me slightly. “So you never messed around in here as a teenager, no?”

“No,” I whispered back.

“Let me really make up for it then.” James sank to a crouch on the floor and freed my cock from the confines of my jeans. The cold air hit it straight away and I instinctively flinched backward, but James put one hand on my arse and pulled me forwards, replacing cold air with a warm mouth.

It had been a long time. Years, in fact, since Tudor and I had last messed around.

And I knew it had never been this good. I looked down to see James with lips wrapped around my cock in the weak light of my phone and I nearly came then and there.

His head bobbed up and down, almost taking the whole length before gagging and pulling back.

He pulled back off me briefly, and looked up at me. “Even bigger than I thought,” he said quietly. He pushed his lips back onto my cock and I could feel myself getting closer.

“Fuck, I’m going to-” I tried pulling away, but James’ hand on my arse pulled me back in as he continued to work his magic.

I could feel my release building, my balls pulling up tighter toward my body as he licked up and down the shaft.

I groaned as I came, holding myself to the wall to stop my legs going from under me.

James carried on sucking as I finished. I heard him gag and when I looked down there were tears in his eyes. I pulled out of his mouth and sank down to his level. I took his face in my hands.

“Is everything OK?” I asked.

“Of course,” James smiled as he wiped the water away. “I really liked that.”

“Let me...” I started to move toward his zipper but James stopped me.

“Nah, I like pleasuring you,” he said. I thought I saw him blush in the darkness and he dipped his head to not keep eye contact. “You can do me another time.”

“Sure?” I asked. I tucked myself back into my jeans as the cold air started to effect me.

“I’m sure.” James pulled me in for a kiss. I don’t know how long we both crouched in the cave like that in an intimate embrace, but by the time we had finished kissing my hands were freezing and my lips were chapped. Only my mouth and cheeks felt warm and we were both shivering.

“Can I walk you home?” I pulled James to his feet.

“Yes, I’d like that.”

Chapter Seven

James

The banging on bedroom the door woke me quickly and rudely. “James, there’s a parcel here for you!” Nain shouted.

I pulled on a spare pair of boxers from the little bedside table Nain had brought in and took the only other pair of jeans I had.

There was a white polo shirt in my drawer that I hadn’t seen before which gave me a feeling Nain had been back out to the shop without me, and I pulled on the teal jumper I’d neglected to wear the night before.

It seemed Nain was trying to give me a whole new look without me noticing, and I didn’t hate it.

I was used to the corporate world of suits and brogues, but comfy jumpers and jeans made me feel more at home in the country.

Picking up my phone with a little feeling of dread, I re-dialled my boss.

“Hello, James. I trust you’re well?” My boss’ voice drove a little spike of fear into me that it never had before.

“I’m very well, thank you Arthur.” It was far too easy to slip back into the corporate tone.

“Good. I trust you’re still on track to come in on Friday?”

“Yes, I am.” It was strange, I’d never loved work. But I’d never hated it, but the thought of leaving now filled me with dread. And fear.

“Good. We’ll have a Return to Work form filled out in advance, so that we don’t complicate anything. It’ll be good to have you back.”

“Thanks, Arthur.”

I put down the phone and sighed out loud. Was it the attack that was making London feel so unsafe to me now, or was it something else? I couldn’t tell. I just couldn’t believe that I’d only been in Hiraeth for two days, and would only have three more.

“Did you want a cuppa, cariad ?” Nain called. It broke me out of my stupor, and I quickly pulled on my socks.

“Yes please, Nain!” I got up and opened the bedroom door. Once I was in the kitchen I sat down at the table as Nain boiled the kettle. On the table was a brown paper bag with my name written on it. There was no address.

“Gwyn dropped it off earlier. Said it was from a not-so-secret admirer.” Nain put down a cup of tea in front of me. Seconds later, she was back with toast. I reached over both to see what was inside the package.

There were two wooden knitting needles and two balls of yarn, a deep emerald green that was soft to the touch. “Beautiful,” I muttered. Llywelyn , my brain supplied instantly. It must have been from him.

“That boy knows how to treat someone right,” Nain supplied. She had come to the same obvious conclusion, it seemed. “Shame he’s never found anyone. He’d make a

wonderful husband.”

I felt something coil in my belly at the thought. Of course he deserved someone good to him. I idly stroked the ball of yarn as I thought. He would make someone incredibly happy someday, and it wasn't fair for me to want it to be me.

I ate my toast and drank my tea, took the dishes to the sink and washed them. The entire time I kept glancing back at the wool and needles on the table. It had been so long since I'd picked up a pair of knitting needles, but it would be impolite not to use them.

I took the bag with the needles and wool and walked to the living room where Nain had already ensconced herself in one of her comfy chintz chairs to watch daytime TV.

I cast on a few stitches experimentally, then a few more.

Before beginning, I pulled my jumper over my head and checked out the cabling that ran all the way from the top to the bottom.

Should be easy enough to replicate, I thought.

I started knitting slowly, but it was like riding a bike — impossible to forget once I had started. The old stitches and purls came easily, and I was almost at the end of my first skein of wool when I became aware of someone calling my name.

“Sorry?” I looked up, dazed. Nain stood in the doorway with another old lady at her side.

“You remember Beca, don't you?” Nain asked. I examined the old woman's face, and then a memory came to me.

“You argued with my mum in the street once!” I said. “The last time I came here...”

I noticed Nain’s sharp glare at Beca then and wondered if I’d put my foot in it. “You never mentioned that,” she said quietly and maliciously toward the other woman.

“Strange that,” Beca said and then looked at her watch. “Oh, would you look at the time. Must dash.”

Beca’s feet carried her out of the front door as fast as they could at eighty-years old.

“Well.” Nain shook her head as if dazed, and then looked down at what I was creating. “Oh, isn’t that wonderful! It seems true talent is never forgotten, is it.”

I looked down at what I had been creating.

I had been so engrossed in the little pattern that I had concocted that I hadn’t even looked down to appreciate it.

The cables twisting up the emerald pattern made it seem to coil like a snake, and the delicate ribbing either side made the cabling stand out even more.

“Wow,” I said. I hadn’t realised that I could make something so beautiful after so long.

“That looks long enough, doesn’t it?” Nain pulled the scarf from my hands and put it around her neck experimentally. “Yes, that would be lovely. Why don’t you finish it off and go and get us some sausage rolls from the bakery? I can’t be bothered cooking lunch now.”

My stomach rumbled. “What time is it?” I asked idly.

“Just coming up to 2 o clock now,” Nain said.

Wow. I must have been very into my work. Nain gave me the scarf back and took a ten pound note from her pocket to give to me. It felt strange, at my age, a successful financier, taking money from my nan for sausage rolls. But I wouldn’t have access to my savings for at least another couple of days.

“Thanks Nain,” I said. I felt ten again. She kissed me on the cheek and walked out, presumably to the kitchen.

I finished off the scarf, weaved my loose ends in and threw it around my shoulders. I had to find a way to thank Llywelyn for this gift. My mind flashed back to the night before. Perhaps not that kind of thanks.

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The air was cold once again, as it always seemed to be in Hiraeth in January, but the sun was shining.

I pulled Llywelyn’s coat around me for warmth and breathed into the scarf around my neck.

I headed toward the bakery. As I approached, I saw familiar van a few shops down and my heart thudded just a little bit faster.

I walked straight past the bakery and to where the van was parked.

The little shop was obviously no longer in operation, and the windows had been whitewashed on the inside. I pressed my face up to the glass to see if I could see anyone inside. Suddenly, a face appeared in my vision and I jumped back. Llywelyn grinned at me, and gestured for me to come in.

I pushed open the door, which tinkled to announce my presence. Llywelyn looked a bit grimy and sweaty, and wiped the sweat off of his forehead with one arm.

“Hi,” he said. He looked down self consciously at his messy clothes. “Sorry I’m a state, I wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

I wanted to kiss him but knew that I shouldn’t. We weren’t together or anything, it might just be weird if I did. Instead, all I could manage was a measly “you look fine.”

“Liar.” Llywelyn smiled at me, and I felt like melting. I wasn’t a liar at all, and I really was still attracted to him when he was sweating. It was the thought of the physical labour that I’d never really been able to do in my jobs.

“What you doing in here then?” I asked, looking around the dusty place for the first time.

“A bit of a project for Mr Prentis, he used to run this place and he’s hoping to sell up. Fat chance as there are no buyers around here but he’s paying me 50 quid a day to get it done.”

“Fifty?” I balked. “That’s nothing!”

“Yeah, well...it pays the bills.” Llywelyn shrugged. “That, and he’s a really nice guy. He offered a hundred but I haggled him down.”

“You...you what?” I was amazed. “What did you say yesterday about wanting more in this town? And you’re haggling people down in price? That’s insane.”

“Well, thanks.” Llywelyn took a sip from a bottle of water. “But that’s the way things are in a small town, you wouldn’t understand.”

“I understand needing enough money to live on,” I replied. Things had gotten frosty quite quickly, so I took on a more conciliatory tone. “I just mean...don’t sell yourself short. You’re obviously providing a valuable service, please don’t struggle to survive just to do so.”

Llywelyn was quiet after that. I took an opportunity to look around. Llywelyn had obviously been fixing some kind of hole in the ceiling, based on the ladder that he stood next to and the brown plaster above, as well as speckled on his clothes.

There was opaque tarpaulin covering what looked to be tables and chairs laid out around the walls. In the far corner was a dusty brown wooden bar, and behind it, taps and sinks.

“Was this a cafe?” I asked.

“Yup,” said Llywelyn. “Mr Prentis has run it since the 60s and struggled for years before deciding to pack it all in in the end. It was still running great, but he got old.”

“It’s gorgeous.” Whilst Llywelyn had been talking I ran a finger across the dust on the bar. The dark mahogany beneath the dust shone. “Are you done on this end? Mind if I start cleaning up a bit?”

“I couldn’t ask you to...” Llywelyn started.

“If you can use the help, I’m all hands on deck,” I said.

“In that case, there’s cleaning stuff under the sink.” Llywelyn started to climb the ladder again, smoothing down the plaster above him. I found a rag and some surface cleaners and polish under the sink, and ran the hot water.

“Who does Mr Prentis think he’s going to sell to then?” I asked.

“No idea. But half these shops have been closed down for years. The problem is we’re far from everything, and the parish council.”

“What about the parish council?”

“They hold a lot more power than the usual,” said Llywelyn. “Always have. So every time a big organisation or company tries moving in to one of the shops, the parish council blocks it.”

“So no local Tesco?”

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“God no, they wouldn’t dream of it. Beca keeps saying about getting new blood into the town, but I can’t see how she thinks she’s going to get new blood in if they reject every company that tries.” Llywelyn frowned. “I just worry that by the time I’m gone, everyone else will have moved out.”

I thought back to Beca arguing with my mother when I was a kid. Was she that keen on kicking people out if they didn’t fit in with her idea of the village? I decided not to bring it up right in the moment.

The sink had filled with hot water, so I took the rag and gave the surfaces a quick run over with it, dipping it in the water every now and then and wringing it out.

After my first pass over the worktop I could see that there was some beauty to be had under all the dust and the water in the sink was almost black.

I was vaguely aware of Llywelyn getting his paintbrush out as I wiped it down.

I took the polish and did my best to buff the worktop to a shine.

By the time I was done my right arm was sore from wrist to shoulder and I was starting to sweat.

I shed the coat on to the floor. “You look like you’ve been working as hard as me,” Llywelyn said.

He walked slowly toward me, and with one rough knuckle wiped at my cheek.

“Bit of dust, though I think I made it worse,” he said quietly.

The air sizzled between us as I took a tiny step closer.

He leaned down slightly and I met him in the middle as we kissed.

I had never done this before with someone I wasn't seriously seeing, never kissed out of nowhere or when we weren't hooking up.

“You look very good like that,” Llywelyn said as he pulled away. “And in this.” He hooked one finger under the scarf.

“Oh my God, I only came in to thank you for the wool!” I said. “I completely forgot, I'm so sorry. I only came in to say thank you. I'm meant to be buying Nain's food!”

Llywelyn laughed. “And instead I got you doing hard labour.”

“Here — it's yours.” I pulled the scarf from around my neck and gave it to him. I made to leave the shop, but Llywelyn called my name as I opened the door.

“Are you free tonight?” he asked.

“Maybe,” I smiled. “Are you going to change my plans?”

“I'll come and get you at 5. I'll bring the dog this time,” he said. I nodded, and let the door swing closed behind me.

As I emerged into the street I almost ran into Tom Brown. “Oh, hi,” I said.

“H-hello,” he said. “Who...?”

“The fake you,” I said. “I almost ended up teaching your class by accident.”

“Oh, oh yes.” He looked frazzled. “So sorry, but I have to meet someone...” He hurried off down the street and around a corner. Strange man, I thought. Very unlike any art teacher I had ever met.

I rushed into the bakery. A quick check on my ancient phone told me I’d spent an hour with Llywelyn, but Nain hadn’t called yet. She was probably fretting after me at home, I thought.

“Hi, how can I help you?” said the friendly looking baker behind the glass counter.

“Two sausage rolls please.” I noticed as the baker picked up the rolls that his nails were painted black and vaguely remembered Llywelyn saying he thought the baker was gay when we spoke at the beach. It seemed the little village really was much more accepting than I ever thought it could be.

“There you go, three pound.” I exchanged my money for the sausage rolls and walked out of the shop whistling. It was going to be a good night.

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“You’re in a very good mood,” Nain said as I walked into the kitchen. “And awfully late.”

“Sorry, I got caught up on my way to the bakery.”

“Caught up with a particular someone, eh? You know the village talks, James.” Nain gave a wicked smile before tucking into the sausage roll I had placed on the table in front of her.

“Well that can talk all they want, I’ll be gone in 2 days.” As I said it I wished I hadn’t. Nain’s face had dropped.

“It has been lovely to have you here, cariad. Promise to visit me more now you’ve been down once. You seem to have enjoyed your time here.”

“I have,” I said, answering her rhetorical question but avoiding her request..

Even as I knew it would be very difficult to visit in future on account of Llywelyn.

We may not have had anything official going on, but the thought of coming back and seeing him with someone was weird.

Or if I did come back for the weekend and he wasn’t seeing anyone else, would we rekindle things for a couple of nights?

Or just accept these few days as an oasis far apart from the rest of our lives?

