

Dogs. Family. True Love.
There are some things that aren't...

Just for Christmas



Scarlett Bailey

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About the Book

Her best friend's wedding . . .

When Alex Munro learns that the love of her life is getting married to another girl, all she wants is to be alone – and as far away from Edinburgh as possible.

Moving to a Cornish cottage, which comes complete with the world's scruffiest dog, Alex finds that her new neighbours are determined to involve her in their madcap Christmas festivities.

Then she meets her sexy neighbour Ruan – and somehow Alex doesn't want to be alone this Christmas after all. But having lost one fiancé, Ruan has no intention of letting anyone get close to him again . . .

About the Author

Scarlett Bailey has loved writing stories since childhood. Before writing novels she worked as a waitress, cinema usherette and bookseller. Passionate about old movies, Scarlett loves nothing more than spending a wet Sunday afternoon watching her favourite films back-to-back with large quantities of chocolate.

Scarlett also writes novels under her real name Rowan Coleman. Currently she lives in Hertfordshire with her husband, five children and a very large collection of beautiful shoes.

Also by Scarlett Bailey:

The Night before Christmas
Married by Christmas
Santa Maybe

As Rowan Coleman:

Growing Up Twice
After Ever After
River Deep
The Accidental Mother
The Baby Group
The Accidental Wife
The Accidental Family
The Happy Home for Broken Hearts
Lessons in Laughing Out Loud

Quick Reads:

A Woman Walks into a Bar

Just for Christmas

Scarlett Bailey



EBURY
PRESS

For Adam, always

Chapter One

14 December

It took a few seconds after she killed the lights and switched off the engine, for Alex Munro's eyes to adjust to the dark.

This was proper dark, nothing like the night times back home, in Grangemouth, where the streets were spangled with orange street lamps, and the roads lined with neon signs, where the towering cranes crowded the docks, and the floodlights that enabled a twenty-four hour operation always kept the stars at bay. So for a moment after she switched off the lights and turned off the engine, Alex just sat there behind the wheel of her car in the pitch black, and wondered what on earth she was doing here, a few weeks before Christmas, in a place where no one knew her and she knew no one, and about as far away from her home country as she could get without actually having to use her passport. Which wasn't to say she hadn't thought about it.

'You're running away,' she reminded herself, out loud, her voice a soft whisper, because anything louder would have seemed unseemly in the perfect quiet. 'That's what you are doing, Alex. A new year is on its way, and you are making a new start. Now, get out of the car and get on with it, you big Jessie.'

Now that she'd had a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dark, Alex could see the faint orange glow behind the curtain in the window of what was to be her new home, A tiny, squat and decidedly lopsided-looking cottage, which could be no more than two up, two down, its white-washed exterior a ghostly dark grey in the darkness.

The mayor of Poldore, Mr Godolphin, who wasn't her new boss exactly, but would be her point of liaison with the town, said he'd be there to greet her when she arrived, although she hadn't really believed he meant it. She had carefully explained via a very detailed email that the drive down to Cornwall from Scotland would take several hours, she had no idea what time of the day or night she might arrive, and now it was almost ten. Mr Godolphin had told her there was a key in a flowerpot by the door, not that she'd need it because he'd be there to greet her and, anyway, no one locked their doors in Poldore. Might as well be there as anywhere, he'd said. Alex hadn't believed that either. After all it was Cornwall she'd decided on a whim to move to, not the Middle Ages.

After climbing out of the car, Alex grabbed her overnight bag, planning to come back for the rest of her stuff later, when a sound, so alien, so terrifying, stopped her dead in her tracks, raising prickles along the back of her neck.

It took two seconds more for Alex to realise it was a snarl, no, more of a vicious growl. She was being growled at by a thing, a quite big thing, with eyes that glowed in the dark, its terrible teeth glinting in the moonlight.

'Shit,' Alex whispered out loud, dimly remembering that if you were attacked by a bear you were supposed to stand tall and try to look bigger than it, but this wasn't a bear, this was Cornwall after all, so what the hell was it then?

The Beast of Bodmin, that was it. Alex's heart pounded furiously. Bodmin Moor was pretty close to Poldore, maybe only ten or so miles away. It was just her luck that she'd run away from Scotland, a broken heart and a lying father, to end up coming face to face with the Beast of Bodmin.

So this was how it would all end. Maybe they'd never find her body, maybe her disappearance would always be a mystery and then Marcus would be sorry. He'd be weeping in despair as he walked up the aisle to marry another woman, with her hair and her push-up bra and obvious tan.

