

Exposing the Myth

By

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To my husband and family and good friends – you know who you are - for their love and support,

Exposing the myth

Rhia moves to Cornwall to start a new life after the death of her grandmother. She is hoping to find romance, and she does, but ... after one shocking night her world comes tumbling down and nothing will ever be the same again. Rhia ultimately has to make choices that will break hearts...will she make the right choice? A story full of twists and turns that will leave you guessing until the end.

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Chapter 1

‘Come on, I can’t wait any longer,’ muttered Rhia to herself as she sat amongst the bags and boxes that constituted much of the last few years of her life to date. In just a few short minutes, she would be leaving her old life behind and moving on to a new one. There was a tinge of sadness but she couldn’t help also feeling excited whilst she watched the seconds tick by on the old-fashioned clock that sat on the mantelpiece of her late grandmother’s home. She looked fondly at the clock and recalled the times she had spent chatting with her grandmother during the evenings, feeling loved and wanted.

Today she was leaving Derbyshire, her birthplace, and moving permanently to Cornwall. She would be moving in with her much-loved uncle Dennis, her aunt Val, and her cousins David and Anna. She had, for as long as she could remember, spent long summers and other holidays with them over the years, but had never lived with them as a permanent family member.

Rhia’s background was a troubled one. From the age of eight until she was 15 she had lived with her grandmother following the divorce of her parents. Her parents’ new partners had quickly demonstrated that she wasn’t wanted, possibly, Rhia believed, because she represented a constant reminder of their former relationships. She had sought solace with her grandmother, where she had been welcomed with open arms, staying with her until her death just a few months ago.

Contact with her parents had now virtually ceased. Her relationship with her father had never been close and he had made no effort to maintain a relationship with her once he left her mother. She was saddened that her mother’s intermittent visits had now dropped off to birthdays and Christmas. To cope with the emotional anguish she had felt from the abandonment, she lived her life as if she no longer had a mother and father, both now being

evidently more concerned with their new partners and families. She barely knew her half brothers and sisters and had never been invited to get to know them properly.

Following her grandmother's death, her aunt and uncle were granted legal guardianship of her. This was at her own request and of course their approval and agreement.

Her relationship with them had always been a very good one and they had never treated her as anything other than as part of their own family. It was taken as read that should anything ever change in her circumstances she would be expected and welcomed to go and live with them.

For the past few months she had lived alone in her grandmother's house whilst she had finished her 'A' levels at school. Friends of her grandmother kept an eye on her during this time and she had regular telephone contact and visits from her family in Cornwall.

David and Anna were not just her cousins but also her friends. She and Anna, who was the same age as her, enjoyed all the girly activities such as shopping, doing each other's hair and makeup, and gossiping, almost exclusively about boys. David, at 5 years older, encouraged the tomboy in her and encouraged her to climb, wield a cricket bat and climb trees and walls. She still remembered the time when she had broken her ankle after falling from the top of one particularly high brick wall. Poor David had to practically carry her home and he was read the riot act when he got there for failing to look after her. In fact, it was not his fault but hers, but he had taken the blame despite her attempts to stop him from doing so.

Whilst she was waiting, she reminisced about the times she had spent in Cornwall. She had swum in the sea, played volleyball and tennis on the beach and learned to ride a bike through rugged terrain, chasing David who forever challenged her to beat him and kept just far enough ahead for her not to lose confidence, even though he could effortlessly outride her.

David was now a mechanic and quite regularly had come and spent part of a day with her when he was in the area looking at cars for his boss's garage business. She was always delighted to see him and it not only broke up the tedium of studies but also brought some welcome laughter into her life. David's humour was very dry, as was her own, and thus the banter between them was entertaining, well matched and appreciated. She and David had recently strengthened their already strong bond during the time they had spent together and she looked up to him. She saw him as almost, but not quite, a big brother, but definitely as her best friend, he made her feel safe and they were easy in each other's company. She was looking forward to being re-introduced into his social circle. She would soon be able to drink legally and he had promised to take her to the clubs he frequented, along with Anna who was already 18, being just a few months older. David's friends were a tight group who got up to a lot of mischief and she was anticipating getting up to a lot of mischief herself. As a bonus, David did have some very nice looking friends!

She looked at the clock again, counting down the minutes until her uncle came and took her away, checking the window regularly for signs of his arrival.

Rhia, or more accurately Rhiannon, although she couldn't remember a time when her full name was ever used, couldn't wait for him to come and get her. She was desperate to see Cornwall again; she had always loved the place for its rugged beauty, but it was more than that, it was almost as if the place called to her, possessed her even. In particular she loved being able to clamber down the sloping cliffs and to sit and watch the sea splashing against the rocks, the bigger the waves the more she enjoyed it. Just the thought of this gave her a feeling of immense pleasure and she shuddered at the memories. She was clear that one of the first things she would do was go and walk amongst the rocks and just sit by the sea; something she did when she had felt particularly burdened, or had felt in need of guidance in some way. She usually came away feeling relieved of her troubles.

‘Hurry up Dennis,’ she muttered under her breath, ‘We’re wasting valuable time and I want to go...’ She felt guilty having these thoughts but the truth was that whilst she loved the home she was about to leave she didn’t want to be here without her grandmother. She also did not have a lot of fun outside of College. There were the odd parties of course but mostly, since her death, she had been studying and she applied her own strict curfews, as she didn’t like coming back to an empty home late at night.

Rhia desperately wanted to feel part of a proper family, it was important to her that she no longer felt like an outsider. As a child, she had the peculiar feeling that her parents, Mike and June, were not her real parents at all, but that somehow they were merely the instrument for creating her outer casing but that her inner self, her soul, or spirit, if you like, had been created elsewhere. A little fantasy perhaps, but one that her grandmother had often given voice to, she may have even created the fantasy in the first place. Rhia could never remember when she first had the thought; it had been there as long as she had thoughts in her head.

Her grandmother spun a tale that her spiritual parents were actually from amongst the highest-ranking family of Gods and Goddesses who had once lived as mortals and had chosen to send her here to Earth. According to her grandmother she was here in order to learn some of the lessons that her Godly parents had once had to learn, but also she was being tested to see if she could be worthy of the rewards she would earn if she was successful in overcoming the trials that would be set for her. Rhia thus believed as a child that her true parents were simply in some other realm but were still playing a part in her life. All she had to do was talk to them in her head and she would get what she asked for. It was a lovely thought and she continued to play along with it even now, although she thought it was probably just a fantasy designed to comfort a lonely and unwanted child.