Stop thinking , my mind supplied completely unhelpfully. I’d had sex with people before, and dated, and then moved on like nothing had happened — so why was this feeling so different?

The sausage roll suddenly didn’t seem so appealing as my stomach churned, and I recognised the familiar signs of anxiety returning. Having been off medication for a long while, I turned to an old coping mechanism to assuage the symptoms. Risk and reward.

Risk? Not being able to show my face in Hiraeth without feeling guilty for messing Llywelyn around.

Reward? A fantastic few days in this little village with a wonderful guy.

Risk? I don't want to hurt anyone.

Nain seemed to have read my mind, or perhaps she could see the emotions heavy on my face.

“Take every day one day at a time, and enjoy every second. As I found with your mother, you never know what the future holds for your loved ones. Don't worry about the future, because worrying won't change it. ”

“Thank you, Nain, love you.”

“I love you too, you idiot.” She stood from the table and made to leave. Just as she reached the door, she popped her head back in. “Just so you know, I'll be out at the pub with Beca tonight. So if you're going out with anyone in particular make sure you bring a key.”

Alone in the kitchen, my interrupted thoughts decided to rear their ugly head one last time.

Risk? I'm falling for him, quicker than I thought possible.

Chapter Eight

Llywelyn

I pulled up in the van and beeped the horn. Dinky barked at the horn like she had never heard it before. “Worst guard dog ever,” I said as I scratched under her chin. She just groaned.

James hurried from the house, giving a quick wave over at Glynis. I waved at her from the van and got a curt wave in return. She really had been less outwardly friendly since James and I had started...well, whatever we had started doing.

I wanted to ask him about it, because I had never done this kind of thing before.

But I didn't want to make things awkward or to stop seeing him, even if we only had a couple of days.

Seeing James made me want more from life.

I wanted to explore outside the village, outside Wales even.

To do that, though, I had to get my act together.

“You're obviously providing a valuable service, please don't struggle to survive just to do so,” James had said.

Perhaps he was right. Maybe I could save some money to see him in London, if he

would let me.

James hopped into the van and casually kissed me on the cheek. I felt my face warm as I blushed. The last rays of the setting sun shone in to the van, so I knew there was no way he hadn't seen.

"You look deep in thought," he said. Dinky had jumped onto his lap and was trying to lick his face.

"Nah, just trying to remember the way," I lied.

"Where are you taking me then?"

"You'll see." I looked over at James and grinned at him. The sunlight framed his face perfectly. God, you're beautiful. I wanted to say. But I didn't want to scare him off. Instead, I put the van into gear and sped down the street as fast as I could.

"Do your parents still live around here?" James asked. I felt my heart drop. It had been a while since I'd had to tell anyone this kind of information. I took my foot off the accelerator as we reached the country lanes.

"They died. Car accident."

"Oh." I risked a glance over at James. He was looking at me with...pity? I couldn't tell. "I'm sorry to hear."

"Nah, it's fine. Ancient history now." I tried to act like it was, but there must have been something in my face because James asked the one question I didn't want him to ask.

"How long ago?"

I hesitated before replying. “Five years.”

“Shit. I’m sorry, Llyw.” James put one hand on my thigh and squeezed. I blinked back any tears that were threatening as I drove.

“It’s fine. It happens to all of us some day.” I focused on the road ahead, and not on the reassuring warm hand.

“Still. If you need to talk, I’m here,” James said. But I knew within days he wouldn’t be and that hurt too.

“Right, moving on. Do you know what day it is tomorrow?”

“Honestly, being here — time has stood still. But...Thursday, right?” I could see him counting in his head for a second “The 25th of January.”

“Yes, Dwynwen’s day.” I said. “Do you know the story?”

James crinkled his face in concentration, like he was trying to dredge up some long forgotten memory. “...no,” he finally admitted. “There’s something....but no.”

The country lanes opened up in front of us to the little car park that no one ever used. I parked the van, hopped out onto the gravel and held my hands out for Dinky. James lifted her into my arms and jumped out the same side.

“So, are you going to tell me about Dwynwen then?” A gust of wind blew in suddenly and he shivered. “God I wish I’d brought my...I mean your coat,” he said.

I turned to open the side door on the van and took it out for him. “I brought it,” I said, trying to pass it over without it seeming like a big kind of deal.

“Thank you.” James pulled the coat on over his jumper and zipped it up all the way to his neck. I threaded my fingers through his and led him past the little car park and beyond.

In front of us, the sun was setting over what looked to be a field.

I led James further onward, until he could see where we were.

What looked like sharp stones pushed up through the grass at random intervals.

As we walked further forwards the stones pushed up more and more until it was more obvious what they were - ancient ruins.

When we reached the final, most complete part of the ruins I heard James gasp slightly.

Of the whole ancient structure a singular wall with one window in it survived.

The glass, if there ever had been any, was long since gone, but at the right angle the dying sunlight shone through.

As we approached ever closer, the noise of waves became audible.

I tugged James the last couple of metres toward the window.

Through the wall, it became obvious that we weren't in a field but at the top of a cliff.

Below, the Bay of Cardigan glinted in the last rays of the sunlight and waves crashed up against the rocks.

The wall was almost at the very edge of the cliff.

“It never used to be this close when I was younger,” I said. “The cliff edge must have eroded by at least a metre in the last twenty years.”

James took a small step back, but I held on to him with one hand. Dinky put her paws up onto the sill of the window to look through and barked at the sea below. We both chuckled.

“It’s beautiful,” James said.

“It is. And it’ll all be gone much too soon,” I replied. His hand squeezed mine briefly, and I realised the unintended connotation I had made.

“So, Dwynwen?” James asked. I sat on the edge of the window and he tentatively joined me.

“Where do I start?” I said, like I hadn’t heard the story a million times before. I remembered exactly how Mam used to tell the story. I put one hand over James’ and held on. “Dwynwen, they say, was a woman in love. In love with a young man called Maelon Dafodrill.”

“Daffodil?” smirked James. “Like the flower?”

“What are you, twelve? Dafodrill,” I teased.

“Anyway, she met this young man, Maelon. Who wanted to propose. But because she had been promised to someone else, she couldn’t say yes.

They were both devastated, so much so that Dwynwen wished she could forget him, so that she would no longer love him.

“She was visited by an angel, who gave her a potion to grant this wish, When

Dwynwen drank it, Maelon turned to ice. Naturally, her feelings were not dimmed.”

“Even if he gave her the cold shoulder?” said James. He grinned, and I nudged him gently before continuing.

“So God gave Dwynwen three wishes. Her first was that Maelon be thawed. Her second was that God would help all true lovers, and the third...” I paused for dramatic effect. I didn’t think I’d spoken so much around James before, but the old stories got me fired up.

“The third?” he pushed.

“That she never marry, and remain a virgin. God granted this wish too, and she set up a convent all the way over on Llanddwyn island, some 70 miles north. She stayed a nun, never married. Kept her promise to God.”

“Gosh, that’s...sad, beautiful? I don’t know, really.”

“I think it’s beautiful. She gave up her own chance to get married and be in love in exchange for the promise that all true lovers would be helped,” I said. “Dydd Santes Dwynwen, or St. Dwynwen’s Day, is celebrated every year on January 25th in Wales, as our equivalent to Valentine’s Day.”

“So you took me on a date to some ruins the day before Welsh Valentine’s Day?” James asked. He seemed to be daring me to admit any significance.

I tugged on both his hands to stand him up.

The sun’s last rays were just peeking over the horizon, the sky above going from orange to red to deep purple.

“No one knows why, but we in Hiraeth call these ruins Dwynwen’s window.

They say if you look out through this window, over the sea as the sun sets, you’ll never be unlucky in love. Sweet, right?”

“Very,” James agreed. He leaned up on his tip-toes and kissed me gently on the lips.

My eyes widened. “James, you didn’t let me finish! They say if you kiss someone at Dwynwen’s Window, then you’ll always be unlucky in love and die alone! My great-grandmother never married or had kids after kissing her lover up here!”

“Seriously?” James looked slightly scared for a second, but then his eyes narrowed. “Your great-grandmother didn’t have any kids, ey? So where did your grandparents come from?”

“Grown from an evil Welsh curse,” I laughed. “We’re all cursed, doomed!”

“Oh, shut up,” James said and then pulled me in for a much longer, deeper kiss. “Curse me all you like.”

“Certainly sir.” I moved to kiss him again but Dinky started to scratch at our legs. James laughed and picked her up.

“You want kisses too, do you lovely?” he asked. She licked at his face and he held her at arms length to give me another little kiss. “No chance of dying a virgin for me, anyway. That ship sailed a long time ago.”

“How long ago...that is, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Not at all. I was sixteen, with a boy from my maths class. How about you?”

I braced myself to answer. I knew he would ask if I had, but I had to admit it. “Not yet,” I said quietly.

“Pardon?”

“I...still haven’t. I’m 31 years old and a virgin,” I said.

“No, really?” James seemed incredulous.

“I know, I know. Embarrassing.” I sat back down in Dwynwen’s Window. The sun had dipped below the horizon and it was getting colder.

“Not embarrassing at all,” James said, sitting down next to me. “It’ll happen when it happens...anyway, that kind of sex isn’t the be all and end all. You were pretty receptive in the cave last night.”

I felt my cheeks warm despite the cold. “Well, when you put it that way...” I remembered how James had looked on his knees for me. I shifted the way I sat. “I just wish I’d had more than quick fumbles in the dark. I’d love to wake up in someone’s arms.”

“That can be arranged...” James grinned. “C’mon, it’s freezing. Let’s go for a walk.”

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So we did. We walked all the way along the cliff edge.

I pointed out to him the charred spots where teenagers from all the local villages came to light fires, and over the cliff edge where puffins occasionally nested.

He asked questions about the area that I did my best to answer, and told me stories of his life back in London I found almost hard to believe.

It was hours later and we were lit only by the moon when we circled back to the van.

James pulled his hand from mine and I realised we hadn't once let go the whole time. "Going to drive me home then, big boy?" he asked.

"Nah, just going to leave you out here with Dwynwen's ghost," I said. Dinky whined.

James poked me with one finger until I was backed up against the van. "You better not, the rewards could be great for you if you just do as I say." He leaned up against me and kissed me deeply. It felt suddenly like the only warm part of my body was my lips.

"Noted," I muttered. "Let's go then."

???

The whole van ride back felt like an age. My foot was vibrating on the pedal and my hand jumping from steering wheel to the gearstick every time I had to make a change. I was making a conscious effort not to put my foot down and speed down the lanes

like a madman.

I risked a glance over at James, who seemed to be vibrating on the same frequency as I was. I wanted to reach over and touch him, but knew if I did I wouldn't be able to contain myself any more.

"Where are we going to...?" I wanted to invite James over to my house, but didn't want to admit I was still sleeping in my childhood bedroom, or have him on my parents' old bed. That would be a real buzz kill for him, I was sure.

"Nain is out for the night," James whispered, then laughed. "God, I really am like a teenager aren't I? Sneaking you into my nan's house for a quickie before she comes home."

I laughed with him too. Was I being stupid, worrying what he would think of my house then? It didn't matter, anyway. I drove us up to Glynis' house. It was dark, and was obvious no one was in. I felt the buzz start up again, if it had even left me.

We walked toward the house together, not quite touching, but our hands kept brushing up against each other and it felt like static electricity.

Dinky whined to remind us she was still there as if trying to kill the moment.

"Put her in the living room," James whispered as he opened the door with a creak.

"Why are you whispering?" I asked.

"No idea. Just feels like I should." The house was warm and James shrugged his coat off to hang it in the hallway and I did the same.

I popped the dog into Glynis' living room and told her to settle on the sofa, then

closed the door.

James was waiting by one of the doors in the hallway and followed him.

As he entered the room, he pulled his jumper off.

He hadn't bothered to turn the light on, so I could just make out that he was wearing a white shirt underneath that I wanted off him immediately.

I realised that was within my power if only I could be confident enough.

"Hey," I whispered. I touched James' shoulder and he turned.

I hooked one finger between the buttons of his shirt and pulled him slightly towards me to kiss him.

Once we had started kissing, I tried my best to undo the buttons.

My hands were shaking a bit, betraying my lack of actual confidence, but I just kept kissing James till they were all undone.

I hadn't seen his body properly before, but now seeing it in the dim moonlight filtering through the window I wanted him more than ever.

His body was smooth, and he didn't have much muscle but his arms were wiry.

I felt myself exhale slightly as I saw the bruises that still hadn't actually healed down one side of his body.

"Are you OK to..." I started, but James cut me off.

“I don’t want to think about that right now.”

“Then let me help you forget.” I pushed him back toward the single bed until he was sat on the edge, and I shimmied him out of his jeans.

There was a visual bulge in his tight white boxers and I palmed it as I kissed him.

James groaned and arched slightly into my touch, so I pushed down slightly rougher and his moans got louder.

James managed to undo my belt one handed and I batted his hand away as soon as he did. “My turn,” I said between kisses.

I pulled the waistband of James’ boxers just down slightly to release his cock and kissed down his neck until I was at eye level.

It had been a long time since I’d done anything like this, and it had always been a quick and awkward fumble in a hotel room.

I’d never really tried to be sexy before, and I didn’t know really how to do it.

I got down on my knees and brought myself eye level with James’ penis.

It was a bit smaller than mine, with well trimmed pubes.

It curved slightly one way. I was afraid of getting this all wrong, but I was there and ready to go.

I wrapped one hand around it as I fumbled with my own fly, pulling my aching cock out of my jeans just to stop it straining so hard against them.

I put my lips to the head and James moaned. Buoyed by an early success, I slid it slightly deeper, keeping my hand wrapped around it as a buffer and moving up and down gently.

“Fuck, that feels good,” James said. Feeling more brave now, I took my hand away from his cock and moved it to his balls. I played with them as I toyed with taking it deeper into my mouth. “Yes, like that.”

I tried way too quickly to take it all then and choked.

I pulled back, worried I had ruined things but when I looked up James was looking at me with lust glazed eyes and an easy smile.

I tried again, and choked. I realised my own cock jumped when I choked too.

Was I enjoying giving this as much as I enjoyed getting it?

I hadn't thought that would be how it worked.

I kept bobbing my head up and down his cock, palming at my own throbbing cock at the same time. Giving him pleasure was getting me off more than I thought possible. I gripped at the base of my shaft just to stop myself from cumming before he did.