Alex raised an eyebrow, she was quite warming to the Beast of Bodmin scenario.

And then it growled again, lower this time and full of intent, an intent that Alex was fairly certain involved dinner. Alex squeaked, just a little, as the Beast began to advance slowly on her, low on its haunches, the gleam of bared teeth sparkling, darkly.

‘Oh shit,’ Alex said, feeling her knees actually quake, which up until that point she hadn’t realised was a real thing, and then it crept into a shaft of moonlight. ‘Oh you’re only a wee dog!’

The animal, now illuminated in silvery light, had, it turned out, been mostly made up of shadows. In fact it was a reasonably small, very dirty, exceptionally smelly dog, covered in matted hair, and scarcely beastly in appearance at all. Although none of these facts seemed to matter to the hound. The hound still seemed intent on ripping Alex’s throat out and then possibly eating her alive, although she wasn’t sure what would kill her first – the blood loss, or the halitosis.

‘Now, now, little doggy,’ she said, reaching slowly into her bag for half a Twix, which was the lone survivor of her junk food driving picnic. ‘Oh you’re a poor wee little thing, aren’t you? A little stray doggy, what you need is a lovely, lovely snack ...’ Alex grappled for the half-melted finger of chocolate, pulled it out and threw it over the dog’s head. The animal chased after it at once, disappearing into the undergrowth, where it sounded as if it was ferociously killing the chocolate, and Alex took her chance, bolting for the cottage door in the hope that Mr Godolphin was as good as his word and it would indeed be open.

She tumbled into a tiny front room, where a fire burned merrily in the grate, and landed on a large, round, red-faced, silver-haired gentleman, who had been dozing peacefully in an aged, overstuffed chair by the fire. That was until Alex landed on his lap.

‘What the ...?’ He sat up, his arm instinctively encircling Alex’s waist. ‘Oh, oh my, beg your pardon, miss!’

Alex leapt up, followed by, who she could only assume was Mr Godolphin, the Mayor of Poldore.

‘There’s this rabid dog out there,’ she told him, pointing in the direction of the open door. ‘It’s a vicious animal. It was about to maul me! We need to call someone, the police, the army. Who is it who takes care of rabid animals? The RSPCA?’

At which point the stinking, mostly grey, matted animal in question trotted meekly through the door, carrying half a Twix delicately in its jaws and settled down in front of the fire, with a deeply satisfied sigh.

‘What, Buoy?’ Eddie Godolphin said, looking perplexed. ‘Buoy won’t do you no harm, he’s all mouth and trousers is Buoy, and well ... Buoy lives here.’

‘I don’t care if he’s a boy or a girl, he’s got to go!’ Alex said. ‘I live here now.’

Eddie chuckled deeply, shaking his head; he didn’t seem to get the gravity of the situation at all.

‘No, no,’ he said, smiling fondly at the fetid creature. ‘B. U. O. Y. As in a life buoy. Clever, isn’t it? Although Buoy is a boy, for the record. He’s got about twenty or so pups attributed to him in Poldore, something of a rake in his heyday he was, getting on a bit now, though, aren’t you Buoy? Buoy is your new housemate.’

‘What?’ Alex asked him, as the animal eyed up a pile of scones that sat on a small gate-leg dining table. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘Buoy!’ Eddie looked like he might be a bit worried that she wasn’t keeping up so well. ‘Your new housemate. Our harbour master before last, Alf Waybridge, he picked Buoy up as a puppy, some rotter chucked him out when he was tiny, him and the rest of a litter. Alf found Buoy, the only one left alive in the sack. Took him in and the two of them were thick as thieves. Then when old Alf passed on Buoy didn’t.

He didn't fancy moving, you see? We tried rehoming him a few times, but he doesn't get on with people, a bit like old Alf, really. So the town looks after him now, and when he does want a roof over his head, when it's getting cold, this is where he comes. It's his home, you see, and he's getting on now, must be at least eleven.'

Alex stared down at the creature for a long, desperate moment. Maybe she'd go back to Scotland and watch the love of her life marry a bimbo after all, maybe that would be what she would do. Or move. Or build a new house.

'So anyway.' Eddie grinned, clearly feeling that the subject of the sitting tenant was closed. 'Hello to you. I didn't know he was bringing a young lady with him. That's nice, isn't it? He won't be starting out here alone.'

Alex blinked at him. 'What?'