Back in the present Rhia contemplated how different her life was likely to be from now on. She was expected to go to University in due course but she was considering instead

getting vocational qualifications and taking a job, perhaps doing a part-time degree in her spare time. She wanted to do something creative with her life but wasn't entirely sure what it would be. Along with her cousins, she would get a portion of her grandmother's estate so would have some financial security that would allow her choices.

Her main focus, she had to admit was in wondering if she would meet someone special. At nearly eighteen, she felt she must be the oldest virgin on the planet! She wasn't planning to jump into bed with anyone soon but she definitely felt the time was right for her starting to think about having a proper relationship. She did have a target here, one of the local guys, Liam, who was drop dead gorgeous, and she had nursed a crush on him for at least the past two years and was looking forward to seeing if she could finally catch his eye. He was older than she was, a little nearer to David's age. Thus far, he had not paid her too much attention and she was hoping to change the situation.

She suddenly smiled to herself as she remembered just how protective David could be when it came to dating. She recalled the incident a couple of summers ago when a boy from the village had called round to ask her out on a date and was virtually thrown out on his ear by David who had decided that he was not good enough, declaring that he was only interested in trying to get her into bed. Rhia was just 16 at the time and was mortified by his actions. She recalled how she gave David such an ear bashing, although he only laughed and said that she would thank him one day. She thanked him just a few weeks later when the story was revealed that the boy had got a girl in the next village pregnant and had then denied all knowledge of any involvement.

Suddenly she broke her thoughts as she became aware of activity taking place outside with the neighbour's dog barking furiously as a car swung into the road, speakers blaring out music of a genre not normally appreciated by the elderly residents who lived in the quiet, leafy Close. She peered through her grandmother's thick lace curtains to see her uncle's car.

Thrown off balance for a moment, she was delighted when the driver door swung open and instead of Dennis stepping out, it was David, looking every inch the boy racer she knew him to be. At over 6 feet tall, he was dressed in his regular wardrobe of black jeans and black tee shirt and his favourite black Rayban sunglasses. He spotted Rhia immediately and his face broke into a wide grin, showing his even white teeth. She returned his smile at once. She noticed that he appeared to have put on more muscle than when she had last seen him a month ago. She knew he had been going to the gym more often recently and it was evident that the workouts had paid off. She was about to tell him so but he spoke first as she flung open the door to welcome him.

‘Well if my little cousin doesn’t get more beautiful each time I see her’ he said with a cheeky smile, grabbing her for a brotherly hug.

She had never considered David conventionally handsome before but she had been revising her opinion of him as she grew older and as he now stood before her. He had a solid muscular frame with dark brown, almost black hair that curled ever so slightly at the neck and he had the most glorious chocolate brown eyes framed with heavy dark lashes that were capable of melting the hardest of hearts. Rhia knew he had broken quite a few hearts amongst the young women in his home area where he was well known for having had a number of girlfriends, not one of them lasting for more than half a dozen dates. She guessed he wasn’t the committing kind, which suited her as it meant he would be around for a lot longer and she could enjoy his company without competing for attention with a regular girlfriend.

‘I guess I’ll be shoving a few more boys out of the door before very long. Just look at you, how gorgeous are you? We’re going to have to lock you in your room for your own safety!’

Rhia smiled but couldn’t stop the colour rising in her face, ‘Stop teasing David, you know it’s not true and making me blush with my colouring is not a becoming look!’ Inside though

she was very flattered and hoped that maybe she had changed enough over the past months so that she would indeed catch that certain someone's eye before too long.

David laughed. He knew that Rhia was unaware of how beautiful she was. He could easily see what others had been seeing for a long time. Rhia was a little bit shorter than average height and possessed the slim lithesome body and grace of a dancer. She had a creamy complexion, large round amber eyes framed with dark feathery lashes and her hair was the colour of burnished gold, as inherited from her welsh born father. It was debatable which was her best feature but her hair was rather magnificent and fell in glorious coils of natural curls all the way down her back and challenged any man to resist taking a handful and threading it through his fingers. David marvelled that she couldn't see that she had turned into an absolute stunner during the past couple of years. He knew he was going to have to step up his role of protector where she was concerned.

'Now would I do that to my little cousin?' goaded David further, enjoying the reaction of seeing Rhia go even pinker in the face, which despite her protestations of it being an unflattering look was actually very pretty and didn't go unnoticed by anyone privileged enough to see it. No one could ever describe Rhia as boastful and her shyness when anyone complimented her looks was uncontrived. She genuinely thought she was teased as she still thought of herself as a geeky kid with slightly frizzy hair and a skinny body.

Rhia steered the conversation away from her and addressed David. 'Why are you here and not Uncle Dennis? And how on Earth did you manage to get him to persuade you to let you have his car, have you buried him under the patio or something?' She exclaimed with incredulity.

'Long story, I'll tell you in the car. But suffice to say, subject to getting this little baby back in one piece, I have use of the car for the whole summer and will therefore be able to transport your ladyship around as she wishes, subject of course to fitting in with my own

plans.’ This was quite something. David had his own car but on the strict instructions of her uncle, she and Anna were not allowed to go in it, as it was a really souped up machine, which under David’s handling was easily a lethal weapon.

Rhia noted that there had been a hint of a suggestion that would require a certain amount of cooperation from her, and whilst she was always happy to cooperate, she felt that here lay an opportunity for some negotiation that could not be missed.

‘The whole summer...?’

‘As I said it’s a long story and I’ll fill in the gaps once we get going, but it’s nothing to worry about, although you will only catch Mum and Dad for the next few days as they will not be staying in Cornwall during the next few weeks. They will be back before the summer is over though.’

This was news to Rhia and despite what David had said about not worrying, she was beginning to feel a little concerned. As well as her niggling concerns, she had wanted to have a discussion with her uncle and aunt about the possibility of not going straight to university, which is what they were expecting. She would have to come up with Plan B, which may well involve grovelling and supplying favours to David if she was going to be able to achieve her objective of finding work locally and registering for a part-time course somewhere to achieve her qualifications.