His moaning and gasping giving me even more confidence, I let the hand on his balls wander backwards, and I brushed over his taint and to his hole.

“Yes,” he moaned. “Touch me there.”

Without lube, I was limited in what I could do, but just pressing one finger against James' hole seemed to do the trick. Whereas he'd been lying pretty still, he now bucked upwards gently into my mouth. “Fuck, Llyw. I'm going to-”

I pulled away as he came, cum shooting into my beard and onto my face. I was surprised to know I liked that too.

After James had finished I finally let myself finish too, standing up quickly to wank myself and finishing all over James where he lay on the bed. James burst into laughter.

“Oh God, I’m so sorry-” I started. I was mortified that he was laughing. Have I done something wrong? I thought.

“No, no. Just getting covered in cum in my grandmother’s house wasn’t how I anticipated the night going,” James said. “You were...amazing. Fuck, it was good.”

He stood up so his naked body was almost touching my clothes and wiped at my beard with one hand. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

James led me to the bathroom, turned the light on and stepped into the shower.

Feeling suddenly less confident after finishing, I used the sink to wash myself up, cleaning off my face in the little bathroom mirror.

When I was done, I turned to dry my face and caught a glimpse of James in the shower.

He really was beautiful. He caught me looking and smiled, and it made me want to smile too. I didn’t know what my feelings for him were, not really, but I knew it would hurt when he left the next day.

As he got out of the shower I handed him a towel. “When was it you were planning on leaving again?” I asked.

“Officially? Tomorrow...but I checked the train times for Aberystwyth and I should be able to make it back on time to London Friday afternoon and work late if I get the first train that morning. I wouldn’t mind staying an extra night.”

“Do you want me to drop you to the station in the morning?” I asked.

“No, I couldn’t possibly ask you to come here so early to pick me up.”

“I meant...I’d like you to stay at mine. I’ll drop you off in the morning.” It felt stupid to ask, I knew I was pushing for more time which we didn’t really have. But I wanted James. And if I couldn’t have him for longer, I would just have him for now.

Chapter Nine

James

When I slept, I thought about Llywelyn. And the first thoughts I had as I woke were of Llywelyn too. I couldn't stop thinking about him, and it was starting to scare me.

But I also couldn't stop thinking about this little village, and when I checked my phone for the time and saw yet another missed call from my boss I wanted to cry, or shrivel up into a ball or...

Or never leave. I knew it sounded stupid, even in my head. But I had found myself enjoying my time in Hiraeth more than I thought possible. I hadn't even told my boss I'd be taking an extra morning off.

I swung my legs out of bed and pulled on my jeans, then the shirt I had been wearing the day before.

I felt my cheeks warm as I remembered Llywelyn's fingers taking the shirt apart.

I'd arranged the night before that I would call the taxi service rather than have him pick me up, as I had a lot of stuff and no idea when I'd be saying goodbye to Nain.

He'd gone home the night before, saying he couldn't stay with me in a single bed but that we'd definitely have somewhere to stay when I came over. I'd kissed him as he left. I didn't know how I felt about him, but I knew there was something big there. I just wasn't sure if I wanted to admit it.

My phone rang, startling me. I looked down with dread, expecting my boss again. It was Owen, and I smiled as I picked it up.

“Hey, you OK?” I asked.

“Fantastic thanks, how about you? How you healing up?” Owen sounded upbeat.

“I’m doing great. Really, really great. I...forgot about the injuries, to be honest.”

“Wow. Who’s the lucky man?”

“Shut up, there is no lucky man.”

Unfortunately, Owen could always tell when I was lying. “Fine then, who’s the unlucky man?”

“Twat. I’m just seeing someone whilst I’m here. A little holiday fling.”

“I don’t remember the last time you saw someone for longer than the 15 minutes it took you to get off.” Owen chuckled, and if he had been next to me I would’ve smacked him. As it was, I just huffed down the phone.

“Don’t you have some Tom, Dick or Enrique in your bed right now anyway?”

“Oi. We don’t talk about Enrique.” Owen paused for a second. “Glad to know you’re having fun though. Your new phone and cards have arrived at my place, by the way. So you’ll have your normal life back as soon as possible. I’ll let the nightclubs know the hurricane is on its way back.”

“Thanks, Owen. Miss you,” I said.

“I miss you too. Now get your arse back here tonight and we’ll crack open a bottle of wine to celebrate.”

“Sure thing. Bye.” I put the phone down, not entirely sure why I hadn’t told him I wouldn’t be back in London for another day. I’ll text him later, I reasoned. I got up and left the bedroom.

I trod quietly through the little bungalow to the kitchen in case I woke up Nain — she still hadn’t made an entrance by the time Llywelyn had left and I had gone to bed. I needn’t have worried as she was already in the kitchen at the table nursing a cup of tea.

“Here.” Nain thrust another cup at me as I sat down opposite her. She rubbed at her head and squinted her eyes against the light shining in through the window. “Did you enjoy your last night in Hiraeth whilst Beca had me on shots?”

“Yes, Nain. I did. Wait, did you say shots ?”

Nain waved away my question with her hand like she could physically bat it out of existence. “When’s your train then?”

“Well...tomorrow morning, actually. I’ll spend another night with Llywelyn.”

“You two are getting very close, then.” Nain smiled and then winced again at the light. “Almost makes you wish you stayed for the whole week, doesn’t it?”

I didn’t want to say anything to her about the plan that had started germinating in my mind.

It relied on too many variables , as well as my own ability to take a bigger risk than I ever had.

I couldn't bring myself to say anything to anyone else until I knew what I was going to do.

No point getting my own hopes up as well as everyone else's.

I checked my pocket — I had a few quid to get myself something from the bakery. "I'm going out for breakfast, do you want anything?"

"God no, I won't be able to eat for hours. If you see Beca out and about, kindly tell her from me that she's a cow. She only got me on the shots to avoid some awkward questions."

"Noted. Self inflicted illness is someone else's fault." I gave a cheery wave as I left.

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It was sunny again, and still freezing. I pulled Llywelyn's coat around myself as I made my way down main street, and buried my face in the big collar to keep my teeth from chattering. I passed the bakery and carried on to the little empty shop next to G&G's.

I could see movement inside the shop and pushed the door open, smiling automatically. My smile faltered when I saw that it wasn't Llywelyn stood inside, but an elderly gentleman with his hands on his hips and another slightly younger man in a suit who appraised me coolly.

"Oh, sorry, I thought..." I started, but the younger man cut in.

"You thought what? The place is quite obviously closed. We're talking business here."

“Ah, if we could cool this down please,” said the older man. He gave me a genuine smile and reached forward to shake my hand. “I’m John Prentis. I own this cafe and the little flat above, and this is...”

The other man looked affronted at having to introduce himself to me. “Mr Albert Edwards, of Edwards Acquisitions PLC.” He didn’t hold out his own hand to me.

I knew now was my time to flex the big guns, even if I wouldn’t have them for much longer if all my plans went the way I wanted them to. “James Evans, Senior Executive at Jacobson and Co.”

Mr Edwards balked. Jacobson had snatched a few promising acquisitions from under his company years ago, and if he was higher up in the company he’d know how rapidly we were outpacing them in...well, everything.

“I had been assured that this was an exclusive chance to pick up real estate in a bustling seaside village. I was willing to overlook the lack of bustle, but I’m certainly not going to enter a bidding war for this...

place. Good day, sir.” Mr Edwards gave each of us a look like we’d gone off and flouted out of the shop.

“Oh gosh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t want to chase away potential business,” I said.

“No worry lad, the parish council would have stopped me selling before I even had a chance to put it to them...and I’m not sure I would have wanted to sell to that man anyway.

My nephew Hywel travels everywhere, and when I mentioned selling up he started sending these business lot.

” Mr Prentis gave a small smile. “This place seems destined to hang like a millstone around my neck until I pop my clogs.”

Mr Prentis slid one hand down the wooden counter that I’d polished to a shine.

“I always thought this place was beautiful,” he said.

“I just didn’t want to run it into my eighties.

Llywelyn and another certain someone did a brilliant job at bringing it up to snuff.

” He gave me a meaningful look and I blushed.

“How do you know I was involved?” I asked.

“When you’re friends with Glynis and Beca, there are no secrets in this town.

” Mr Prentis pulled off the tarpaulin from one of the tables and sat down in a little chair, then gestured for me to sit opposite.

I sat down and shrugged Llywelyn’s coat off onto the back of the chair.

“I moved here from Cardiff in 1965, all in pursuit of a man. Perhaps it was stupid, moving from the big city to such a small and close minded town. But I got my man. And the village came to terms with it, in time. He’s been gone for 5 years now, but I can’t regret what I did for a second.

We had a wonderful life. And since he died, I’ve had a wonderful support network here. ”

He stopped for a second and looked around the place with pride. I couldn’t imagine

how difficult it must have been to live openly so long ago.

“You see, I loved my man. But I fell in love with this village just as much as I fell in love with him, despite the challenges they both caused me.”

“I know how you felt,” I said.

“I know you do. This place has an uncanny way of bringing lovers together. But it’s dying slowly now. Needs new blood, our Hiraeth.”

“I...agree,” I said with some hesitation. Knowing what I could say next could change the course of my life.

“Wonderful...” Mr Prentis said. “I don’t suppose a young London lad like you can find any work in a place like Hiraeth?”

“Well...actually. I wanted to ask how much you wanted for this place,” I said.

“How much I...? Oh, I understand — As I did mention, the parish council is likely to block any sales to larger companies, so I’m not sure Jacobson would be the best fit.”

“Mr Prentis...I would like to buy the cafe. Not my company. Me.” There. I’d said it. It was finally out in the open to someone, a life changing decision that had formed in my mind almost overnight.

“Well...” Mr Prentis rather dramatically took a pad of paper out of his chest pocket, wrote down a number and slid it over to my side of the desk.

“Twenty thousand?” I said incredulously.

“I mean, that does include the flat as living space upstairs and I can negotiate if you

feel it's too much..." said Mr Prentis.

"Too much?" I asked. "I feel like I'm robbing you. I've got that much, easy."

"Don't be so silly, lad. It'll be much easier with the parish council to sell to someone with some connection to the community, and it'll be bloody hard work to get back up and running again. I've got money now and I don't want this place going to waste out of greed."

"Well...thank you," I said. "I don't know what to say."

"Say thank you, and call your solicitor." Mr Prentis winked at me. "I presume you'll be going back to London soon?"

"Yes, but I'll call you as soon as I can," I said. He scribbled his number on another scrap of paper from his notepad.

"I'll wait to hear from you."

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“What was his name, Mr Prentis? The man you loved?” I didn’t know why I had been compelled to ask.

“His name was Llywelyn.” Mr Prentis smiled knowingly. “They get their hooks into us city boys.”

I gave a nod, stood up and walked to the door, giving one last smile and wave as I left. I had just made the biggest and most risky decision of my life but I felt like I was walking on air.

There was a queue stretching out of the door of the bakery, and I waited patiently behind Beca. The poor guy looked inundated inside, but everyone seemed to be in a patient mood and there were no grumbles that I could hear.

Beca turned to me and smiled. “You seem to be settling into Hiraeth just as it comes time for you to leave. You look happy here,” she said.

“I am,” I replied.

“Good. Much better that way.” We had reached the front of the line. “What do you want, cariad? My treat.”

“Honestly, you don’t need to-”

“My. Treat.” Beca phrased the offer like it was a threat and gave me the a glare more intimidating than I thought possible for a woman less than five feet tall.

“One sausage roll. Thank you Beca.”

She turned to face the young man behind the counter. “Busy in here today, Glyn.”

“I know,” he said. “I’ve been advertising for an apprentice recently but there’s no one biting. It’s difficult to get people out here.”

“Well I hope you don’t end up with a lovely looking young lady, I’m sure Sally would be very jealous...” Beca stage-whispered conspiratorially, as if hoping to bring out a reaction from the handsome young baker or the assembled queue of people.

“Beca,” he said held up his hands. Today his nails were painted different shades of the rainbow on one hand and his thumb, then blue, pink and white across the rest of his digits. “Why would Sally be jealous of any young woman? I’m very gay, and she knows it.”

Beca huffed as she handed over her money to him. “Well, isn’t every eligible young man in this town? Keep the change.”

She kept one claw-like grip on my arm as we left, muttering under her breath. She turned to look at me. “No wonder this village is dying. Which gay man is going to want to move here? Seems we can’t move for you all.”

“Excuse me, Beca. That’s my grandson you’re talking to.

” We both turned simultaneously to face Nain, who had somehow crept up behind us.

“I accept you want what’s best for this village, and I understand that things have changed a lot around here.

But I will not accept you blaming its death on something we very much cannot

control.

And I seem to recall how keen you were to push this town forward years ago.

” She was leaning on her stick but staring Beca in the eyes with steely conviction.

“You and I are going to have a little talk about why my daughter felt the need never to come back here, and I would like my grandson to join us.”

“Shall we head to my house?” Beca asked warily.

“No, we shall not.” Nain pointed over the street at the little picnic tables set up beside the river. “We will talk here, out in the open.”

Nain took the arm that Beca didn’t have a grip on and dragged the both of us over the road before we could protest. When we reached the benches Nain took a seat and patted next to her. I sat down, and Beca sat opposite like she was facing a job interview.

“So,” Nain began. “I would like you to tell me what argument James thinks he may have witnessed between you and my daughter so many years ago. It’s been playing on my mind, and I can’t remember her ever giving a reason for not wanting to come back.”

“Well...” Beca’s lip wobbled. When I looked down I could see her hands were shaking.

“I heard her make some comments. About this place, about how run-down it was looking. And how she was glad she’d left, and I wasn’t happy with that.

So I told her if she really hated Hiraeth...

hated her old home , so much, then she could leave and never come back. ”

“And you took this upon yourself, in what capacity? Spokesperson? Town crier? Grand High Witch?” I could hear Nain getting angrier. “I know that you think you own this village sometimes Beca but you do not get to choose who comes and who goes.”

“I...I don’t think...” Beca started, but seemed unable to finish.

After waiting a short while for an answer, Nain huffed and carried on.

“I don’t think for a second my daughter would have come back to Hiraeth for the rest of her life — look at her now, living it up in Asia!

But I might have had more times like this with my grandson had you kept your nose out.