'Your man, the new harbour master, Mr Alex Munro.' Eddie grinned again, and Alex noticed he had very white teeth, teeth that a dentist had spent serious time on, and a thick gold chain around his neck. He'd told her in their email exchange that he was also the landlord of Poldore's busiest pub the Silent Man, as well as being mayor, and Alex thought he looked much more suited to that role than the one he was here for. For starters he was talking total nonsense. 'If he'd told me he was bringing his young lady, I'd have got some flowers in or something. Maybe given old Buoy here a spray with the Febreze.'

'I'm Alex Munro,' Alex told him, holding out a hand.

'Munro's young lady, yes I worked that much out.' He winked at her.

'No, I mean I'm actually Alex Munro,' she said again. 'I'm Spartacus!' he said jovially, until finally the deadly serious look on Alex's face began to sink in. 'I'm sorry, love?'

'I am Alex Munro, Poldore's new harbour master,' Alex said slowly and deliberately as understanding dawned. 'Did no one tell you I was a woman?'

Chapter Two

‘Well now, that’s a turn-up,’ Eddie Godolphin said, settling himself back into the only comfortable chair in the minuscule room. He picked up the plate of scones and stuffed one whole into his mouth. ‘That’s a real turn-up for the books.’

Or at least that was what Alex thought he said; it was hard to tell through the crumbs, cream and jam. The dog eyed her with the single amber eye that was visible through his unruly coat. He definitely had a look of a pirate about him, and now that the chocolate bar was gone he looked hungry again.

‘Well, I don’t know why you didn’t know,’ Alex said. ‘I did three Skype interviews with the Port Authority people, they saw my face, and I know I’m not exactly a girly girl, but I think it’s pretty clear I’m a woman.’

Eddie nodded as he looked her up and down. ‘Oh yes, you are all woman,’ he said, cheerfully.

Alex scowled. She was fairly sure you couldn’t discern her shape under her deliberately shapeless and chunky cable knit jumper, but still the comment, as benign as it was, unsettled her. She’d grown up in a world of men, working in the male-dominated industry of shipping since she’d left school at sixteen. She’d learned very young that the second a man noticed you had breasts he stopped taking you seriously. In her line of work it was best to keep everything feminine hidden away.

‘Well, anyway,’ she told him, raising her chin and lowering her voice, ‘the Port Authority interviewed me, checked my credentials, experience and references, and gave me the

job. So you can't take it away again because I'm a woman, that would be illegal.'

'Oh I know that, love,' Eddie said, stuffing another scone into his mouth before offering Alex the plate.

She would dearly have loved to eat at least three of them, but her pride would not let her take one. It didn't seem to be tactically sensible to eat scones with this man, not while she felt that her new life, her new start, was suddenly at stake because of her ovaries.

'And it's not like we aren't a forward-thinking town,' he said. 'We are very modern in Poldore you know, we've got all sorts here.'

'What men and women?' Alex asked him a little sarcastically,

'It's, well, thing is, it's tradition, isn't it?' Eddie said, rather apologetically. 'Boats and women, they don't mix, do they? Or at least that's the superstition. I don't mind it myself. But then again, I don't like boats, never have. Sheer coincidence that I live by the sea.'

Alex huffed crossly. 'I've guided several hundred super tankers in and out of port back in Grangemouth,' she told him sternly. 'And I've never crashed one.'

'Ah, yes,' Eddie said. 'But have you ever dealt with a good old-fashioned Cornish fisherman? Or woman? Being harbour master in Poldore isn't just about parking boats, it's about being at the heart of the community, knowing everyone who comes in and goes out. It's caring for the very thing that makes us us.'

'I know that, and, as I said in my interview with the Port Authority, I have excellent interpersonal skills and am able to work well under my own initiative as well as part of a team,' Alex said, so stridently that she thought Eddie Godolphin looked a little bit scared. 'And anyway, it's about time good old-fashioned Cornish fisherpeople dragged themselves into the twenty-first century!'

Suddenly she felt exhausted – the eight-hour drive, the near mauling by the foul-breath mutt, the confusion over her sex all caught up with her and she sat down heavily on the only other seat available, a rickety old wooden chair that was tucked under the narrow gate-leg table. Both had seen better days, a very long time ago.

Eddie put the plate of scones down on the table.

‘My Becky baked them,’ he said. ‘You won’t taste any better. Go on, you must be famished.’

Alex shrugged and took a scone from the plate. She took a bite; it was utterly delicious.

‘Look.’ Eddie leaned forwards in his chair and smiled at her kindly. ‘You’re a lady ...’

‘Woman,’ Alex told him sternly.