‘And Anna? Will she be going away as well, she told me she was working on a plan to get permission for alternative holiday arrangements?’

David raised his eyebrows. ‘Well, you know Anna, she’s nothing if not resourceful and I’m not entirely sure what story she’s given Mum and Dad but I believe that the essence of it is that she will be home for a few days and then she will be off for what Mum and Dad think is a couple of weeks’ holiday in France. Although off the record I think she is aiming for the

whole summer, and possibly even to stay out there longer and have a sort of gap year before going on to University the year after.'

Oh great, thought Rhia, Anna not wanting to go to University either is going to make my job of persuasion doubly difficult now.

David continued. 'Apparently, the story she is putting about is that she has got this fantastic opportunity to spend the summer with a girlfriend in her family's holiday home where she can brush up on her French and learn something of the culture first hand. Of course, she thinks I don't know what she is doing and of course, you know that I know everything that she gets up to. She's rather keen on her friend's brother so is desperate to get herself over there and initiate a well thought out plan of seduction, which she has been working on for the past few weeks. You should see the clothes she has been hiding under her bed from Mum and Dad! She hasn't told them about the brother obviously, otherwise they probably would be questioning the wisdom of letting her go, you know what they are like about protecting the virtue of you two girls,' chuckled David.

Rhia couldn't help but grin back and felt some measure of relief inside. There couldn't be too much wrong if Anna was being allowed to go off to France. Rhia was itching to question her more about a brother that David had referred to. She knew a little about him as she had texts and late night phone calls from Anna but there was nothing like a face-to-face chat.

'What it does mean though, is that this summer it is looking very likely that it will be largely just you and me kiddo, and of course the occasional visit of my friends. I expect that you will be doing all the washing, ironing, cleaning and gardening and my contribution will be to pay for all the takeaways. I think that is a fair exchange. You will of course be required to act as hostess when my friends are around, you do have a black skirt and white blouse don't you?' he added, his face a mask of seriousness.

She gave David a withering look. 'All of that's fine David, although there are some amendments to the arrangements,' she smiled sweetly at him, 'you will be doing the washing and cleaning and I will not be present in the house when your rowdy friends come round. I will however be taking your money down to the chip shop and you will be taking me to Nando's every time I demand to go.'

David laughed 'Subject to additional conditions, that we can of course negotiate, that would be my pleasure, although I suspect that because I am such a big clever boy and have made some very convenient alternative arrangements for your sole benefit, it is doubtful that I will be required to take you anywhere this Summer. In fact, I fully intend not to unless I am proved to be a certifiable imbecile.' He smirked at Rhia who was not entirely sure how much of this was a wind-up.

Rhia was intrigued but she knew David well enough not to show it. She would play him at his own game, he would know how much she needed to know what this was all about and he would torment her mercilessly through the journey home by pleading ignorance before finally revealing what this 'arrangement' was likely to be.

'As long as you are not going to sell me to white slavers to fund your drinking dens I can pretty much put up with anything that you might have 'arranged' for me' she replied with an assumed air of indifference. Unfortunately, the meaning of what she had just said she knew had come across as an agreement to go along with David's plans. Rhia immediately regretted what she had just said, as she knew she had just given David a stick with which to beat her.

'You'll put up with anything will you,' smirked David, 'now that's definitely food for further thought!' David suddenly became aware of the time passing and so Rhia didn't get the opportunity to respond further.

'I will tell you more on the way home. Sorry Kiddo, I don't want to rush you out of here but we do need to get a move on, we'll stop on the way for a coffee and burger but it's going

to be a long drive and I want to get back in time to have a kip before I go out tonight. We'll argue the logistics of the domestic arrangements and I'll explain the rota I've planned for you to do the washing up, shopping and instructions on how I like my shirts ironed and put away etc. en route. But what I will promise now is that you will not be getting any concessions such as breakfast in bed and I will not be escorting you on any clothes shopping trips!

Rhia laughed as she remembered the last time that David was dispatched to accompany Anna and herself to Truro to buy new outfits and he was forced to traipse after them into every shop in town. To add insult to injury he was then made to suffer the indignity of having to carry all their bags too.

'Oh shame!' said Rhia cheekily as she began to pull her bags together ready 'I was really looking forward to you getting up at the crack of dawn to make me poached salmon soufflé and I was relying on you being my personal chauffeur when I buy my summer wardrobe!'

David laughed easily; he was not renowned for getting out of bed much before lunchtime on non-working days. For him breakfast largely consisted of eating cold takeaway or pizza from the night before. Rhia would concede that he did work hard at his job and was therefore entitled to his partying, which often continued until the early hours of the morning. She had no problem with David and sharing housework, as she was fully aware that whatever else he was, and he could be lazy if he could get away with it, he wouldn't do anything to disrespect his parents. If there was going to be the odd few evenings of his friends being around she was confident that he would pull his weight and ensure the house didn't suffer in any way, even if that meant that he might well organise his mini army of female admirers to come and clean the house for him!

She had hero worshipped David since she was a toddler and he was about 7 years old and would obediently let her climb on his back to play 'horsey.' David and she had always had a very comfortable relationship and rarely had a cross word ever passed between them. She

knew that he would always act in her best interests and would do all he could make things all right if it was in his power to do so. She also had no doubts that he would do his best to make sure she was looked after during the summer and not left alone for long, even if that did mean she would have to tag along and watch him play rugby, surf the waves and join in with his drinking friends following these activities. She knew she would have to make more friends of her own and whilst she did know some people, it was a case of whether they would be around or not. She didn't want David to feel obliged to look after her, or cramp his style.

She remembered that Anna had said that she thought Liam would be around this summer and that filled her mind with positive thoughts. She also knew that David's friends, who could be a rowdy lot, were actually generally very good natured and good fun and would play their part in making sure she had invitations out and had a good time, although the likelihood was that she would have to suffer merciless teasing throughout the summer.

Saying a mental goodbye to the house that had been her home for the last few years she climbed into the car waiting outside and settled into her seat. 'Okay, spill the beans' she ordered as they drove out of the neat little lane and headed for the main route out of the county towards Cornwall, 'I can't wait any longer, why are Dennis and Val not going to be around?'