I’m just glad he’s had this week now. And if you hadn’t decided to scare him off too five minutes ago, he might just have decided to come back one day. ”

Beca put her head in her hands and even I felt choked up. “I will be back Nain. I promise,” I said.

“Oh, you say that now...” she said quietly, but then seemed to reconsider. “No. I won’t presume. I’ll believe that you’re coming back when I see it. Just don’t want to get my hopes up when it’s been so long.”

I knew it was stupid to keep it from her when she seemed so upset, but I didn’t want to get her hopes up about me coming back on a more permanent basis when it could all so easily balls up.

“I’m sorry Glynis, I really am. Come over to mine for a cuppa? We can talk about it more, and what I can do to make it up to you.”

“Sounds good,” said Nain. “Are you coming, James?”

“Yes, I-” I shivered and realised I had left my coat in the bakery. “-I’ll catch up with you.” I gave Nain a kiss on the cheek.

I crossed the road and checked into the bakery. The door had been left open and Mr Prentis was setting out the tables and had disposed of the tarpaulin somewhere.

I opened my mouth to speak when my phone rang again. I picked up without checking who was calling.

Chapter Ten

Llywelyn

The doorbell rang and I ran to get it, mini vacuum cleaner still in hand. I opened the door. Alaw grinned from outside and held up two big carrier bags full of the cleaning supplies I had asked for. Dinky jumped up at her and got some awkward scratches behind her ears.

“Let’s go, big brother!” she said. “You better have the kettle on.”

“I’ll put it on now,” I muttered.

“Good boy.” Alaw barged past me and into the kitchen, filling the kettle herself and popping it on the stove. Dinky scampered past us and into her bed in the kitchen.

“I don’t know why you ask for anything when you clearly think you can do things better than anyone else,” I said.

“Because if I ask, maybe you’ll remember next time.” Alaw started to unpack the bags as she spoke. There was bleach, glass cleaner, all sorts of air fresheners and smelly things I hadn’t asked her to grab.

“What’s all this crap?” I asked.

“Y’know, gotta make sure your house is ready for your mystery visitor.” Alaw pushed the other bag to the back of the kitchen counter and I wondered what could

possibly be in it. “The mystery visitor whose name is James, Glynis’ grandson, the visitor from London...”

I didn’t even bother asking how she knew. Everyone knew everything in Hiraeth, I had no idea why I’d even bothered trying to hide it.

“You’ve done a good job in here though,” she said as she looked around. “Really spritzed it up for your boo.”

“He’s not my boo!” I protested, perhaps a bit too forcefully. “And anyway, I Hoover and polish weekly.”

Alaw snorted. “OK, whatever. Where do you want me to start?”

I pointed her to the sink and counters and I started scrubbing the slate floor. It was a companionable silence for a few minutes before Alaw spoke again.

“So, tell me about him,” Alaw said. When I carried on scrubbing as I tried to come up with an answer, she carried on. “I mean, from what everyone is saying, he sounds nice. And handsome, from some reports.”

“Very,” I replied. And because I’d already got myself into trouble just for admitting it, there was no point holding back now. “And lovely, too. It’s not just his looks, it’s his smile. How he carries himself. Just...”

“He sounds great,” said Alaw. “But what are you going to do when he leaves?”

“Wow, thanks. Buzz kill right there.”

“No, but seriously - do you know what you’ll do?” The kettle started whistling.

“No.” I stopped scrubbing, and Alaw poured hot water into a cup. “I don’t know what I’ll do, and I’m not even ready to think about it.”

“Well maybe you should,” Alaw said.

“Do you not think I deserve just to have a guy here for one night?” I asked. “Can’t I just enjoy one night with him before he pisses off back to London to do whatever and whoever he likes? Can I not just have a quick fling with someone I genuinely really like?”

“And therein lies your quandary,” said Alaw. She always liked to use bigger words when she was problem solving, like it somehow made her sound more old and wise.

“What quandary? I don’t have a quandary. “ I started my scrubbing again, a little bit harder and faster than before.

“You care. And you like him. And one night isn’t enough for you, it never will be. You could have had any number of one night stands with the men in this village. But you never have, as far as I know. Because you were holding out.”

“How do you know I haven’t been shagging around the village since you went off to Swansea?” I asked. “It’s not like I tell you everything.”

“Llyw, we’ve always told each other an unhealthy amount of stuff. Like how I lost my virginity to Alun in the back of his truck.”

“You did not!” I shouted, more in shock than anything else. “Alun, the mechanic? I thought he was gay!”

“Oh my God, I thought I’d said years ago!” Alaw laughed. “And God no, not every bloody man in this village is gay, much as it feels like it. Mac who works with him is,

though.”

“Wait...” the pieces in my mind seemed to be clicking together like a puzzle. “Is that why you’re back in the village. Is that why you’re not staying here with me?”

Alaw blushed. “Yes.”

“Bloody hell Alaw, how did that happen?”

“Well, Alun was down for a course in one of the big garages in Swansea for the weekend and we texted for a bit.”

“When was this?” I asked. I hadn’t known my sister come back here for ages.

“Six months ago...he’s been coming down almost every weekend. I figured, since I work from home, that I should come up here for the week. I’ve been staying in the flat over the garage with him.”

“Well, I’m gutted you never told me...but happy for you.”

“Thank you. I don’t like keeping secrets from my big brother,” Alaw said.

“Well at least I should see more of you now,” I said.

“Well...about that. Alun has been talking about me moving back up here. So much of my work has been remote recently that I hardly need to go back to the office. He’s looking at buying one of the houses down by the beach, maybe renting the space out above the garage to someone else.”

“You’re joking! You’d leave Swansea to come back here?”

“Hiraeth is my home. Always has been and always will be. Anyway, when you going to convince lover boy he’s better off here?”

“I don’t want to,” I said. “I mean...I want to, but I don’t want to hold him here.

James has so much ambition and a huge career in London.

It’s not fair on me to have him here. I don’t even have a proper job for God’s sake, I’m struggling just to keep a roof...

” I tailed off as I realised I had said way too much.

“Struggling to keep a roof over your head is it? You bloody idiot.”

“I can’t help it if I’m poor, can I?” I felt like a child but I’d already said it now. “I have no education past GCSE, Mam and Dad left me with a creaky old cottage in the arse end of nowhere and a town full of people who need my help.”

“A town full of people who, if they want your help, can just pay.”

“T-they do...”

“Don’t you lie to me Llywelyn. Alun said you fixed a hole in his roof the other day and refused anything more than 20 quid. For 3 hours work and materials! If he charged anything like that for his work his garage would have gone under years ago.”

“But he’s a friend!” I said. I remembered James being shocked at my rates just days before and realised that maybe he was talking sense.

“And I know the school have been looking for a permanent caretaker. I know for a fact the deputy head has mentioned it to you several times, and you keep ducking the

point. The people of this town want your help, and they want to help you too. But you're too bloody stubborn to do more than survive.

"There was pity in Alaw's eyes. "I know how difficult this is. God knows I ran away when Mum and Dad died because I couldn't cope with the way people in this village looked at me.

But it's different now, we're not teenagers any more.

You should be working to live, not living to work.

And maybe then you wouldn't feel so intimidated by a man who has the tiniest bit of drive behind him. "

I stopped my scrubbing completely. "You're probably right."

"Probably? I am right and you know it."

"You're a smug cow when you think you're right," I said. I could feel my lips turning upwards. Perhaps I was good enough to keep James around. Maybe I had a little bit of life sorting to do, and maybe he'd say no. But it was worth asking him.

"Good thing I brought extra then, because me being right is gonna rock your world tonight." Alaw reached into the second bag, pulling out a set of nice mugs, new bedding and what looked like a fabric laundry basket collapsed down.

"I can't resist a bargain, me. And you're not sleeping with someone in your childhood bed. Time to start sleeping in the master."

I was about to retort but it died on my lips. She was right. I'd left the bedroom untouched long enough to respect Mam and Dad's memory. Most people lost their

virginity in their childhood bed I was sure, but then again most people probably weren't losing it in their 30s.

"Thank you," I said. Alaw just smiled.

"By the way, I'm kidnapping Dinky," she said. "Don't want her mentally scarred by the noises coming from her Daddy's bedroom. I'll make sure she's brought back in one piece by Sunday."

"You can't just kidnap my dog for a whole weekend! Who's to say she even wants to go with you?"

"Well I'm trying to convince Alun that a puppy would enrich our lives , and if you think she doesn't want to come with me..." she turned to where Dinky was laying in her bed. "Want to come and stay with auntie Alaw? With plenty of walks and cuddles and treats?"

Dinky jumped out of bed and jumped up on Alaw, whimpering with excitement. "Traitor," I muttered.

"That's settled then. We'll get done here, I'll take the mutt and you can enjoy your mystery man's last night. See if you can get him to stick around."

"I'll try," I promised.

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Hours later, when the sun was setting and Alaw had left me and the house shinier and more sparkling than ever, I looked over it with pride. The cottage might be old and it might have its problems, but I was proud of it and the life I'd built.

I glanced into my parents' - no, my bedroom now.

Alaw had worked her magic with the bedding and it didn't smell abandoned any more.

The setting sun peeked through the window and bathed the bed in a golden glow.

My heart thumped with anticipation. I wanted to do the right thing and romance James when he got here, but equally I wanted to get him through the front door, rip his clothes off and throw him straight onto the bed and not let him leave until he had to.

I was sure there was a compromise between the two somewhere.

I sniffed my t-shirt and recoiled a little bit.

The process of getting the house fully cleaned had obviously not done me as many favours.

I stripped off my t-shirt and trousers and walked to the bathroom, throwing them in the little laundry basket that Alaw had brought with her.

I realised then that she hadn't just been helping me make the house look nicer and cleaner - she had been preparing it for two people. Making it a home.

I turned on the shower and stepped into the tub, letting hot water fall over me and soothe my fast beating heart.

I would be seeing James later in the night, and even the thought of him was getting me semi-hard.

“Down, boy.” I muttered at myself. I had plenty of insecurities about pleasing him - I would be the most recent in a long line of lovers for him, and he had surely had the best - but just thinking of him and the times we had shared soothed my fears.

As I turned off the shower and grabbed a towel from the railing my mind was filled only with thoughts of him.

Little did I know then that he was already gone.

Chapter Eleven

James

The second I alighted I felt myself tense at the crowds bustling through the platform. I used to love the hustle and bustle of the big city but now it felt kind of oppressive. I wanted to get straight back on the train and get back to Hiraeth. But I couldn't. I had a job to do.

My phone rang. "Where are you?" I asked.

"At the entrance by the LEON," Owen replied. I headed over and sure enough he was there and holding a takeaway bag in hand. I ran to him and hugged him.

"My favourite?" I asked, and he nodded. I pulled away from the hug and took the little paper wrapped burger from the bag. I took a bite. "God, that's good. It's the only thing I've missed from London...and you of course."

"Thanks," replied Owen sardonically. "I don't even know why you like it. You're not even vegan. You eat steak, for fuck's sake."

"If you don't understand the feelings I have for the LEON Love Burger then maybe we can't be friends. I don't even believe it's vegan, I think they're lying to me."

"I think you're lying to yourself if you can pretend that's meat. Anyway, we better rush. By my reckoning we have...45 minutes."

“Let’s go then.” I was ready to face them. I was sure of it.

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I was not ready to face them. I felt Owen’s arm tighten around me reflexively as I tensed, but I found that my best friend wasn’t the comfort I wanted or needed right now.

He had always been there for me, but it felt like that instinctual need to be comforted had pivoted elsewhere. And I knew where.

We were looking at a monitor which displayed a little bland room with a wooden table inside.

At that table sat the little man who had so completely altered my life.

A police officer just as bland as the room who hadn’t bothered introducing himself stood next to Owen and I whilst we could see Detective Inspector Butt on the monitor, facing away from the camera on the opposite side of the table to the young man.

“For the tape, this is Detective Inspector Richard Butt. Could you please state your name for the record?”

“ Dick Butt? ” I whispered to Owen. “His name is Dick Butt?”

I laughed despite myself, and the police officer stood with us shushed me. I mouthed a quick sorry and turned back to the screen.

“Charlie Clarke,” said the young man.

“And you have chosen not to have a solicitor present?”

“That’s correct.”

“Then we’ll begin. Were you present in Heaven nightclub on the night referenced?” asked Detective Butt.

“No comment,” said the young man. His voice was lower and less flighty than I remembered it being. Had he been putting on a more feminine act to see what I’d like? It seemed ironic that I’d ended up falling for the gruffest guy around.

“On the night in question, did you meet with the man in this photograph?” I could just about make out that it was a picture of myself being pushed across the table.

“No comment.”

“Did this man buy you a drink, and did you put any controlled substances into it?”

“No comment.”

“Have you ever met or worked with this man?” Detective Butt passed two pictures over the table, supposedly of the bearish man he’d been involved with.

“No comment.”

And so on it went. Every question answered with a shrug and a nonchalant no comment, like he hadn’t been part of a gang that had drugged me and left me for dead. I stared at the pixels on the screen and searched for one shred of remorse or sadness, but could find none.

“Before I present any further evidence, I would like you to reflect carefully on your

previous answers. If you have any additional details you would like to furnish us with or to enter a plea, it may reduce your sentence. If you have been coerced by this man into this kind of behaviour, it would be better for you to speak now.”

“No. Comment.” Charlie crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair.

“Here he goes,” muttered the police officer to our side, surprising me with intonation and personality to his voice I would never have expected otherwise. He leaned toward the monitor and Owen and I did the same as if waiting for our favourite football team to score a goal.

“We have a witness, the man whose picture I presented you with, who is happy to testify against all three of you in court. To say he was at Heaven, that you spiked his drink and gained access to his finances and property. We have tests confirming that he had a very high amount of GHB in his system, possibly enough to overdose. ”

“Some junkie with a vendetta against anyone young and pretty enough to get some? Not exactly a reliable witness.” The young man had careened from complete nonchalance to spite, and I wondered why. Was he worried the gig was up? But if what he was saying was true and I wouldn’t be seen as reliable...

“It seems that the CCTV in the bar area of the club wasn’t working, but the bouncers did wear body-cams. You entered the club-” at this, DI Butt passed over the three pictures to Charlie, “-at 9pm. Your alleged associate entered at 9:27.”

“I’ve never seen those men in my life,” Charlie replied.

“So we’re not no commenting any more? Cool.