‘A lady woman,’ Eddie went on. ‘And you are our new harbour master, appointed by the Port Authority, and I might be the mayor, but they are the only ones who could un-appoint you. A few of the old sea dogs are going to grumble, and I suppose you have to work twice as hard as a man to prove you are up to the job but ...’ Eddie stood up, and grinned. ‘Our last harbour master was a drunk, so you’re one up on him already. Unless you are also a drunk, that is.’

‘So you aren’t going to try and hound me out of town?’ Alex asked him. ‘With pitchforks, and ferocious dogs, maybe set fire to me in a wicker man?’

Eddie chuckled, and Alex noticed he seemed to be in a permanent state of amusement. ‘Darling, Poldore is like the Cannes of Cornwall, you’ll soon find that out. We’ve got more pop stars, novelists, film stars and millionaires round here than we know what to do with, and besides, I think you’ll find all that pagan stuff happened just north of where you came from. I’ll leave you to it, let you get spruced up a bit and I’ll see you over in the pub in about half an hour for your welcome do.’

‘My what?’ Alex spluttered through a mouthful of crumbs.

‘We’re a *community*, Alex,’ Eddie told her, emphasising the word as if it might be one that she’d never heard before. ‘And you will become a key part of it. Everyone’s waiting to meet you, Becky will feed you, my daughter, Lucy, will serve you wine, or a pint!’ he added to make sure he didn’t sound sexist. ‘All on me. The Silent Man, right across the river. There’s a brand new dinghy moored for you at the back of the cottage. Take a torch though, steps down to the mooring can be a bit tricky, and we don’t want you drowning on your first day, do we?’

Eddie picked up his coat and was almost at the door before Alex realised he was leaving something behind.

‘The dog!’ she said, pointing at the mutt, who was watching her with the one yellow eye, his chin on his paws, just the hint of his yellowing teeth exposed under one black lip. ‘Take the dog with you!’

‘I thought I told you, the dog lives here.’ Eddie shook his head, slightly bemused. ‘Remember? He’s your dog now. Or, more likely, you are his human.’

‘But I don’t like dogs!’ Alex told him. ‘I’m not a dog person.’

‘You should get along just fine then.’ Eddie looked at the animal that now lay, snoring peacefully on the rug. ‘Because he’s not a people person at all.’

Chapter Three

As exciting new beginnings go, this one hadn't exactly gone according to plan, Alex thought as she explored her new home. Thankfully there weren't any more unwanted pets. Not unless you counted the spider in the bath that Alex thought might measure a foot in diameter. Well, a good three inches anyway. As predicted there wasn't much to the cottage. Downstairs, there was the living room and a sort of kitchenette – little more than a cupboard really – that led off from it, with a cooker, an ancient fridge, a sink – with a curtained off recess underneath it – and another door that led into the back garden. She could see little in the dark but the garden appeared to comprise about three square feet of grass and a sheer cliff face of rock, soaring upwards. Upstairs there was an old but working bathroom and one bedroom, containing a largish double bed and a very old wardrobe.

'It's not so bad,' Alex told her reflection in the dusty wardrobe mirror as she emerged, shuddering, a little while later, from a freezing cold shower, which the spider had stubbornly stayed in situ for, only ambling off down the overflow after she'd stepped out of the ancient bathtub. There was another tiny radiator in the bedroom, but this one was stone cold and so Alex had turned on a very small and inefficient electric heater, which was doing an excellent job at keeping her left big toe lukewarm. 'It's not so different from what you were expecting. Although to be fair you weren't expecting everything to be at a forty-five degree angle.'

It was hard to tell in the dark, but Alex thought that in the next five to ten years the cottage would have slipped off of the edge of the ledge it was perched on entirely.

She rooted around in the bottom of her bag until she found her hairbrush and pulled it through her long black hair. Hair as black as a raven's wing, her dad used to say as he brushed it out for her every Sunday night before school, and then that would be it. No more brushing for the rest of the week; Alex hated it. And even her stern and strict father couldn't do a thing to change her mind about it. By Wednesday, she'd have a distinct air of the cave girl about her, but by Friday she looked positively feral. Now she was twenty-eight, Alex knew about conditioner, and it helped keep her hair tangle free and smooth. But in her motherless household, it had taken Alex and her father at least two decades to work that out, and if it was up to Ian Munro, she'd still be washing her hair with hand soap.

Thick and refusing to dry, her damp mane sat heavily on her shoulders, as she reached for her sensible white bra and pants, jeans and a loose white shirt, which she pulled a deep green sweater over. As Alex looked at the pale heart-shaped face that peered out from between the two dark curtains of hair, parted carefully in the middle, her blue eyes suddenly brimmed with unshed tears.