'Well... 'When David started his sentences with 'well' it usually meant something with merit or importance was going to follow. 'Well, the thing is, and I don't want to worry you unduly, but the thing is that Mum's ill again....'

Rhia's whole body immediately slumped. Being 'ill again' could only mean one thing, the cancer that had dogged her about 8 years ago and which had thought to have been in remission for the past 5 years had apparently returned.

'Why has no-one told me this before?' cried Rhia, trying hard not to let her emotions start running away with her.

‘It’s not that you haven’t been told deliberately, Anna hasn’t been told either and I’m not supposed to know but I overheard Mum and Dad talking the other night when they thought no-one was in the house. What I heard, I felt that Anna wouldn’t handle well, because, well let’s face it, she’s a professional worryguts and would spend from now until eternity weeping and wailing. You are stronger than she is, and you can and will be able to handle it. And in any case, I couldn’t cope over the next few weeks without having someone to share this. I’ve told you because not only do I need to share this but I also need support in keeping this quiet for Mum’s sake.’

Rhia stayed quiet for a moment or two absorbing this information, wanting to know the rest but not daring to ask. David turned his head to check whether Rhia looked prepared to hear what he had to tell her, and decided there was no time like the present for getting it over with.

‘Mum has found another lump, previously you’ll remember it was in her armpit but this time it’s in her breast. She is having surgery a week on Monday and Dad is taking her off to a private convalescent home where she will be able to properly recover and have all the necessary facilities nearby. He’s paying for a double room so he can stay with her and then I believe, but I’m not sure, they will go and stay with friends until she feels well enough to come back. I don’t know where the home is but I heard them saying that it has proper nurses available 24 hours a day and daily visits from a doctor as well as an on-call medical support team. It would seem that Mum’s doctors have said its okay for her to go and that it could actually have a very beneficial effect on her recovery.’

Rhia nodded her understanding, but could feel the ache growing inside, this was not what she wanted to hear.

‘You know as well as I do that this is the second cancer she’s had in pretty much the same place so there is obviously cause for concern. This time they’re not going to mess about and

are going for a full mastectomy. Mum doesn't want to upset everyone and that's why she wants to keep it quiet and just get on with the treatment. In her conversation with Dad that I was eavesdropping on, she was absolutely adamant that Dad didn't tell anyone about this. They're telling everyone they're travelling before they get too old to do it. I think she's hoping that she can have the surgery, start the follow up treatment and then come back with a more positive prognosis and then reveal all to us.'

David reached over and squeezed Rhia's hand. 'Don't worry, Mum is very strong, she can beat this and you know she has her own way of doing things and I think we have to respect her wishes in this.'

Rhia noticed that David was struggling a little with his emotions but he was clearly hoping she hadn't noticed. He preferred to let people think he was the strong silent type, which he was, most of the time anyway. .

David continued, 'I want and need you to be strong for both of us because I don't want Mum and Dad finding out that we know; they'll only worry more, and we don't want Anna to find out yet. Let's just let her go off and have her fling in France and she'll be much better prepared to cope with the aftermath when she returns. So, when we get home, just act normal, try to pretend to be really pleased that they are going off on a holiday. They're giving out the story that it's the honeymoon they never had, which is true, as they never did have a honeymoon. So congratulate them, and please, if you can't do it for them please do it for me.' Rhia noticed again the catch in his voice and she reached up and stroked David's cheek, wiping away the single tear that had fallen and then snaked her arm around his neck patting and squeezing his broad shoulder gently as she did so.

'No problem, David, it's you and me and we can be strong together, although I may well be asking for a hug from you later on tonight.'

For a while, they carried on the journey in comparative silence, until finally, Rhia felt she had to break the atmosphere. She didn't want them both to turn into total wrecks or else she would dissolve in a collapsed heap at first sight of her aunt.

'Okay, so now you can explain to me about what you meant by your comment earlier that you had little intention of spending much time with me this summer.' She delivered this with all the feigned outrage that she could muster.

David brightened at this, and grateful for the distraction, chuckled loudly 'I knew that would get your attention,' he said teasingly.

Rhia tried her most menacing voice in response. 'Don't play games David, I know you're an awarding winner wind-up-merchant, but you had better tell me what you mean by that; you've obviously got some evil intent in mind. I might just tell Dennis and Val what happened with that girl who was visiting from Scotland. I saw her sneaking out of your bedroom at 5am on that Sunday morning last time I was in the house.'

David pretended to look outraged. 'She was inspecting the bed linen! She was an interior designer looking to give the room a makeover; very busy girl who could only fit me in at that time of day!'

'Yeah, right, she did look as if she was very capable of giving a good makeover...'

giggled Rhia and gave David a firm punch on his shoulder.

'Ouch, that hurt! I'll get you for that later! However, as your argument is a persuasive one I will reveal all, if only to save my arm from turning black and blue. We have a new neighbour; you remember that the Masons, serial adulterers they both turned out to be, moved out last summer? Well we've just had a nice couple move in and they have a son. His name's Paul. He's about 19 or 20 and whilst I'm no expert on what girls determine is good looking in a bloke I would be surprised if you didn't think he was. In my humble opinion, I think you'll agree he's a pretty nice guy. I like him a lot for what it's worth, and well... I

thought I could introduce you to him. He's keen on surfing and he's not at all bad on a board. He's nicely laid back and therefore likely to be a much better teacher than I am, mostly on the grounds that as an almost non-drinker he is sober at a time when it's actually possible to get out and catch the waves. I've told him you wanted to learn to surf and he's already promised to give you some coaching if you'd like. The killer thing is that he's a very keen photographer and is looking to complete some sort of project this summer. Knowing your own interest in photography, I thought you might enjoy showing him around so that he can put his portfolio together. He plays guitar and writes some of his own songs too, although I've not yet heard any of his compositions. Liam will probably be interested in meeting him too. Did you know Liam's band has been doing pretty well and he's had some good gigs lately? He reckons it's only a matter of time before a recording contract is offered. Although I'm sure you remember Liam, never short of confidence, he's convinced it's his destiny to be famous.