” DI Butt seemed to have full control of the situation.

The dynamic shift had been subtle, but Charlie was now on the back foot.

I wondered if he was starting to sweat. “Your alleged accomplice left some hour later with the victim, claiming to bouncers he was going to get him a taxi. You left just three minutes later.”

“You can’t prove we were there together.”

“No. I can’t. But you said you’d never seen him in your life. Odd, given he left and entered within minutes of you. You might have even seen them at the taxi rank.”

“Well I didn’t so-“

“I’m not done.” The Detective Inspector’s voice was low and clear.

“The problem with thieves and muggers? Greed. Pride...whatever the other deadly sins are. We found this-” he passed one small object in a plastic bag over to Charlie, one I recognised instantly as a credit card, “-in the pockets of your accomplice.”

“I told you, I haven’t seen that man before in my life!” Charlie was angry now, and he had made as if to stand before sitting down again and trying to create the cool mask of composure. Even on the little screen I could see that had become a struggle.

“And if we were to test it for fingerprints?”

“No-I mean, that older guy might have bought me a drink before he did whatever with him. I might have had his card in my hand.”

“Right. So your fingerprints are on a stolen credit card, found in the pocket of a man with whom you had absolutely no association but were in the club with?”

“That’s right, yeah.” Charlie sounded deflated.

“See, that might have been enough to take to the Crown Prosecution Service. We might have gotten a conviction, despite your insistence you had never met those men, and we might have taken you to jail for a relatively long time. But those are all maybes. I had no concrete evidence that you had ever met the other who had been involved with the theft. I had no proof it was a theft after all, beyond the credit card. But juries can be persuaded, and with the eyewitnesses we had I was relatively confident that they would be on our side. But I wasn’t sure . ”

I had to admit DI Butt was phenomenal. I could tell he was building up to something, but having been late to the station we hadn’t had a chance to review the evidence beforehand. I was as clueless as Charlie, it seemed, in what the Detective Inspector had up his sleeve.

“The one continuing pattern with scams and gangs that go on for a long time is sloppiness and laziness. Keeping the credit card was lazy, or perhaps it was pride. A search of your accomplice’s possessions showed he had kept a credit or debit card from every victim.

Trophies of the poor innocent people he and you spiked, beat, mugged and left for dead.

Depending on the victim’s profile in every instance they described being approached by a larger man or a smaller one - we couldn’t get a handle on hair colour, length, beards — I presume you changed those for each scam, to make it harder to identify you? ”

“I fucking told you, I don’t know what you’re on about! This is bullshit! I have never seen that man in my life!” I could see one of Charlie’s hands vibrating above the table like he was trying to resist the urge to hit DI Butt.

“You’re such a good liar it’s almost believable,” said the Detective Inspector.

“But there’s one last piece of evidence.

One I wouldn’t have found myself. A junior officer of mine was almost too ashamed to admit he recognised you.

At first, he thought from one of the clubs, but then he realised.

Are you familiar with the Twitter handle @YungTwink62? ”

Charlie didn’t answer. I could see him slumping down in the chair slowly, early defiance long gone.

DI Butt continued. “You see, there’s a link to a paid service here...

but pinned at the very top of this profile—oh wait, your profile—is a video.

A video called ‘Daddy Bear Dominates Little Twink’.

Now I wouldn’t call it particularly artfully shot, and I’m much more a fan of otters and jocks myself.

But the people in the video are unmistakably you and the older gentleman you claimed not to know.

And out of some ridiculous urge you couldn’t possibly wait any longer.

As far as we can ascertain this video was filmed in the victim’s flat, in his bed before you ransacked the place.

He will no doubt confirm this for us when we show him the video.

As you've so far not seen any reason to cut in I feel pretty comfortable in formally charging you with one count of first degree assault, level three robbery.

If this gets escalated beyond our force based on evidence we have provided, you're looking at many more similar charges.

You're going away for a significant time. ”

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“I didn’t-I couldn’t-he-he-he made me do it,” Charlie muttered so quietly it almost wasn’t picked up by the mic.

“Strangely enough, he said the same of you. It’ll be the courts that decide which of you is telling the truth now.”

And with that, DI Butt pressed the button on the tape recorder and swept out of the room.

And into the room we were in. Owen gave him a little clap, and DI Butt gave a mock curtsy.

“Thank you,” I whispered, though I really wasn’t sure what emotion I was feeling in the moment. Anger? Relief? Owen slipped his arm around me once more and gave me a squeeze and I realised I was just tired.

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“Are you ready?” Owen asked later, when I had given my witness statements and returned to my flat. I nodded quickly as I knew if I hesitated I couldn’t possibly do it.

“Oh, there’s this,” he said. He handed me a little unfamiliar key. “The police had your lock replaced to prevent access to your flat.”

“Great.” I didn’t have the energy for enthusiasm, so I stepped forward to fit the key into the lock. As the door swung open, I felt myself start to tear up.

“Fucking hell, they really took it all.” The little flat looked like it had been emptied to sell.

The TV unit was still in the living room, but they had even taken the little statement coffee tables I used to have in the middle.

The floor was bare of the rug that used to sit there and the kitchen units all hung open.

“Did they get the bedroom?” I asked.

“They did, I replaced the bedding for you though.” Owen gave a little smile as I glanced at him.

“Thank you, you’re the best best friend.”

“I know.”

I walked through the empty living room and into the bedroom. A quick cursory search of the bedside drawers revealed everything was gone. “Guess I’m going to work in denim tomorrow,” I said.

“We can get you some clothes now if you like?” Owen offered. “I’m sure there’s some shops open, and I have...” he produced a stack of envelopes from a little messenger bag “...all of your cards and financial stuff, kept in police possession.”

“In all honesty, I just want to sleep. I just want to go home.”

“You are home,” said Owen.

“Nah. Not any more.”

“You going to look for another flat then? One just came up for rent near me if you want to be closer. We could have wine nights every single Thursday!” I couldn’t bear to hear the puppy-like excitement in Owen’s voice, and I realised in a whirlwind week I hadn’t once confided my plans in him.

“Shit, ah,” I started, unsure how to broach the topic. “I’m moving. To Hiraeth.”

“To Wales?”

“Yes, to Wales.”

“Wow, whoever that guy was, he dickmatised you hard. Well done to him.”

“No, we didn’t...”

“You didn’t have sex? In a week? I’ve never known you wait more than an hour. Christ, we had sex before you even knew my name!”

“We...did stuff,” I said, sounding like a lame teenager. I realised I had left Llywelyn in the lurch, promised him something special and left him in the night. I hoped he would forgive me when I could get back.

I checked my little phone and tried calling Nain’s home number again, only to be notified that her answering machine inbox was full. “Fuck’s sake, I had a week to teach her how to use technology.”

“And you spent it all mooning over some wild Welsh hunk. I don’t blame you for your life choices, though I do judge you.”

“Shut up,” I swatted at Owen’s arm. “God I want to be back there right now.”

“Wow, I feel so wanted,” he said.

“No...it’s not that I don’t want to be here.

” I thought for a second. “No, scrap that. I definitely don’t want to be here.

Whatever attraction London held for me, and it still does - fast internet, nightclubs and cinemas all hold a special place in my heart.

But something switched, and I don’t know if being mugged reminded me of the dangers of living in the city, or if Hiraeth and the people were just that good , but within days of stepping off that train I knew it was the place to be. It’s not about the man.”

Owen gave me a look of disbelief, but I continued.

“Honestly, it isn’t about Llywelyn. Because he’s wonderful, and showed me just what I’ve been missing.

But if I went to Hiraeth tomorrow and he said he wasn’t interested in me, or that he didn’t want to pursue anything with me, I would be devastated but I would accept that.

And I would stay there. Because I’ve fallen in love with the place just as much as I’ve fallen in love with... ”

“With?” Owen prompted.

“No. Shut up. I’m not admitting that out loud. Not now.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

So I told Owen about the shop, and about the plans I had for it - how I wanted to create a community hub for the little village of Hiraeth, and the chance to pursue my own passions.

“So when are you going?” asked Owen.

“As soon as I can. I’m going to hand my notice, work a few weeks and get back to Hiraeth.”

“Why?” Owen asked.

“Because I want to go back there. Because I want to make a life there.”

“No, you idiot. Why are you waiting? You’ll be running your own business, you don’t need to serve your notice period. Why are you waiting for a reference?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do.” I had been confident about my plan up until now, but Owen had put a chink in my armour. Should I be waiting? An image of Llywelyn flashed through my mind, and I wanted him. I was missing him already.

“Screw the right thing, get out there and get your man.” Owen sounded much more confident than I felt.

Chapter Twelve

Llywelyn

I had some work to do in G&G's, so I pulled up outside, cut the music off and stomped a bit childishly into the shop. Geraint was as smiley, round and red-faced as ever. "Nice and early I see. How are things, Llywelyn?" he asked.

"Fine."

"Good, good...so this is the problem." He led me to the back of the store where a wall was showing cracks. I had the plaster in the back of the van, so it shouldn't take too long.

"How long do you think this will take?" Geraint asked.

"Only a couple of hours." It was a simple enough job. "Who did you have in to plaster originally? Looks like you've had cowboys in here."

"Some big company from out of town. We'd have asked you, but..."

"But what?" I did my best not to sound offended. I may not have had the qualifications, but everyone knew that I was a dab hand with a skimmer.

"But...oh, it sounds stupid now. We didn't want to take advantage of you."

"Take advantage of me?" I wanted to laugh, but my mood still wouldn't allow that.

“How could you possibly do that?”

“You always quote very low. I haggle with my suppliers to no end but if I haggled you any lower you’d be paying me.”

“So if I charged a higher rate, you would have hired me?”

“Well...yes. Come and take a look at what they left us with. We haven’t had anyone round to the flat in months...”

Geraint led me through the back room and up the set of stairs I knew led to their flat from the couple of times I had been there before. “This is what they’ve left us with,” he said as he gestured around their living room.

The walls were uneven and I could see stress cracks forming already. The ceiling was even worse, and I could see in the corners where the plaster had chipped or fallen away. “We refused to pay them the final amount of course, but they had already taken half as a deposit up front.”

He gestured toward the other open doors off the hallway. The bedroom was exactly the same and the tiling in what looked to be a newly tiled bathroom was uneven without the grouting having been finished.

“Take a look in here,” he said and opened the last door.

Where the kitchen had been was a total mess.

The units had been ripped from the walls and the walls hadn’t yet been plastered.

In one corner I could see what looked to be the new units all covered in tarpaulin, some put together and still in their cardboard boxes and flat packed.

“When we told them we weren’t satisfied with the work so far and wouldn’t pay them the other half ‘til it was fixed, they just up and left. We’ve been surviving on takeaway meals, microwave dinners and cold sandwiches for ages!”

“Bloody hell, Geraint.” I surveyed the mess.

I had put bigger kitchens together in my time.

And my plastering skills were a damn sight better than whatever mess had been left in the rooms of the house.

And Alaw and James’ words echoed in my head.

And even if I was hurting that James had decided not to see me for whatever reason, I was going to do my best to make myself worthy of him, or any man who might come my way.

I cleared my throat. “Looks like about 2 days’ work per room with the plastering, and a few days extra in the kitchen to plaster and then put it all together. I can do it all for a hundred a day.”

“A...yes, that works for us I think. Let me talk to Gwyn. When can you start?”

“Tomorrow, if you like. I’ll get your plastering downstairs done today and I’ve got some stuff to do up at the school but I should be able to work on yours pretty consistently after that.”

“Bloody hell, thank you Llywelyn. I should have asked sooner.”

“Well ask me first next time.” I felt pretty proud of myself for the rest of the morning as I worked at the wall at the back of the shop and when I’d finished and Geraint

pressed a fifty pound note into my hand for one morning's work I managed to nod and smile rather than insist on twenty.

It was only when I exited the shop into a crisp, sunny and cold early afternoon that my mood soured again.

"Llywelyn!" called a voice from across the street, and my mood lowered even further. Glynis looked both ways before shuffling as fast as she could over the road.

"I'm a bit busy at the moment, Glynis." I hauled the bag of dry plaster into the back of the van and tried not to look her in the eye.

"Well someone needs to give you a bloody talking to." To my surprise, she sounded furious and when I looked down at her she looked like she was ready to clobber me. "Kidnapping my grandson like you did."

"Kidnapping? What do you-" she swatted at my arm and I shut up quickly.

"He was meant to come back last night to pick up his things and never did, so I can only presume he went straight to yours to canoodle ." She had said the last word like it was a swearword.

"I hadn't seen him! I thought he had stayed at yours and forgotten about me!" My mind was racing, and I had no idea what was going on. Where was James, if not with Glynis?

"Oh, cariad . He could never forget about you." Glynis gave a small smile and reached out a hand to brush against my sleeve. "But that leaves the question. Where is James?"

"Well where was he when you last saw him?"

“Right here, on this street. As far as I knew he would be coming back to pick up his things and then going to you. Can’t you call him?”

“I don’t-I don’t have his number,” I admitted.

“Don’t have his bloody number? I thought all you young people did was text and bookface?”

“Facebook—anyway, that’s not the point. We were inseparable for 3 days, I honestly didn’t think to. Don’t you have your grandson’s number?”

“Yes, his old one. The stolen phone.” Glynis shook her head. “I hope he didn’t take a walk along the cliffs...”

“What?” My blood ran cold. Surely he wouldn’t take that kind of risk by himself.

I thought back to the night in the cave, and I could feel the fear seeping in.

Had he taken a walk along the sea and gotten caught by high tide?

There were so many coves along the seafront that it would be easy to get caught in.

“Or,” said a familiar voice, “he might have had to rush back quicker than any of you thought.”

“What do you know, Prentis?” asked Glynis, turning on the old man stood behind us. “Where is my bloody grandson?”

“London. Police had suspects in custody and only so much time to convict before they had to set them free. He called the taxi service and rushed out of here before I could blink. Said he’d call both of you, though.”

“Well, he doesn’t have my number,” I said, glaring at Glynis.

“Bloody answering machine.” Glynis muttered.

“The young man should be back in about 3 weeks, notice served, if I recall,” said Prentis.

“Coming...back?” I asked.

“Yes, back here. To Hiraeth. I daresay he’ll want to talk to you about how long for.” Prentis smiled knowingly.

Something in my brain shifted. “Do you know his address, Glynis?”