'Shut up, Alexandra,' she told herself. 'Shut up and stop being such a woman. You are here; you have a new life, a new job, and a new house with a new ... dog. Things are going to work out, because they have to. There is no way you are going back home with your tail between your legs, is there?' Alex shook her head in response to her own question. 'So you are going to get up, go downstairs, somehow get past the rabid beast in the living room and go and meet your new neighbours, aren't you?' Alex shook her head again.

'Yes, you are,' Alex told herself, getting up and pulling on her Timberland boots. 'And for God's sake, don't let them

see that you are petrified.'

Buoy got up as Alex came down the steep set of creaking stairs and snarled at her.

'I've got to go out,' Alex told him. She had no idea about how to communicate with dogs, so she thought she might as well approach it as if he understood English. 'You heard Eddie? He told me I had to go to this welcome do. It sounds like a nightmare, so you can keep me pinned to the bottom step all night if you like, but that means it will just be me and you. Up to you.'

Buoy sat down, a little stiffly and regarded her, as if he was considering the options.

'Wouldn't you like to live in a nice animal shelter?' Alex asked him. 'Or get adopted by a granny? Maybe a blind old granny with no sense of smell?'

Buoy growled again.

'Right, well, Eddie didn't say anything about you having a track record of murdering people, so I'm betting your growl is worse than your bite, and I'm just bloody going out. And I'll deal with you tomorrow.'

Buoy raised one bushy brow and gave her a decidedly sceptical look.

'I'm not scared of an old mutt!' Alex told him firmly. She ran all the way to the door nevertheless.

It was cold outside, and Alex was glad that she'd taken her dad's old greatcoat off the peg on her way out. She wrapped it around her body, pointing the torch at the ground as she edged her way along the stone path that was cut into her small garden towards the cliff edge, where she assumed the steps that Eddie had referred to must be. It was cold, but not the same sort of cold that she was used to back home in Grangemouth, which was hard and bitter, and sometimes tasted of iron. Here the cold seemed softer, more enveloping and, well, sort of warm. Alex caught her breath as she reached a rotten picket fence, leaning

outwards at a suicidal angle, bisected by a gate swinging on rusty hinges, which seemed to mark the end of the world.

Edging closer, Alex took in another sharp breath as she realised that this was where the path dropped off the edge of a cliff and became a steep set of steps roughly cut out of the rock. At the bottom of perhaps a twenty-foot drop, Alex could just make out where the water lapped against a small stony beach and her new boat moored at the end of short quay. As soon as Alex saw it, glowing like a new moon in the water, she smiled. It was only a very basic motorised dinghy, true, but to Alex it was freedom. Her eyes travelled upwards, drawn to the coloured lights that bobbed in the water, and she looked across the mouth of the river for the first time and saw her new home, Poldore, in all its glory.

Rising sharply up the hillside, the town glittered in the crisp night, a thousand lights in windows shining bravely. Poldore was set, like a jewel, right on the edge of the sea, mirroring the sky above it that blazed with countless stars. Alex stood stock still on the edge of the cliff, enveloped in the warm cold of a Cornish December, looked at the crescent moon shining above, and the one that awaited her at the bottom of the steps and she thought, Yes, *this* is what a new beginning feels like.

Which was when Buoy barged past her, trotted nimbly down the stone steps and climbed into the boat.

It didn't take long to make it across the harbour to the town, which was lucky as Alex was holding her breath the entire way to try to avoid the dog's distinctive scent. The man from the Port Authority said there was a reason the harbour master's cottage was built on the other side of the estuary, some sort of local tradition to do with witches, smugglers, or maybe pirates, he couldn't remember exactly, but Alex didn't mind in the least. She liked being on her own, she liked the idea of her lonely bolthole away from the hustle

and bustle of the little town, and she couldn't have loved the commute any more if she'd tried.

Buoy, who was completely indifferent to the odour he brought with him, sat in the prow of the boat, gazing wisely out to sea, and just as Alex pulled up alongside her mooring, he hopped out of the boat and went on his business without so much as a second glance in her direction, for which Alex was oddly grateful.

After mooring her dinghy, tying it with great care, using the sailors' knots she'd learnt from a book as soon as she discovered she had the job, Alex heaved herself up onto the harbour wall, where she was greeted by a small square, surrounded on two sides by shops and restaurants, and a large Victorian redbrick town hall. Festooned in Christmas lights of all colours, which ran from building to building, the square was fairly busy with people, and Alex could hear the chatter coming from the restaurants, and the Silent Man, which stood slightly elevated above the other buildings, a little further up the steep incline.