Anyway, back to the point, Paul has only been here for a few weeks and so doesn't know too many people yet. I've been spending a bit of time with him in the evenings and weekends. He's obviously welcome to hang out with me, and my friends, and he does come along and watch matches and play pool with us and such stuff, but he's not much of a drinker and so there are times when there are activities and things that he would not really want to join in with. His mother is a bit of a dragon as well and she would give him a pretty hard time if she knew just some of the mild things that he's been involved with in recent weeks. She tries to keep him on a tight leash, although she certainly doesn't get all her own way. I think he's her only child and I guess she's never moved away from the protective phase with him. He's no mummy's boy though and ends up doing what he wants, but in stages so she gets used to the idea that he's an adult and not her little boy anymore.'

‘These ‘things’ that they wouldn’t approve of wouldn’t be the sort of things that include spending all your evenings down the pub getting smashed, watching strippers, playing poker and sneaking nubile young women into your room at night would they?’ countered Rhia with a completely straight face.

‘I’m totally affronted that you would even think such a thing! That doesn’t sound like a description of me at all, where do you get your information? And in any case, I don’t spend all my time down the pub ... just four or five evenings, Saturday lunches... Sunday lunches, that’s about all it is now since I cut down. As for nubile young women, the one you referred to earlier had just fallen asleep after nothing more than a necking session, pretty heavy I will confess, but there was none of the funny business that you assume. I am not quite as depraved as you seem to think,’ he added wickedly, ‘but I am working at it.’

Rhia laughed. ‘Essentially what you’re telling me is that whilst you’ve been in an unusually sober state, you’ve got yourself entangled with a nice guy with a set of standards that is totally contradictory to your own. Whilst you feel somewhat protective of him, you now want to get back to your intended life of debauchery. You therefore have set me up to take over for you? Is that right?’

‘Well.... I wouldn’t put it quite like that but he isn’t exactly like the rest of my friends, and by that I mean he’s not as wild and is probably more intelligent than most of them. He’s certainly more sensitive and polite than all of them put together, with the exception of myself of course’ he beamed. ‘I don’t know anyone that doesn’t like him and I’m confident you will like him too. He has a good sense of humour and he does share a number of your particular interests. He’s not as gorgeous or funny as I am of course but I think he could be good for you, and you could be good for him too. So, what do you think? Please, pretty please with a cherry on the top, help him, help me, help yourself, and you never know you might just enjoy

it,' he whined pathetically, whilst fluttering his big brown eyes at her in his irresistible puppy dog way.

Rhia thought for a moment before delivering her verdict. 'Okay but there are a number of conditions. Firstly, you have to take me to Nando's where you can buy me the biggest bowl of ice cream that they have. Secondly, you have to convince your Mum and Dad not to oppose me in not wanting to go to University as they expect. Thirdly, I need your help to find me a car. If you agree to my terms and conditions then I'll give your suggestion a go'

responded Rhia defiantly.

David laughed. 'You're a tough negotiator but do I really have any option on this?'

'No!' was the curt response.

David smiled but did feel relieved. His plan really wasn't so much about helping Paul; in fact, that was just an excuse. The suggestion was really to make sure that Rhia was kept fully occupied during the summer and had a good time, instead of worrying about his mum all the time. He had spoken to Paul who had agreed to go along with David's plans, although he hadn't been made aware of the real reason for doing so. He had told Paul that Rhia was still grieving for their grandmother and might be feeling lonely with Anna away. He had known that Rhia would play ball with any suggestion he could make to her as he was confident of her trust in him, but he had been serious about Paul being someone that Rhia would like.

He had felt instinctively that Paul was someone he would completely trust with Rhia. David admitted to himself that not only was he extremely fond of Rhia, and very protective of her, he couldn't deny that had Rhia not been his cousin she would definitely have been someone to have caught his own eye. If she had been just a girl in a bar or on the beach or something, he would have tried to make a date with her, and not as a one-night wonder either, she was a keeper. It wasn't her looks, well not just her looks, he recognised her qualities, she was quite an innocent still but there was something else about her too, there was the chance

that others would see what he saw and take advantage. There was a definite reasoning in his approach of making sure that she was with a guy who met his approval, and Paul had this in spades.

His only problem for the summer was that he knew Liam was interested in Rhia and had been for some time. So far, he had been thwarted by David, who had managed to deflect him away, saying she was too young. Now she was almost eighteen Liam would see her as fair game. If Liam decided to take an interest in Paul's musical gifts, it could mean that he might be around Rhia more than he would prefer. Liam aspired to be a rock star, and whilst he certainly had looks and charisma, he had a huge ego and a bad reputation, a very bad reputation. He was definitely a love 'em and leave 'em type, and by that he didn't mean he was like himself, who having had a half dozen dates moved on to the next girl. Liam was the sort that acquired a huge number of notches on his belt by sleeping with dozens of girls, all of whom seemed very keen to do so. Liam was a charmer who was adept at making promises that he had no intention of keeping. David was therefore entirely convinced that any intentions Liam had towards Rhia were entirely dishonourable.

David knew of Rhia's crush on Liam, although she would be horrified to know this. However, he had to accept that Rhia was a grown woman and that was evident for all to see. Liam would describe her as 'ripe for picking.' He dismissed his concerns and decided that he would deal with Liam should any situation arise, and in the meanwhile he would make the introductions between Rhia and Paul and see how things went. If he was as right as his instincts told him, it would mean he would have more time to pursue that very pretty little blonde barmaid down at the surf club!

Chapter 2

They arrived in Cornwall after what seemed like hours driving. They had a brief break at a Service Station for a coffee and soggy burger which David paid for and informed Rhia she could pay for in kind by ironing him a shirt or two later. Rhia mentally braced herself to prepare for seeing her Aunt and Uncle, knowing that the situation was not as they would try to make it seem.

‘It’s Rhia!’ roared a distinctive male voice as Rhia stiffly edged herself out of the car and stretched her legs hoping the numbness would quickly begin to subside. She immediately put aside her discomfort and rushed into the open arms of her Uncle Dennis, whom she rarely called uncle, and who crushed her tightly to his chest.

‘How are you petal?’ said Dennis in his laughing, musical voice which revealed little or no trace of the distress that must have been going on his mind for the past few weeks. Dennis was tall, very tall, at around 6’3” and heavily built with thick grey hair that still had the waviness that had made him popular with girls in his youth. With his dark blue eyes and heavy brows he was still a handsome man whose physical features belied his 60 odd years. She soaked him in, attempting to pick up what he might be feeling before responding.