Glynis pulled a little pocketbook out of her bag and flicked through, ripping out a page. On it were James’ number — his old one, I presumed — and an address for a flat in Central London. “Want to send him something, do you love?”

“Something like that...thank you, I’ll see you both later.”

Without another word or look back I got into the van and started the engine. If I sped a bit in the country lanes, I could make it to the London-bound train in time. I had 10 minutes.

I pushed down hard on the accelerator and begged the old van to go as fast as it could.

I could see the little piece of paper on the passenger seat out of the corner of my eye, the address already seared into my memory.

If he wasn’t coming back for another 3 weeks then I would go to him.

I needed him to know that if he planned on holidaying in Hiraeth in the near future then I wasn't just some one time fling who would crawl out of the woodwork for a shag each time he wanted to visit.

Bloody hell, I'd move to London for him if that's what it took.

After a couple of near misses with tractors in the country lanes I could see the roof of the train station ahead.

I parked up as quickly and messily as I could and ran out to the platform.

Had I missed it? No, the sign on the platform said it was a minute away.

And sure enough, there in the distance was the train heading in to the station.

The last stop on its way from London before it headed back.

I tapped my foot on the ground as I waited, ready to run onto the train the second it pulled into the platform, as if it might somehow leave me behind if I didn't jump on quickly.

The train's approach seemed to be agonisingly slow and the brakes screeched forever before it pulled to a stop.

I jogged to the nearest set of doors, intent on pressing the button to open them until it broke under my finger.

I jabbed at it multiple times until the doors opened and stepped onto the train without even looking up, bumping into someone smaller than me with such aggression that they fell back into the train.

“Sorry, I-” I started, before realising. It was him. He who had consumed my thoughts and dreams since the day I had met him. The man I wanted more than anything else. “James, what the fuck are you doing here?”

“I wanted, I needed, I...” but he didn’t have to finish the sentence. I knew what he wanted, or at least thought I did. I offered him my hand to pull him up, and he took it. I felt the sparks of electricity that passed between us as I pulled him up and into my arms.

“Fuck, I was so worried about you. About us...” I said.

I leaned down to kiss him and our lips touched.

He leaned into the kiss so that his whole body was pushed against mine and I could feel the same arcs of electricity jumping between us.

I deepened the kiss, my tongue touching his and I pushed him up against a plastic divider.

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“Were you planning on buying a ticket to go back to Cardiff, or did you want to get off right here?” A ticket inspector interrupted me before I could rip off all of James’ clothes right there on the train.

“Oh, um, yes. Sorry.” I grabbed James’ hand and pulled him off the train as we ran laughing to the van, too happy with his company to be embarrassed by the public display of affection.

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After the initial rush, it felt a little bit awkward to sit side by side in the van. I was desperate to reach over and touch James, but I knew I’d want to pull over on the side of the little country lane and do things we definitely didn’t want to be caught doing.

“So,” said James.

“So,” I replied.

The silence stretched for a few more awkward seconds. “I’m sorry,” I said - just as James said the same thing.

“What the hell have you got to be sorry for?” he asked.

I suddenly felt pretty stupid, realising he had no idea how awful I had been for the whole 36 hours or so in which I hadn’t seen him.

“Oh, I dunno. Stuff. You?”

“Sorry for bailing - I had to be at the police station for questioning and I realised I had no way to contact you and Nain’s answering machine was full—I was desperate to let you know where I was and that I was safe and that I was sorry that I wasn’t there—”

James stopped abruptly as I leaned over and gave his leg a gentle squeeze. It was the only way I could give him any gentle reassurance as I drove. “It’s OK. I’m glad you’re here now.”

“Me too.”

“How long are you planning to stay? Are you going back to work on Monday?”

“Nope.”

“Have you taken another week off?”

“Nope.” I risked a glance at James, and I could see he was smirking.

“What, then? Extended holiday? Back home before Monday?” I asked.

“Just...drive me to your place and I’ll talk to you there. I’m not sure I want you driving for this conversation.”

“OK...” I wanted to ask lots of questions, but dared not to. My foot pressed down just a bit harder on the accelerator. I tried not to make it too obvious that I was speeding up, but James’ low chuckle near me indicated I’d been rumbled.

I pulled up outside the cottage and once again felt a little bit awkward. Despite my best efforts cleaning the inside, it was obvious from the outside that it had seen better days.

“I love it,” said James. He opened the door to the van and stepped out, then walked to the cottage to press one hand up against the whitewashed stone walls. “This is absolutely gorgeous, and so homely.”

“Let’s get you inside then,” I said with more confidence than I felt. I opened the door and gestured for James to go first. He smiled and trailed one hand along my back as he walked past me and into my home.

“Wow, this is lovely.” James looked around the hallway. “My flat in London was nice, but...never home. This feels like you’ve lived here. Like there’s history.”

“Didn’t you bring a bag?” I asked. I had suddenly noticed the lack of luggage and I worried that he had only come to say goodbye. Would he be going back to London within the day?

“I was mugged, you mug.” James laughed. “I have the shirt on my back. Everything else is at Nain’s where I left it.”

“Oh.” I still wondered if he might be going back to London pretty immediately once he had picked it all up. “So, how long...”

“Can we talk about that in a minute? I’ve got some stuff I want to do first.”

“Like?” I asked.

“You.” James turned to me and kissed me gently. I put one hand on the back of his head and kissed him back, pushing him up against the roughly hewn wall.

James’ hands wandered to my collar and I felt him start to unbutton me. I used my other hand to wander to his arse and pull him even closer and I pressed him hard against the wall.

Oh so clumsily, James pulled at my shirt till it fell off my shoulders and onto the floor.

“Bed?” he muttered between kisses. “Where is it?”

Rather than answer I took my hand from his head and moved it to join the other at the rear.

Linking them, I picked him up and carried him into the bedroom that I had only slept in for the first time the night before, and dropped him onto the bed so he was laying on his back.

I unbuttoned his jeans and pulled them off at the same time as his boxers, letting his cock free.

With more confidence than I knew I had, I pushed his t-shirt up towards his head and kissed down his smooth, pale body, nuzzling in towards his balls before licking his shaft.

“Fuck, Llyw. Want it,” he said. I looked up at him briefly. His cheeks were flushed and his head thrown back so that he wasn’t even looking at me.

“You’ve got it,” I said before returning my mouth to his cock.

“No, I want you. Inside me. Now.”

I pulled back. “You sure?” I asked. I knew I was, despite it being my first time, not that he knew that. I would have James however he wanted me.

“Sure. Yes. Now.”

“A man of many words,” I chuckled, trying to sound confident or like I knew what I was doing. I left him lying there whilst I grabbed the supplies I had stashed in the bedside table the night before just in case this happened. I came back to James with condoms and lube in hand.

“I’ll need some preparation if I’m going to take that, though.” James nodded down towards my waist and the very obvious bulge in my jeans and I thought I felt my cheeks heat. Perhaps porn had lied to me about just how average I was.

“Yes, sir.” I kneeled down again at the foot of the bed, pouring lube on my fingers as I did. I slicked them up and took James’ cock in my mouth again as I pushed my middle finger inside him.

“Fuck, yes. Do that. More.” It seemed James was reduced to short sentences wherever pleasure was involved.

I kept his cock in my mouth, bobbing up and down as much as I could without gagging.

I found myself taking it deeper each time.

I added a second finger to his hole as I did, and James just moaned in response.

Without me even touching it, I could feel my cock getting hard.

I did my best to pull my jeans down with my spare hand and managed to get them to my ankles.

“Enough of that unless you want me to finish in your mouth right now. I need you to fuck me.”

James' assertiveness and that he knew exactly what he wanted was even more of a turn on.

It felt a little bit clumsy as I took my fingers out from him and tried to get the condom on but I managed, and when I looked James was smiling down at me.

"Come here and kiss me," he said. I moved up his body, still stood on the floor and leaning over him, and kissed him deep and slow.

James bit my lip mid kiss and pulled, and I felt like I was about to finish just from that.

"Fuck me like this," he said. "I want to see you." James raised his legs slightly and with a small bit of manoeuvring my cock was at his hole. I used more lube to coat the condom.

"You sure?" I asked. I was nervous, but quivering with excitement.

"Yes, as long as you are. Take it slow." James kissed me again and I positioned my cock to slide into him slowly.

He hissed as I first breached his hole. "Slow, slow." I stopped for a second, and then pushed in slower, centimetre by centimetre into his warmth.

After a moment, James groaned out loud as I slid all the way in.

Gently, I pulled out a little again and pushed back. James moaned again. "Yes, like that."

I rocked into him, back and forth, James' moans encouraging me to start to move harder and faster.

“Fuck, harder. Faster.”

“I don’t think I can last...” I was embarrassed to admit how close I was already, but everything about James was doing it for me. His body, his face as I fucked him, the tightness around my cock.

“Me too. Come when you need to.” James manoeuvred his hand between us to wrap around his cock.

I found myself pushing his legs back towards him as I pushed harder, faster, deeper.

“Oh, fuck,” said James as he came all over his own body.

Seeing that was enough to push me over the edge and I came inside him, racked with an orgasm more intense than anything I’d ever had before.

James moved his head up to kiss me gently and sweetly as I pulled out.

“Was that...OK?” I asked, hesitantly. It had all felt so right at the time. But James had probably had tens, if not hundreds, of men in his time.

“Yes, it was. More than OK, I mean. It was the best.”

I disposed of the condom and walked to the bathroom to grab a towel, passing it to James before collapsing on the bed next to him.

“Thank you,” I whispered. I kissed him again, with no hurry or agenda — just a sweet, slow kiss that I never wanted to end.

His arm lazily trailed up my stomach and chest as we kissed, and I felt like I was in heaven.

“Don’t need to thank me,” he said. “I’m very keen to do it again sometime.”

“Any time you want,” I replied. And I knew I was hooked on this man after less than a week.

I knew however often he would be coming back wouldn’t be often enough for me, but I’d still yearn for him.

I would still miss him, and any amount of James would never be enough.

But I was at peace with that. I’d waited over 30 years for this.

I could wait weeks or months at a time for it again.

“So how long is it you’re staying?” I asked, trying to keep my tone light and casual.

“As long as you’ll have me,” James replied.

“Ah, I’ll keep you forever,” I joked. Well, half joked. I looped one arm under James’ body and pulled him in closer to me. I had never laid so intimately and openly with someone like this before. The warm, close feeling was almost as good as the sex had been.

“Sounds like a deal.” James shifted closer in again, laying one slender leg over mine. He tucked his head onto my chest. I tried to process what he was saying. Was this some kind of joke? Was he asking me out, wanting to keep this long distance?

James looked up at me with a smile playing at the edges of his lips. “You should see your face,” he said. “You look like you’re stuck on a particularly tough maths question.”

“If that’s what you want to call yourself, so be it,” I said. “But I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“I’m staying here. In Hiraeth. For as long as you and everyone else here can tolerate me.”

My heart — and my brain — skipped a beat for a second. “Here? Hiraeth? For good?”

“You’ll get to a full sentence eventually, I’m sure of it,” James smiled.

“But — what about London? Your job? Your friends? Your flat?”

“I had all of one friend in London, who’s going to use his job in tourism marketing to get to here as often as he can. The property market is insane and I’ll have my flat sublet in a week. Or I’ll pay off my landlord. And my job...fuck it, really. Fuck it all.”

“What are you going to do here?” I was dumbfounded that he could uproot his life like this so quickly.

“Whatever I like. But namely, I’m going to start a little cafe in the empty shop front.

Mr Prentis is selling me it and the flat above for a steal, so I have somewhere to work and somewhere to live.

It took being beaten up in an alleyway, but I’ve realised money and career isn’t everything.

I just want to earn enough to get by and enjoy my life.

I want to be part of a bigger community and I want to have time to do my own thing.
”

“Well that sounds...good,” I said a bit lamely. I wasn’t sure how to bring up the next bit. Man up, supplied my brain unhelpfully. “So...if you’re staying. What...what are we? What am I to you, I mean?”

“Llywelyn Jones, are you asking me out?” James asked. I felt my ears and cheeks heat up.

“Yes,” I said quietly.

“Well,” he replied. “That sounds good to me, partner.”

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:04 am

Epilogue

James

My alarm rang, for the first time in weeks, before either Llywelyn or I had woken. I reached over to my phone and switched it off, stretching and smiling. Today was the day.

The sun was streaming through the windows of my flat - my flat, though in all honesty, it was more of a base for renovations.

I had bought a bed, TV and a freezer for food but otherwise spent most of my time living between Nain's and Llywelyn's.

I had been putting far more effort into renovating the cafe and getting set up as a permanent resident of Hiraeth than I had into the living space above the cafe.

Llywelyn and I had only ever stayed in the flat on nights where we had worked on renovations so late into the night that we could imagine nothing worse than the drive back to his cottage...

or on the nights where painting and DIY had transitioned to horniness before we could get back to his.

But last night had been the night before we opened up, and we had both fallen into bed with thoughts of nothing but to get rested.

Though the cafe was primarily on my mind, so was something else...

I looked over at Llywelyn where he lay, breathing heavily.

I marvelled at his face, hair and beard messy from going to sleep fresh from a shower.

I moved the covers down slightly. My eyes drank in his body, one I didn't want any less than the first second I had clapped eyes on it.

Curly dark hair ran across his chest and down his stomach.

His shoulders and arms were defined not like a bodybuilder but it was obvious he worked hard for a living.

The last three months had proven to me that Llywelyn wasn't just a fling, and our feelings for each other had deepened.

I was still a bit scared of saying the 'I' word first, but I knew it would come in time.

I reached one hand out to stroke Llywelyn's arm.

Once I had reached his hand, I moved across to his stomach and downward.

I was surprised when I didn't encounter a waistband, just more skin.

I lifted the bedding further and looked down.

Someone had obviously collapsed into bed after his shower naked and I'd been too tired to even notice.

I could rectify that. I kissed at his neck, then trailed further kisses across his beard to

his mouth.

“Oh, this is what we’re doing?” Llywelyn said groggily. He opened his eyes and looked deep into mine. “Do we have time?”

“Such a romantic,” I said. “I’ll make it quick.”

I kissed him for a moment longer then crawled on top of him, snaking my arm between us to hold our cocks together.

“Fuck, you know I like it like that.” Llywelyn squirmed underneath me and I used my other hand to hold him down at the base of his throat.