In the centre of the square, a tall, strong-looking spruce took pride of place, positively bristling with Christmas decorations. Pop a couple of carollers in Victorian dress in and it would make a perfect Christmas card: a thought which gave Alex a tight feeling in her chest. This would be the first Christmas ever that she would spend away from her home, her dad, Marcus, her friends and everyone she knew. And yet it was the way it had to be, there was no going back now. Home was a very, very long way away, and so was the life she had left behind.

Taking a deep breath, Alex tied her hair into a knot at the base of her neck, squared her shoulders and headed into the pub.

Chapter Four

Alex had thought that pubs falling silent while everyone stared at you only happened in old Hammer horror movies, but no, the second she walked in the door of the Silent Man everyone stopped talking and looked at her, which instantly turned Alex's pale skin a ruddy shade of pink, made her hunch her shoulders and hide behind her hair. If there was one thing that Alex hated it was being the centre of attention, particularly when she wasn't at all sure that the attention was friendly. However, it was too late to escape, firstly because they'd all notice her leaving, and secondly because a lady who she guessed was Becky Godolphin, was marching towards her, arms outstretched.

'There you are!'

Alex fixed her gaze on the smiling face of a pretty blonde, rounder and older than Alex, perhaps in her early fifties, wearing a tight electric blue dress that accentuated all of her many curves and bulges. For a moment Alex thought Mrs Godolphin might be about to hug her, a thought that made her die a tiny bit inside, but instead she took her hand and led her to the bar, past a host of curious onlookers. 'I'm Becky, I'm Eddie's wife, landlady at the Silent Man. We're all so pleased to hear you arrived safe and sound. And you're a girl too, girl power!' She shook her fist, several golden bangles jangling on her wrist, and growled a bit. 'We'll show the chauvinist pigs!'

'Um ... well, I just do my job really,' Alex said.

'Good for you, socking it to the Man!' Becky beamed as she all but lifted Alex onto a stool at the bar, before calling over the barmaid, a tall, slender young woman, whose long

blonde hair looked like spun gold. She had enough of a look of her parents about her to make Alex sure that this was Becky and Eddie's daughter, although she also had a sort of ethereal grace that neither parent possessed in obvious quantities.

'This is Lucy, our barmaid,' Becky said. Lucy smiled from behind a curtain of her hair, as Becky added after a fraction of hesitation, 'Lucy's my daughter.'

'Hello,' Alex greeted her quietly. New people were never her best thing, new people en masse were officially her worst thing. She tried quite hard to concentrate just on Lucy and Becky and forget all the other people that were unashamedly gawping at her. Lucy, she guessed, was about her age, somewhere in her late twenties, with silky blonde hair that fell to just below her shoulders, and fine delicate features that Alex thought must have come from her mother's side. She was the polar opposite to Alex who wore boys' clothes and boots, didn't know the first thing about make-up, and had literally no idea what was fashionable. Lucy, on the other hand, was impeccably made-up, just enough for a weekday evening, and working a sparkly silver top over jeans, teamed with low-heeled pumps. She looked effortless lovely, but the language of style was one that Alex didn't really know how to interpret. She had two dresses, both black, which she wore to parties and funerals, whichever the occasion required. And yet she envied Lucy's easy attitude to her femininity. Perhaps if she'd known what to do with eyeliner then maybe Marcus would have noticed she'd been in love with him all of her life.

'What can I get you?' Lucy asked.

'It's all on the house for you tonight!' Becky told her. 'Although best not get too drunk; you don't want to start your first day on the job with a hangover.'

'I'll just have a lemonade, thanks,' Alex said, feeling excruciatingly scrutinised by the rest of the pub. Although

now talking in murmurs, she just knew that they all had their eyes still fixed on her back.

‘And some fish and chips. That’ll set you up,’ Becky said.

‘Oh well ...’ Alex, who had eaten precisely three and a half Twix bars, two packets of Pringles and a doughnut on her epic journey down to Cornwall, plus the scones with Eddie, attempted to refuse the offer, not because she wasn’t hungry, but because she found it excruciatingly difficult to know how to respond to people being kind to her. She failed at once.

‘Tell Sam to make it an extra large portion, Lucy,’ Becky said. ‘And stick a vodka in the lemonade. The girl needs a stiffener with this lot treating her like a monkey in a zoo.’ She turned around and narrowed her eyes at the customers, who all pretended to be doing something else for a moment.

‘Thank you,’ Alex said.

‘Not a problem,’ Becky said, squeezing her arm. Leaning in a little closer, she added, ‘They aren’t so bad once you get to know them. Promise.’