‘I’m great Dennis, doing really great. You look really well, have you been catching some rays recently?’ said Rhia trying very hard to be her normal chirpy self and making herself believe that everything was as it should be.

‘Everything is great Rhia.’ Dennis was another one who never called Rhia by her full name; it had always been Rhia and very often ‘My Rhia’ so that he could tease her by singing his own maladapted and tuneless version of the well-known song ‘Maria’ from the film West Side Story. ‘Val and I have been going down to the beach quite a bit in recent days, just taking a gentle stroll and I guess we’ve both caught the sun as a result.’ Dennis spoke with an

assuredness that Rhia found a little disconcerting. He continued, 'I assume David has told you that Val and I are going off on holiday?' Rhia nodded that David had indeed told her.

I'm sorry we didn't give you advance warning but we only decided a couple of days ago and have only just made the final arrangements. You won't mind will you? We know you'll be fine with Anna and David, although I suppose David's also told you that Anna's going off to France for a couple of weeks or so herself?' Rhia nodded but kept the information to herself of Anna's real intentions, being reminded that she had some burning questions to ask of her.

'Where are Val and Anna anyway?' At the question a cheery 'Hi Rhia – be with you in a bit' echoed from the kitchen and Rhia recognised the familiar voice of her Aunt. Anna also called out and she shouted back 'Hi everyone, catch you all in a few minutes!'

'As you can hear, she's in the kitchen with Anna and they're both cooking dinner, it's your favourite – Chilli con carne!' said Dennis indulgently.

Rhia hated Chilli as it always made her hiccough, but as everyone else seemed to love it, she had never been brave enough to be able to say so, and now was definitely not the time for such revelations.

'Great, great... Looking forward to it' she said with as much enthusiasm as she could muster. David caught her eye and he grimaced too, and she learned for the first time that he was not a fan either, and laughed with him.

Dennis said he'd go and help the women in the kitchen after Rhia refused to let him help with getting her bags out of the car, saying that David could help her. Before he went, he gave her a peck on the cheek and told her that he and Val would tell her all about their holiday plans over dinner when everyone had finished sorting themselves out. Rhia and David went to her bedroom and he carried the heaviest of her bags in for her and put them on them on her bed so she could unpack.

Her room was exactly as she had left it, decorated as it had been since it was last done when she was 12 years old. It was still lovely and she felt immediately at home but she did notice that it did now need a rethink. She hadn't wanted to suggest that it needed doing before as it really was still in very good condition but she thought that possibly she might do it up herself whilst Dennis and Val were away. The prospect intrigued her and she stored the thought for future development. She thought that David could probably be persuaded to help her if she offered him favours in return, like washing his car or cleaning his room.

'Everything seems normal at present' she said to David who agreed that it did seem they were doing a good job of keeping things under wraps.

'And we want to keep it that way, so no clues that you know what's going on, and especially not to Anna, remember this what Mum wants.'

'I'll remember' promised Rhia. David pulled her into a hug and kissed the top of her head. 'That's a good girl' he said.

Chapter 3

Rhia found Val and Anna in the kitchen and was surprised to see how cheerful the atmosphere was, all the usual gossipy chat between mother and daughter flowing back and forth.

Following hugs and kisses from both and a short welcome speech from Val, which Rhia much appreciated, she took a moment to look at her Aunt, searching for some clue as to what might be going through her mind. She saw nothing, except perhaps for a tiny sense of her holding Rhia tighter and for slightly longer than was usual. She told herself she was mistaken and her Aunt was just pleased to see her, as she always was. Val's demeanour made it very much easier for Rhia to pretend everything was okay. She decided she could carry off the subterfuge but would definitely need to check in with David later for a bit of moral support and another hug, which she had warned him, she would probably be claiming.

In the meantime, she joined in with the kitchen activities. She noted that Val, who was normally very petite, was actually a little thinner than she had been when she last saw her. Her hair had been cut short and was a neat, sleek blonde cap that framed her face and her grey eyes perfectly. At just over 5 foot tall she stood in dark contrast to Dennis who dwarfed her unless she wore her stiletto heels. Anna was a younger version of her, petite and pretty and never bigger than a size 6, Rhia felt almost huge next to them both.

She started to ask Anna about her holiday plans, but was deliberately side-tracked with a great deal of facial movements that indicated that this was not the place to raise the subject and to drop the matter. She did so, but not without giving Anna a clear look that spelled out that she had better tell her everything later or else there would be trouble.

Just then, she heard loud barking from outside and realised that the one member of the family she had not yet seen sight of was Bou, the large and extremely sappy golden Labrador. She had been brought into the family with the intention that she be trained to be a tough

guard dog, hence her naming after the Celtic Warrior Queen Boudica. Unfortunately, Bou was much too soft to do anyone any serious harm, except by serious licking, and was now often called just 'Bou.' Her name partly arose as a shortened version of her official name but more literally was given because of her being scared of her own shadow, the expression "boo" scaring her to death. Still, she was more than capable of putting the frighteners on if necessary and could bark and whip up a frenzy of fear in someone who didn't know her any better.

Rhia was surprised to see what looked like someone else in the garden with Bou and she caught a glimpse of the back of a blonde head dashing across the lawn. Anna saw that Rhia had noticed the movement. 'It's probably Paul, our neighbour, he takes Bou out with him to the beach sometimes, which suits me as it means I can miss a turn at walkies.' Anna was a great girl, but it had to be said she could be quite a selfish little madam sometimes. Her current opinion of herself was that she was a young sophisticate who held the idea that having to pick up Bou's pooh during walks was not something that matched her perception of herself one little jot.

'David was telling me that you had new neighbours, what do you think of them?' asked Rhia.

'They're quite a nice family from what I've seen so far, which is not a great deal yet' interjected Val. 'There's Beverley and Tom who are a bit older than Dennis and myself and their son Paul, who is a bit older than you two. They've only been here a few weeks but they seem to be settling in and are already becoming part of the community, which as you know is not too difficult here as people have always been welcoming. Beverley's a dressmaker, not just any dressmaker, she makes wedding gowns, beautiful ones at top prices too,' she said with a bit of a face, 'none of your High Street type stuff from her, it's all about miles of expensive silks and satins, hand sewn beads, diamante, pearls and acres of tulle and lace.'