I gave a few slow and gentle tugs which made him moan and wriggle even more.

“Keep still,” I whispered. Llywelyn, as ever, did not listen.

I started tugging faster and harder, both heads slick with precum that made the experience even better.

I leaned down again to kiss Llywelyn. “You love it when I’m in charge,” I said right into his ear, one hand still tugging and the other squeezing at his throat.

It had taken a couple of months for Llywelyn to come out of his shell and try many new things, but this was something he had taken to.

“You think so?” In one swift movement, Llywelyn reminded me that I was never really the one in charge by grabbing my arms and flipping us so he was the one on top. He pushed my legs upwards and apart and rutted against my hole. “You know what I want and what I like.”

“Yes,” I replied. When Llywelyn took control I struggled to speak.

He grabbed my hard cock and jerked it as he continued to push against my hole, the slick head never quite going in but still giving him pleasure and me the feel of complete submission.

I knew I wasn't going to last long, but when Llywelyn pushed down on my chest and leaned down to take my mouth I ended up spilling out all over his hand.

Within seconds he had finished all over my arse and then collapsed on top of me in a heap.

“Well, that was a nice morning surprise,” he said.

“You're telling me. I was not expecting that .” I wriggled out from beneath him and grabbed at a t-shirt on the floor to mop up.

“Come on, cariad , let's get you cleaned up for the day ahead.” Llywelyn stood up and held his hand out for me. I took it and got out of bed and we walked together to the bathroom with the little shower cubicle just off the bedroom.

We showered together, as we had many times before. The little shower cubicle was a tighter space than Llywelyn's bath back at the cottage but we made it work anyway. Another alarm went off in the other room and I grinned up at Llywelyn, the water dripping off his beard as he lathered himself up.

“It really is today, isn't it?”

“Well, today is today, yes. That's how it works.” Llywelyn smiled and I splashed some water back in his face.

“Don’t be sassy,” I replied. “That’s my job.”

I stepped out of the shower, leaving Llywelyn to wash his much bigger and furrier body.

I dried off and checked myself in the mirror quickly.

I’d gained a little bit of weight — happiness weight, Nain called it — over the intervening 3 months and had relaxed into a style of comfortable clothes far removed from the ones I wore in my office job.

I picked out a soft burgundy jumper I’d knit myself and a plain white shirt and some jeans, perfect for the slightly colder April sun.

I was looking forward to spending my first spring and summer in Hiraeth.

With the weather already heating up, there had been plenty of chances to take Dinky for long walks along the beach and for us as a couple to take long walks along the cliffside.

I heard the bathroom door open behind me and Llywelyn enveloped me in his big arms, wetting the shirt I’d already pulled over my head. “Twat,” I muttered playfully as I perved on him getting dressed in front of me. “God, I want that ass,” I muttered to myself, just loud enough for him to hear.

“I’m working on it,” he replied. “Til then you’ll just have to put up with me using yours.”

“However will I cope?” I grinned. He smiled back.

“Almost nine o’clock,” he said as he pulled his jeans on. “Are we ready?”

I didn't know when I had become we in this whole process, but I had zero complaints.

In between the numerous bigger projects he had taken on and a couple of courses I had pushed in his direction to get qualified in all of the DIY tasks he was already amazing at, Llywelyn had been instrumental in helping me get the cafe and community hub organised.

He refused to take a penny, of course, as that wasn't in his nature.

But he'd been getting better at asking his worth, and it had led to security for him.

"Oh, the central heating people texted," he said, right on cue. "They'll be coming round to quote in the next few days."

"Does that mean I can finally take a hot bath in your house?"

"It means you can if you're paying half the bills, yes."

"Welshmen being tight with money really is an accurate stereotype, isn't it?" I dodged the topic yet again. Despite us living in each other's pockets near constantly, every time Llywelyn mentioned moving in with him I managed to move the conversation elsewhere.

"Not tight, I just wouldn't mind you making the four nights a week you already stay with me more official." Llywelyn had walked to the door that led down to the shop and was waiting for me to pass him.

"I'll think about it." I had been thinking about it, and I wanted nothing more than a life living with the man who had so effortlessly made my life better.

But I worried it was too soon, and if it didn't work out how I would show my face around the village afterward — whether it would be too messy to move in with Llywelyn and then out again.

It seemed sometimes like all the oomph to make big changes in my life had been used up by my initial move to Hiraeth, and now I was stuck in a funny new status quo.

We descended together into the shop, and I had to take a second to stop myself from getting too emotional.

Months of work had paid off well. With most of my money taken up with paying off my old landlord and buying this place, we had to do a lot ourselves and stick to a strict budget when renovating. The same old coffee bar had been polished to a sheen and stained a lighter colour, the front covered in sanded driftwood from the beach.

There was a brand new coffee machine on top of it as well as a grill to one side, my biggest expenses.

An old laptop I'd once used for crunching big budget financial equations in the city was now in use as a cash register.

Llywelyn had found some old railway sleepers and attached them as shelves to the walls, which now held jars of coffee beans and fancy teas that we had sourced locally.

The tables and chairs were a higgledy collection of those sourced from charity shops across the west of Wales.

I'd bought bookshelves from locals and from the school, as Llywelyn had replaced all theirs, and lined them all against the opposite wall.

They were filled with donated books and those sourced from charity shops.

Llywelyn had worked his magic with a sander and wood stain so that they all looked at least somewhat coherent.

On one hand, the place was a bit of a mess but on the other it all worked so well together and looked so homely that I was glad I'd had to stick to a budget.

All that remained to be seen was whether the locals and the few tourists would provide enough income to the place to keep it going.

My love for the place coupled very well with the anxiety that I'd fall flat on my arse and have nowhere to go back to.

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Llywelyn rubbed a small circle into my back and spoke as if he had read my mind. “People are going to love this place. They already love you. I l—”

He was interrupted by a knocking at the door. I smiled at Glyn the baker and hurried to open it for him. He had a bag full of pastries and cakes that I’d ordered.

“Thanks so much Glyn, come on in.” I headed to the bar to start putting them out for presentation. 9:15am, just quarter of an hour until opening time. Glyn stood awkwardly in the shop, eyes drifting between me and Llywelyn. “Everything alright?” I asked.

“Yes, yes, of course. It’s just nice to see Llyw looking so happy. He deserves it.”

“No special man in the picture for you then?” asked Llywelyn.

“God, you’re getting worse than Beca. No. No one for me. Just me and my bakery.”

“Maybe we need to find you an extra sexy butcher or grocer to hook you up with. Or both!” I grinned, but Glyn only looked mildly amused.

“I’m a one man kind of guy, but I’m married to my bakes. Not sure I’ll ever find anyone...better go.” Glyn rushed out of the bakery before we could even say goodbye.

“Think he’s OK?” I asked.

“Yeah, he’ll be fine,” replied Llywelyn. “Just lonely being gay in Hiraeth for most

people.”

“It’s odd, isn’t it?” I said. “So many gay men in one tiny village but none of you seemed compatible with one another. You’ve got the guy from the garage..”

“Alun? He’s with my sister.”

“No, the other one. The one with tattoos.”

“Oh, Max! Yeah, bit scruffy for me.” Llywelyn smirked.

“Then you have Glyn, Tudor...am I missing anyone?”

“Gavin Jones, head of the school. You won’t have met him yet but he’s a bit older than the current crop. I think he said he’s bringing someone to the opening today.” Llywelyn was looking at the shelf above my head as I finished presenting the pastries. “Is that shelf level do you think?”

“Yes, yes,” I said idly, then looked up to double check it was. “If you did it, it’s bound to be perfect.”

“Are you trying to get into my pants?” he asked playfully.

“Yes, always. Now get a bloody brush and dust that corner. I can see the cobwebs from here.” I slapped his bum and he moved away to the cleaning cupboard to get the cleaning stuff as I walked to the door and stepped outside.

Hiraeth Community Cafe stood out in proud lettering above the window.

“Oh, open early are you?” said Beca. Before I could tell her that no, we weren’t, she had walked straight past me and into the cafe.

A couple of elderly people from the village who had been milling around in the early morning seemed to follow her lead and I rushed inside to make sure they were all seated.

By the time I'd served out their two tables with the coffee and tea requested, Nain had joined them — leaning in for a quick peck on the cheek before dropping into the seat reserved for her by Beca.

I noticed her touch Beca's arm in a way that surprised me, almost intimately.

It wasn't my place to ask so I took her order and brought back some complimentary muffins for the table too.

By that time the cafe was filling even more and I could see the normally unflappable and rocksteady Llywelyn panicking as he tried to guide people to seats and take their orders.

“You grab some pastries and bring them over here, cariad . I'll do the customer service bit.” I kissed him on the cheek and kept an eye on him as I helped Tudor find his place at a table. Glyn had reappeared and muttered something about closing the bakery for the morning as he took a seat by Tudor.

“Two lattes, please,” said Tudor. Glyn nodded the affirmative and I wondered why the two of them had never ended up together.

“Oh, good news for both your businesses,” said Tudor in a conspiratorial whisper that made us both lean in.

“I've been speaking with a big production company who want to film some fantasy series up on the cliffs and in some of the local villages.

They want to rent out most of the hotel for months ! ”

“What, so big actors, lots of mouths to feed?” I asked.

“Yup, and it’s being adapted from a really popular book so the nerd tourism will be off the charts! I’ll need to talk to Llywelyn about getting some of the rooms renovated if you can spare him for a minute. He’s obviously done a fantastic job here.”

I nodded and grinned. That was some of my worries about business assuaged so long as I could get a good first impression with the crew. “I’ll get my lovely boyfriend to bring you over the lattes so you can chat about it.”

“All going well?” asked Llywelyn as I got to the counter. I nodded the affirmative and got to making the coffees, and sent him over to Tudor and Glyn with yet more pastries. It felt cheeky sending one of Glyn’s pastries back to him but I was sure he could enjoy it as a customer.

Over the next hours the cafe filled up to capacity and beyond and I did my best to keep up with a trade even better than expected.

Alaw had dropped in with her boyfriend and with Dinky, who she had kidnapped more and more over recent weeks as Llywelyn did his best to balance his newly blooming career, courses and helping me with the cafe.

Midway through the day I had to send Llywelyn over to Glyn’s to pick up more cakes and pastries. He returned with even more than we had in the morning.

“He’s not happy,” Llywelyn muttered as we placed them onto plates to be taken out to the tables.

“No? Should we stop ordering from him? Have I done something wrong?”

“No. Not with us. With this bloody TV production company deal. He’s struggling with too much trade at the moment, let alone once more people are coming into the village every single day.”

“And he can’t find the staff?”

“Could you?” Llywelyn asked. He had a point. Nain had offered to volunteer a few hours a day but otherwise I was running this venture on my own.

“Right. Well, I’ll do a bit more baking in house then if it comes to it.” I was no wonder with puff pastries but I could make the odd cake, and practice made perfect.

The door opened once more, but before I could rush to get it Llywelyn grabbed my arm. “Is that...?”

“Tom Brown, the substitute teacher? I think so. Who’s he with?” Tom had walked in with an older man, bearded with salt and pepper hair in a leather jacket. “What a daddy, ” I said without thinking.

“Down, boy. That’s the headmaster at the school. Let me talk to them both.” Llywelyn crossed over to them and came back with their order a few minutes later. “Well that’s a story for another time...”

The rest of the day went by in a flash. A steady stream of customers flowed through the shop and a quick glance at the till exceeded my expectations.

Nain, who had sat dutifully at her table for almost 8 hours and surviving on a steady stream of tea and cake, stood up to give me a hug after the last customer had left.

“I’m so proud of you, cariad ,” she said.

“I wish you all the joy in the world. And I’m so glad you’ve chosen to make Hiraeth your home. ”

Once she had left and I’d locked the front door Llywelyn pulled me into a bone-crunching hug.

“So proud,” he whispered as he kissed the top of my head. “So, so proud.”

“Thank you, cariad .” I extricated myself from the hug to wipe over the last table.

“So, am I dropping you into work in the morning?” he asked.

“Staying at yours, am I?”

“Yes. And unless you agree to live with me, I’m never letting you leave.” Llywelyn’s eyes challenged me to disagree.

“I don’t know...”

“No, you do know. And you want to. But you’re scared and I get that. I really do. But you’re here in Hiraeth, running your own business. You took a risk, you made a massive jump. And you’ve landed on your feet. I want you to do the same again.”

Llywelyn had never been this assertive when we’d first met, but he seemed to have taken my lessons on negotiating a price to heart. “I’ve created a monster, haven’t I?” I said.

“You have. But I love you. That and my cottage still doesn’t have central heating so it’s a very cold morning waking up alone.”

“Fine,” I said as if it were a chore. “You’ve convinced me.”

Llywelyn pulled me in for a kiss and I knew despite our exhaustion we would be up for a wild night.

“I’ll get locked up and then we’ll go...go home.”

Llywelyn grinned at me and stood by the door, foot tapping like he couldn’t wait a second longer. “I’ll just go and get the van started,” he said.

Just as he stepped outside I called his name and he stooped with his hand on the door. “I need you to know,” I said. “I love you too.”

And I would. Forever.

The End

* * *

A message from Matt...

If you enjoyed this book, the first in the West Wales Romance series, please head over to my website at www.mattpetersauthor.com.

If you sign up to my newsletter you’ll get a free, sweet and sexy epilogue to Handy Man in your inbox, as well as future short stories set in the town of Hiraeth.

If you enjoyed please leave a review on Amazon and/or Goodreads.

I’m a little guy just starting out and the more reviews there are the better visibility I get!

So what next for the little village of Hiraeth? Well, Tudor has a whole troupe of actors and crew coming to town. Surely someone will catch his eye, even if he doesn't particularly like them at first.

And with the flat above the garage now empty due to Alun and Alaw finding a place in the village proper, there's space for a mysterious and brooding stranger to move in. One who doesn't like to talk about the past...

Thanks again for reading. I hope you'll stick around for the ride.

Also, a little thank you to my partner for giving me a kick up the arse to get this book done. Thank you to my two lovely dogs for endless cuddles on the sofa as I write. Read on to the next page for a sneak peek of the next book in the series!