Becky drew another stool beside her and Lucy put two sparkling clear drinks in tall glasses in front of them.

‘Where’s Eddie?’ Alex asked. ‘Did he have to lie down from the shock? I don’t think he expected me to be female.’

‘No, it takes more than a female harbour master to shock Eddie, even a young female harbour master, trust me.’ Becky’s smile wavered a little as she watched her daughter serve two new customers. They looked like tourists, Alex decided. They had an air of money about them. Even their casual clothes looked like they’d originated in some high-end exclusive boutique. ‘Eddie’s just sorting out the cellar, that’s all. We had a barrel of bitter explode. He’ll be up in a minute.’

‘This looks like a very busy pub.’ Alex was quite proud of that conversational gambit.

‘It is, busiest and best in Poldore. There’s the Ship down the road, and the Smugglers Inn on the way out of town.’

Both crap.’ Becky cocked her head to one side, as she examined Alex. ‘So tell me what was it about Poldore that made you want to come and live here?’

Alex took a sip of her drink, grateful for the shot of vodka now. She could tell Becky that it was to escape her broken heart, and her spurned love, or that she’d been looking at the Port Authority website for situations vacant and made a snap decision, partly fuelled by Pinot Grigio, and partly by pure mortification and horror, that had somehow brought her here. Or that she actually knew nothing about the town, except that it had a busy harbour and she was now its master, or mistress, except that she was still a master even though she was a woman. The Port Authority had told her with some delight when she’d been offered the position that she was the UK’s second ever woman in the job, the first one living up in Orkney. They’d talked about some publicity, and newspaper articles, about sending a photographer down, but Alex had said very politely that really she only wanted to do her job, and she didn’t see what difference it made that she was a woman. What really brought Alex to Poldore was a sudden overwhelming urge to be alone to lick her wounds for a while. So far, that part of the plan wasn’t going very well.

‘I just thought it was so ... pretty,’ Alex said, rather inanely, thinking of the twinkling lights that had melded with the starry sky above as she had made her way over the river mouth. ‘And it looked like, well, like it might be good for the soul.’

‘Well, it is pretty and that is for sure,’ Becky said, scrutinising Alex as if she could read her thoughts. ‘There’s been a human settlement at Poldore since the Iron Age for certain – there are burial sites not far out of town, overlooking the cliffs – and maybe even before that. And it was a fort for a long time, which is why we still have Castle House, the house that looks like a castle, right in the middle of the town. It started out being a real fort, but over the

centuries it got built on, burnt down, rebuilt and nowadays it's more Victorian than anything, turned into one big folly – though don't you tell Sue Montaigne that I told you that.' Becky nodded over to the end of the bar where a compact-looking woman, with auburn curls cut into an efficient-looking bob was pretending to have a conversation with the man she was sitting next to, a shortish, plumpish man, with thinning sandy hair, but a kind looking face, all the while keeping her eagle eye on Alex. Alex got the distinct impression that the woman was just waiting for her to be exposed, and alone, and then she would swoop in and eat her. Or talk to her, which would be worse. 'The Montaignes have lived in Castle House for eight hundred years continuously. The family line has never once been broken. That's why when Sue got married she kept her name, and her husband changed his!' Becky chuckled into her drink which she then downed in one. She set it on the bar where it was immediately replaced with another by Lucy, plus another drink for Alex who'd barely touched her first one yet. 'Mind you he's a writer, or claims to be, although he's never finished a book yet as far as we know. His name used to be Rory Frogget so I don't suppose he minded changing it too much. There's barely any fishing here any more, although we have the regatta in the summer, and plenty of private boats, boat tours ... You'll have been told about our cruise liner which comes in every few months. That's always good for business. Like you say, Poldore is pretty, it's beautiful, but the harbour still is the life blood of the town. Over the years we've come to rely more and more on the tourists. We love the tourists, but more than that we got the rich folk coming in now. Building their big million-pound houses high up on the cliff, they've bought up most of the seafront. We got film stars, movie directors, comics, writers, models, rock stars – quite a few of those as there's a world famous recording studios in the woods. I bet you didn't know that?'

Alex shook her head. Suddenly Poldore didn't sound quite like the backwater retreat from the world she had in mind.

'Oh yes, Brian Rogers – have you heard of him?'

Alex nodded. Her dad owned all of his albums, both the stuff he'd recorded in the seventies with his band FireSea and his solo stuff since. Alex couldn't call herself a fan of his music, but she'd heard enough about him to know that at the height of his career he'd sold several million records around the world, and was cited as a major influence for many new artists. If her dad knew that Brian Rogers lived here he would be so excited. Music was one of the rare things he got emotional about and ... Alex felt a burst of pleasure at the thought of being able to share the news with her father, but then she remembered that they weren't talking when she left. And that the way she felt at the moment she wasn't at all sure she'd feel like talking to him ever again.