We haven't seen too much of her husband but I gather he's a researcher or something to do with psychology or psychiatry or something airy-fairy like that. A clever bugger anyway!'

Val was a dental hygienist by profession and was usually described by those who knew her as plain speaking and didn't just call a spade a spade but rather 'a bloody shovel.' It was clear to Rhia that Val thought Tom and Beverley might be a little bit uppity. Rhia paid no notice to this; her Aunt's initial judgement on people was never great and she didn't put any store by such opinions in this respect, preferring instead to listen to David's judgement. She knew her aunt well enough to know that she needed time to get to know people before she really considered them friends, although once she did they were friends for life.

'Young Paul seems a nice lad though, he's been helping Dennis with the garden over the weekend, and I can't help thinking that David had something to do with the fact that Paul was working there and not him. There's some sort of agreement going on there that I haven't got to the root of' she said, raising her voice so David could hear her accusation. David raised a quizzical eyebrow and spread his arms out wide in a gesture of innocence. Val continued.

'Don't play the innocent David I know you've been manipulating him! Anyway, somehow David gets Paul to take Bou out for regular walks, which I have to admit is a real help, as she does need so much exercise, and lately, well, we've been a bit busier than usual so the help has been much appreciated. Bou loves Paul, in fact she seems to love him more than she does me so that tells you a lot.' said Val with a note of indignation in her voice.

'Yeah, Paul's okay' offered Anna. 'Bit young for my taste, I think he's about 19 or 20, he certainly looks very young, but he is quite cute and probably more your type than mine, although he's no Liam!' Anna whispered with a suggestive smirk.

'Shut up about Liam or I'll start spreading my own stories,' countered Rhia threateningly. Both her cousins loved to tease her but only Anna, as far as she was aware, knew definitively of her crush on Liam and she didn't want this making general gossip.

Over dinner, she listened to her Aunt and Uncle's holiday plans and Rhia was glad that she managed to maintain her controlled stance through the duration of the telling. She caught David's warning glance once or twice when it seemed she might be asking for a little too much information. His look almost knocked her off balance but she didn't think anyone else noticed. More good-natured banter passed as the meal was served. She learned that Val and Dennis would be leaving on the Thursday of the coming week. Anna was going to travel part of the way with them. She would be dropped off at her friend's home where she would stay until her trip to France the following weekend.

'I'm just going to unpack my things,' proposed Rhia 'want to come and help me Anna?' she invited. Anna said she would and both girls headed for the bedroom and quickly closed the door behind them, anxious that no one the anticipated gossip.

'Tell me all about this brother then' said Rhia excitedly, 'exactly what does he look like, do you have a photo of him?'

'He's gorgeous!' said Anna in her most breathy dreamy voice as she pulled out a photograph from her bag and passed it to Rhia. 'Tall, dark, handsome, very sophisticated, naturally,' she revealed. 'And not to put too fine a point on it he fancies me something rotten.'

Rhia thought he looked very pleasant, in a wimpy sort of way but was not going to tell Anna that. 'He looks lovely Anna; I can see why you like him so much.' She wasn't lying, he wasn't her cup of tea at all but she knew Anna's taste and he matched it perfectly.

The girls high-fived each other. 'Result!'

'Okay, but what about this plot of yours, How are you going to get permission for a trip longer than the two weeks that has been agreed?'

'That is my cunning plan' she said conspiratorially, 'The idea is to buy a little extra time by working on Dad just as the first two weeks draw to a close, hopefully I can get Chantelle's

mother, Chantelle's French by the way, to appeal to Dad's better nature by offering assurances that I am in good hands. Then... well then the rest of the plan is to try and get them to agree to me taking a year out to do some work experience in France before coming back to start my degree. Michel, that's Chantelle's brother, has offered to find me some document translation work in his company. Not only will that give me some very useful work experience, but it will also let us have a whole year together! I hope that by the time the year's up we could even be engaged to be married and I won't need to go to University at all. Michel's going to be very successful and I expect, as his wife I will be needed as a hostess to look after his business clients. I'll probably do a cordon bleu cookery course whilst I'm there.'

Rhia laughed, both outwardly and inwardly. Anna was about the same age as her but she could well have been only 14 by the way she went on sometimes.

'So I guess the seduction game is on. I just hope that you are sensible and won't do anything silly,' said Rhia in what she hoped was her wise counsel voice.

'Oh Michel will be taking care of that side of things' said Anna dismissively.

'Actually that's not what I meant' said Rhia a little shocked at this conversation as her thoughts on seduction were rather more innocent and didn't involve the sort of intimacy that Anna was alluding to. She hoped her cousin was not going to get her heart broken by what she perceived to be a man old enough to know better than to indulge the erotic fantasies of an emotionally very young girl. Alarm bells were ringing loud but she knew better than to voice her concerns. Anna was technically old enough; if not apparently mature enough, to make her own decisions in this respect. The thought crossed her mind that things might not be as easy as Anna had imagined. She would have to contend with the presence of her boyfriend's sister to consider and his parents would be around to keep an eye on things.

Rhia and Anna had a gossipy half hour catching up with the latest news whilst unpacking cases, Anna squealing excitedly each time Rhia pulled out a new addition to her wardrobe, which largely consisted of shorts, tops and swimwear, some of which was definitely a shade more revealing than previous years. She had the occasional flirty little dress, tight jeans and pretty tee shirts too, all which seemed to send Anna into raptures of delight. She particularly liked the new lingerie that Rhia had purchased for herself, having decided it was time to ditch the M&S five packs of cotton knickers that had been her staple clothing for so many years, in favour of La Senza's more glamorous range of lacy bras and matching thongs. Rhia had to physically restrain Anna from stealing her most favourite set, which was a sheer midnight blue bra and matching blue pants.

'If Liam sees these he will be putty in your hands' squealed Anna.

'Hey hold on, I've no plans to reveal my underwear to anyone, least of all Liam. These are for my sight only and intended to make me feel more confident from the inside out. I'm not intending to give up my virginity that easily. It will be a very special person that makes me change my mind on that, and one that I could see myself marrying before I even considered it. As much as I fancy Liam I doubt he's the marrying kind, although I would imagine he's a great kisser!'