Books in This Series

Handy Man - 10 March 2022

Hollywood Crush - 31 July 2022

Full Service - 1 December 2022

WELSH LANGUAGE GLOSSARY

Nain - Grandmother

Cariad - Love

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Hiraeth - Longing (for home)

Bach - Little

Pobl y Cwm - Literally People of the Valley , a Welsh language soap

PREVIEW OF BOOK 2

Hollywood Crush: Chapter 1

Daniel

I could hear the rain falling on my trailer and shuddered at the thought of having to go out in it. It had been 3 weeks since we had started filming an indie film in Ireland and the days had all fallen somewhere on the scale of a drizzle to a downpour.

My agent, Sandra, was staring me down with all the intensity of a predator. “So, have you decided on Thrones of Blood yet? Because if I could decide for you, you’d be-”

“Yes, I know, I know.” I replied. “I’d be taking the big fat pay check and living off it for a little longer. I could take on more indie projects .”

“And you don’t want to, why?” Sandra asked. She tapped one red-tipped acrylic nail on the contract she had placed in front of me, the bit with the frankly eye-watering amount per episode written just above the dotted line which required my signature.

“Because of this,” I gestured upward and around. The trailer was comfy enough, but

having spent so long in here with the sound of the rain was slowly driving me insane. “Why not the new thriller with Tom Cruise in the Bahamas?”

“Because you’d be running against Andrew Garfield in the auditions and now you’ve hit 35 years old you’re essentially dead. And so is cinema, anyway. Take a big-budget TV series they’re offering you on a silver platter and you’ll be making money off nerds at Comic-Con for years.”

She was right, of course. I had flown under the radar for years.

Daniel Ellison, child star who never quite reached his full potential, always managing to make the fifth page of magazines rather than the cover.

Making enough money to live comfortably if I kept working but not quite enough to quit the whole business or start some bogus company to sell people face products that they didn’t really need.

A few films here and there had been promising but Sandra had always told me I could push for more . And I had listened to her. Mostly.

Except for this time. This time, I was filming a little indie film about a gay farmer in rural Ireland. I wasn’t the main character, but Sandra had already warned that it could have dire consequences. That appearing as a romantic interest to another man could lead to the tanking of my career.

“I’ll be honest, Danny,” she said, “I’ve worked my arse off for you to get this deal. They have offered you the part . In a limited fantasy TV series. For good money . Without an audition. Take this up before they release this low-budget softcore farm porno out into the world.”

“My name is Daniel. You don’t get to call me Danny unless we’re friends.

Sandra, you and I have never been friends.

Secondly, I took this project on because I'm passionate about the material.

I've not enjoyed spending 3 weeks in a trailer in the pouring rain and if you think I should go to Wales to do the same but for up to two months you have another thing coming. ”

Sandra huffed and pushed the contract toward me. “Take another day to consider it. I'll have to give the production company an answer by then, but unless you want to survive on cereal ads and bit parts in soap operas for the next 40 years, it's something you should really consider.”

She left the trailer with a slam of the door.

The rain continued to drum on the roof and I sat in the relative silence for a while.

She had warned me about this film as I'd always been relatively coy about my sexuality with the press and it had helped me gain a legion of female fans and fans from across the LGBT community.

Sandra worried that by being in this film I'd out myself as unavailable to women and stop them buying tickets to my films or subscriptions to streaming services, or even worse, have my bisexuality exposed.

“You've always been a very mediocre box office draw,” she had said.

“Don't make yourself a negative. No one employs actors who lose them money. ”

So I had. I'd done the interviews with Cosmopolitan as well as Attitude.

I had made sure to go out for dinner with female friends and co-stars as well as men.

Ambiguous sexuality was all very 90's, Sandra had thought.

But the press had lapped it up. So when I took role that Sandra thought might tank all that and swing me one way or another and for Equity minimum wage too, she had gone apoplectic.

And that was before she saw her miserly cut of the proceeds from a film that would take me out of other work for almost a month.

I read through my script for the day. We were a few days off from the end of shooting and I knew I would have to take on more work if I wanted to live any kind of lifestyle.

Maybe Sandra was right. But I didn't want her to be.

I wanted to make films and TV that I wanted to, not green-screen fests with horrible working hours and hours of prosthetics. But the money was tempting.

A knock came at the door, and one of the runners popped his head in. "You're needed on set please, Mr Ellison?"

"Call me Danny, please," I said. He smiled and jerked his head.

We had been filming in the same old farmhouse for weeks, and some of the crew had been sleeping there.

I'd begged for my chance to sleep there too but had been told I was far too important.

It would be nice to be told that normally but the trailer was objectively worse.

It had rained loudly on the corrugated roof for about half the days and nights I'd been working and the makeup ladies had been applying more and more concealer under my eyes to cover up the lack of sleep.

"Hey, Patrick." I gave my younger co-star a quick one armed hug.

He was a redheaded guy with lovely blue eyes and a great smile almost 10 years my junior and considered an acting prodigy by many.

His agent, he had explained, had thought this little indie film could be a huge career boost for a young actor.

When I had explained this to Sandra she had waved one taloned hand and told me that things were different for young actors now, but the rules still hadn't changed for leading men past their prime.

"Right," said the director, an older Irish lady called Siobhan who had been on the indie circuit for years.

"As you'll all be aware, we'll be filming some scenes of a sexual nature today.

We've got intimacy co-ordinators on set and we can take a break off anyone feels remotely uncomfortable. Is that good with everyone?"

We all nodded the affirmative and got into positions as rehearsed. Patrick was to unbutton the front of my shirt, we would kiss for a while and then he would simulate giving me head, or fellatio as one of the coordinators had insisted on calling it.

The day was great, even if the scene was a little mechanical.

Patrick and I chatted between takes and ate so many breath mints between kissing

scenes that our mouths felt cold when kissing.

But though we had what Siobhan had assured us was amazing chemistry , I knew that Patrick would never be my type in real life.

And judging by the looks he was throwing to the very female AD in breaks between filming I didn't think I was his type either.

When it came to filming the head scene, the set was almost completely cleared but for essential camera operators and Siobhan, as well as one intimacy coordinator.

It all seemed a little overkill to me as there wasn't even any nudity and it was all implied, but things had moved on since I filmed my first sex scene with a woman at 18.

I remembered the trauma of almost-nude photos leaking on to early social media and the national papers.

Child Star Danny Ellis Got Big being one particularly egregious headline.

With my jeans just slightly unzipped, Siobhan had the camera positioned so that Patrick's flame red hair was visible in frame as he bobbed up and down.

I looked down at him and gave all the appropriate facial expressions that Siobhan had asked for but we both dissolved into giggles in between takes.

“And that's us done lads, thank you. Now if either of you need anything, speak to the intimacy coordinator on set. You have their phone numbers for any additional questions any time.”

Back to the trailer , I thought. I had been feeling lonely in the nights too.

It would be nice to get back to my rented flat in Manchester, spend a couple of risky weekends down Canal Street to bring someone home with me even if just for the night.

Even Manchester didn't feel like home though.

Just a quick base of operations between different acting jobs across the country.

"Want some company?" asked Patrick as we emerged into the rain. Despite getting along well on set, we hadn't really hung out together. I hadn't questioned it as he was so much younger, but if he wanted to chat now I was all ears and glad for the company.

"Sure," I said. We shared a glance before running through the rain as fast as we could to get to my trailer. Once the door was closed behind us and I had caught my breath, I offered him a seat on the sofa. "Want a drink?" I asked.

"I'd kill for a beer if you've got one," he replied. I grabbed one from the fridge and he smiled as he took it.

"Hope you were OK with the scenes there," I said. "I know they can be a little intense."

"Nah, all good with me. I've had to do worse to get roles."

I shuddered. I knew how predatory the industry could be to young kids. "Just do your best to rely on your talents," I said. "Don't let them pressure you into anything for a role."

"Thanks for the advice. I've always looked up to my elders in the industry. There's so much I can learn from you."

Elders? Ouch. That hurt, though I tried not to show it in my face. “Well, anytime you need advice, I’m here.”

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“Thanks. I really appreciate that.” Patrick took another swig. “Though, there is something I want to ask. Please tell me if it’s too personal.”

Oh God, Sandra’s gonna kill me if I let this cat out of the bag , I thought.

“How come you’ve never been all that successful?

” Patrick asked, then seemed to cringe back into himself.

“No, that came out wrong. I mean...how come you’ve never been the leading man?

Or been in a big hit TV show or film franchise?

I’ve followed your career since I was a kid.

I love your stuff and I’ve always idolised you.

Just...you never seemed to break through like you could have. ”

I hesitated before I answered. “I guess I just always did what I wanted, no matter what my agent thought. You seem to have a good one though, so keep hold of her.”

Patrick nodded thoughtfully. I was a jobbing actor, and always had been.

Could I really turn down this financial opportunity just to spend another couple of nights at home?

If I worked a series, maybe 2 if it got renewed, I would be in a much better position to be picky, to choose my own destiny and the jobs I wanted to do.

I could find somewhere to stay longer term. Have a home.

“Why do you ask, anyway?” I said. “Surely you’ve got them lining up with big offers at the moment. You’re a hot commodity.”

“Well, yes. I’ve just been asked to go for a guest spot in a big new fantasy TV series filming in Wales.

Thrones of Blood, I think it’s called?” Patrick looked thoughtful for a second.

“I think I will go for it. Can’t hurt to get a bit of weird thrown in to my career.

” He held up the empty bottle of beer and put it down on the counter.

“Thanks for the advice man, I really appreciate it.” He opened the door and stepped out into the rain.

I sat alone for a second. Outside, the wind howled and the rain continued to hammer on the roof almost deafeningly. The whole trailer seemed to sway with each gust.

I picked up the phone and scrolled to Sandra’s name. “I’ll do it,” I said as soon as she picked up. I thought I heard her make an excited little squeal. “On one condition, though,” I said. “I have to have a hotel. I’m not doing any more fucking trailers.”

“Already arranged,” she replied. “You can get the ferry over next week.”

???

The ferry had been awful, with the famous Irish Sea not letting its own reputation for

stormy weather go unmatched. The sea was choppy and I was glad to get back onto land until I saw Sandra waiting at the pier for me, next to the flashy Mercedes that (in part) my money had paid for.

“There’s my favourite man,” she said with a predatory smile. “All ready for tomorrow’s first day on set?”

“Sure thing, Sandra.” My legs wobbled a little as I walked toward her and the car. Sea legs had never been my specialty.

“So the production has booked you and the crew in at this swanky hotel right in the heart of the village - you’re going to love it, it’s to die for .

And I’ve put in your ledger that you need a gym installed to keep your fitness up so that should be pre-installed there too by tomorrow at the latest. I don’t know why, but this production seems really keen on you so I’ve been able to bend them whatever way I want.

Tomorrow you’ll be introduced to the director and makeup will want you in for continuity shots, I’ve sent your measurements to costume but they’ll want to do some final fittings... ”

We got into the car and I drowned out the sound of Sandra’s voice, resting my head against the window as she drove off, out of the little port town the ferry had docked in and along the coastal cliffs.

The scenery was probably nice, but felt like it was being strangled by the oppressive grey clouds above.

After spending 3 weeks in Ireland, the last thing I wanted was another 3 months of cloud and rain.

The length of the shoot meant we'd be here all the way through from May to July and though that would take us through to the summer months, Wales had a reputation for storms. I had worked for 2 weeks on a medical drama in Cardiff when the heavens opened on what had otherwise been a sunny summer day.

"It doesn't rain in Wales," one of the usual actors had said, "it pours."

And sure enough, as Sandra continued to drive and talk specks of rain started to dot the windows of the car.

She took a few twists and turns down a country lane that seemed to be at the edge of a cliff and I had to hold my stomach to stop myself from feeling sick.

The clouds had descended so that it was impossible to see over the edge but Sandra seemed to have little to fear as she yanked the wheel through each turn in quick succession.

Soon, the road bottomed out and we drove over a little bridge over a river, past a high street that, though it had a couple of shops boarded up seemed like it was busy with local people, and up another hill - this one mercifully straight, but so steep that even in her Mercedes Sandra had to change down gear a couple of times as it slipped on the wet tarmac.

When the hill levelled out the hotel came into sight and I wanted to put my head in my hands.

The hotel sat on the very edge of the cliffs, looking like it was at risk of falling over the edge at any time.

It was old fashioned and timber framed, but looked like it was sagging under years of neglect and age.

It was painted white, but some of the chips were flaking and crumbling off of it.

An old porch seemed to be struggling under the weight of the rain.

Above the porch, in faded lettering, was written Gwesty Maes Gwyn.

“What’s that mean?” I asked, pointing at it.

“Dunno. Welsh, probably.” Sandra reached over and grabbed my leg with a familiarity she and I did not possess, squeezing it in a way she probably thought was meant to be reassuring. I shifted it away from her grip, steeled myself and opened the door.

We ran through the rain and under the waterfall that was running over the porch. I wrenched one of the tall wooden doors open and ran in, not caring if it swung back and hit Sandra behind me.

“Well, fuck,” said Sandra, coming to stand next to me. “Swanky it is not.”

She wasn’t exaggerating. The hotel was as old fashioned on the inside as it was on the outside.

It was dark, walls made of deep mahogany lit by struggling fluorescent bulbs in a chandelier that had seen better days.

It was pretty cold, not the respite from the storm I had expected.

Behind reception ran a single staircase, and there was a door either side of us leading deeper into the hotel. I couldn’t see an elevator anywhere.

I couldn’t see any people either. It was as dead as a cemetery, and I could hear nothing but the howling wind and creaking timbers.

I stepped toward the reception desk — it had been polished to a sparkle at least — and pressed the bell.

It chimed throughout the foyer, but no one came. I pressed it again.

“Coming!” shouted a voice from one of the hallways.

It was deep and echoed through the foyer before its owner stepped through the doors.

He was a taller man than I with dark blonde hair, bright blue eyes and stubble on his cheeks and chin.

His hair looked like he had been raking his fingers through it and messed it up, and he was wearing a dark red shirt with black trousers.

He had a purposeful stride and his arms and shoulders filled his shirtsleeves very nicely.

“So sorry if you’re looking for a room,” he said.

I couldn’t stop staring at his face so barely noticed when Sandra once again stepped up to stand alongside me.

“But we’re fully booked from Monday onwards so you’d only be able to stay the weekend.

Got some big film stars staying here and you know what they’re like, divas, the lot of them.

You should see some of the demands...” he chuckled. “Anyway, what can I do for you?”

It was that moment that Sandra chose to explode.