'So what we do,' Becky went on, oblivious to Alex's dip in morale, 'me and Eddie, and almost everyone in this pub, is we try to keep Poldore, Poldore. We take the cash off the incomers, we welcome them, but we fight to keep this town the way it's always been, to keep the sense of tradition and community alive at the heart of it all.'

'Which is why we have the Christmas pageant.' Sue Montaigne had seen her opportunity and swooped in, her neat, beak-shaped nose and bright, intent eyes doing nothing to alter Alex's impression of her as a bird of prey. 'Becky will tell you that the Poldore pageant has been at the heart of Poldore's history since the Middle Ages, maybe before.'

Lucy put a large glass of red wine down in front of Sue who nodded in thanks.

'Sue Montaigne, meet our new harbour master, Alex Munro,' Becky said, winking at Alex. 'Sue is our local aristocracy.'

‘If only that were true.’ Sue grinned, her tight red curls bouncing around her face. Sue was a well-kept woman in her late forties, wearing tight black jeans, black leather boots and green belted sweater dress. She positively bristled with energy, as if everything she said, or thought or did, even taking a sip from her glass of wine, was terribly important, vital even. ‘If I’m aristocracy, it’s impoverished. What I do do is keep Castle House afloat – we hold weddings; sometimes I lecture on medieval history; I breed dogs, miniature poodles and also children!’ She gave a snort. ‘I have three of them. And along with everyone else I do what I can for the town, which is why I took it upon myself to keep the Christmas pageant going.’

‘She’s just got in through the door!’ Becky exclaimed, shaking her head and grinning fondly at Sue. ‘At least let her settle in for five minutes before you rope her in.’

‘Alex, to be part of the town you need to be part of the pageant,’ Sue said, ignoring Becky, just as Lucy put a steaming hot plate of fish and chips in front of Alex.

Alex realised that she was starving hungry. Unable to wait, she put one far-too-hot chip in her mouth and spent the next few seconds nodding politely at Sue while attempting not to spit it out.

‘So can I put you down to help? You could either have a role in the nativity, you’d make a lovely angel, not Gabriel, I play Gabriel, or there is still the back of the donkey that needs filling ...’

‘I’m not a ...’ Alex swallowed. ‘I’m not very good at ... showing off.’

‘We don’t call it showing off,’ Sue said firmly. ‘We call it performing. But if you’re more of a back stage girl, that’s fine, I’ll put you down for set and float painting. Jackson Withers is in charge of that. He’s a fellow of the Royal Academy you know, painted the Queen a few years back. Anyway, the next meeting is at my house on Sunday, ten

a.m. You'll be able to find my house quite easily, it's the one that's a castle.' She gave another snort of laughter at that.

'Becky!' Alex recognised Eddie's voice, calling from somewhere behind the bar. 'Come down here, love! I can't loosen this valve on the new barrel!'

'Men.' Becky rolled her eyes. 'I don't need to tell you who wears the trousers in the household. In a town where the landlady of the pub changes all the barrels, I'm sure we can take a woman harbour master in our stride.'

Alex exchanged glances with Lucy, who smiled at her.

'Well.' Sue smiled at Alex. 'I'm very pleased to meet you and to get you on board for the pageant. There's so much to do and only a couple of weeks to go. You will be invaluable. I can see you've got your supper to eat and that there are a lot of people who want to talk to you, so I'll leave you to it.' Sue gestured towards the bar where the man with thick sandy hair and a large brandy in his hand was in deep conversation with a sophisticated brunette of about Alex's own age. 'If you need rescuing, wave, I'll be over there with my husband Rory and my PA Marissa. Daughter of friends of the family, caused a scandal in certain circles, became rather persona non grata. Nice enough girl, but the organisational skills of a brick. I'm waiting until the New Year, by which time I will have done my duty by employing her and then I'll send her back from whence she came. Toodle-pip!'

Alex watched Sue bustle off, feeling a little bereft.

'So tell me -' an older man slid into the space that Sue vacated at once '- what does a young slip of a thing like you know about boats?'

'Now then, Jago.' Eddie reappeared from behind the bar, his shirt soaked through with beer, and stinking of bitter.

'Alex hasn't just been given the job out of the blue. The Port Authority people interviewed her and checked her out. She's been working in Grangemouth, controlling super tankers.'