'You're so unsophisticated and provincial Rhia, and so old-fashioned. Everyone I know of your age has done it by now and with at least half a dozen boys, get over yourself and get yourself a man so you can find out what you are missing.' Rhia was somewhat shocked by this and her face clearly showed it.

'Are you trying to tell me that you and this Michel have slept together?' asked Rhia, astonished at the suggestion.

'Well not yet we haven't, although we've come VERY close once or twice. However, I'm not a virgin any longer. I did it with Matt Bridges a while ago.'

Rhia was dumbstruck, this was the first she knew of this. ‘But you hate Matt Bridges!’

‘I don’t hate him; he’s just not what I want in a boyfriend. But he was a very good teacher’ said Anna with all the assumed knowledge of someone who was only a recently deflowered virgin. She looked at Rhia in a way that was intended to show that she was a far superior being now that she had carnal experience.

Rhia was even more shaken by this revelation, but decided she didn’t want to pursue the conversation any further, other than warning Anna about making sure she was being careful; all of which did seem to go in one ear and out the other.

Anna left her to take a phone call and Rhia was left alone to determine what she was going to do for the rest of the evening. It was early still, and still beautifully warm and sunny. Everyone else, apart from David who had taken himself off for a lie down before his usual Friday night drinking spree with friends, were engaged in domestic matters. These included sorting out shopping lists and making sure there were no loose ends, like unpaid bills etc. that might arise whilst they were away. It was a good time Rhia thought, to take off for a walk. She left the house and then turned back thinking that Bou might like another walk; she was an energetic animal who could never get enough of being allowed to run alongside the seacoast. She picked up her lead, a couple of tennis balls and called her. She came immediately, barking in a furiously happy way.

‘Come on girl, let’s leave this rabble to themselves and you and me can go for a serious walk,’ she told the delighted dog whose tail was now in serious danger of becoming detached from the rest of her body.

Chapter 4

Rhia knew exactly where she was heading for. She had long been familiar with a stretch of the coastline which was beautiful but which locals and non-locals alike usually avoided because it was difficult to walk through the large pebbles and rocks. Those that were brave enough to do so were well rewarded, as what presented itself was the sea appearing behind a whole series of rock structures, which formed what, in Rhia's mind, she had always seen as the ruins of a once great mythical palace. She liked to think that once upon a time the legendary Goddess Rhiannon herself had once spent time in this magical place. Legend differs as to whether the Goddess Rhiannon was a Welsh, Irish or Cornish Deity, but Rhia felt that whatever the stories, the Goddess had made her presence felt here. Rhia remembered the stories her grandmother had told her as a child. Her grandmother made the claim that she had been the one who had strongly influenced her daughter June, Rhia's mother, to give Rhia her legal name of Rhiannon. June was much maligned by others for doing so, particularly by her mother-in-law. However, Rhia's grandmother, who was a natural psychic, was adamant that it was the right name to be given and that the ancient Gods and Goddesses had chosen it for her before her physical birth. Rhia had loved the story but wasn't sure whether the scrap of belief she hung on to was more to do with keeping her grandmother's memory alive than an actual belief. Whatever, it was a nice tale and she chose to cling on to it. However, she was drawn to the myths and legends of the Celts and she often wore a silver charm symbol around her neck. She would touch the charm to her forehead by the light of the moon when she was troubled and somehow she always felt that her problems were let go by doing so. In her more spiritual moments, which were actually growing more frequent, she had thought that perhaps the Goddess Rhiannon did indeed still linger and played a part in watching over her namesake. It didn't matter whether it was the dreaming of the lonely child within or not, it made her feel better.

Carefully making her way through the hundreds of bleached white stones and shiny black rocks along the approach to the shoreline, Rhia picked up a sturdy stick to throw for Bou who was gingerly trotting behind in the path that Rhia was making. Once the major path had been passed, she threw the stick as far as she was capable and Bou shot off like a bullet from a gun in hot pursuit. Rhia felt exhilarated and threw back her head and her arms to embrace the sun and the sea and the cooling breeze, which was blowing in the facing direction. There appeared to be no one else around, as she had hoped and expected, and she threw caution to the wind in continuing to embrace the elements and ran joyously like a young colt, ostensibly chasing after Bou.

She suddenly saw a flash of light appear and was about to stop and check where it came from before deciding it was probably the sun shining on a neglected piece of glass somewhere on the beach. She once again threw back her head and continued to run wildly, stopping occasionally to throw further sticks for Bou to retrieve. The dog knew the game well enough that all she had to do was catch the stick, run with it and drop it when another one came her way. Again, she saw another flash, and then another and this time she did stop. She saw a figure moving higher up on the rocks and realised that whoever it was had a camera and was taking photographs, either of her, or of something that lay in her direct path. Realising that she might have been captured on film running like a lunatic across the wet sand made her feel a bit foolish and she slowed down her pace to a jog whilst trying to simultaneously track the movements of the figure. Whilst she was concentrating on the mystery person, she realised that Bou was no longer in sight.

‘Stupid Dog’ she muttered. ‘Must have picked up the scent of something interesting and gone running off, please don’t let her have gone running into one of the little tunnels along here or I could be here all night trying to find her, she thought anxiously. Bou had once before done this; it had taken an hour to find her but had actually turned out to be rather a

blessing. Bou had been the one to find for Rhia what she had ever since called her special cave. Hidden between the rock formations was a crevice that, if you were small enough, you could just about crawl into. If you wriggled on your stomach far enough, and continued long enough, and were not put off by the pitch black darkness inside, you found another gap which you could squeeze through and which opened up into not so much as a cave but a small cavern. Since discovering it, Rhia had regularly revisited, usually armed with candles and torches. She had found that when the cave was lit up with flickering lights it was extraordinarily beautiful. She had never uncovered evidence of anyone else having been in it, and would not have revealed its existence to anyone. Not even David and Anna knew she came here. She kept the knowledge to herself as a secret that she would share only with someone who would demonstrate that they could appreciate the beauty of such things.

She started calling for Bou but got no response. Feeling a rising panic, she called loudly with her hands cupped around her mouth to magnify the call. Still there was no response, but there was another flash of light. Seconds later, she heard a piercing whistle and the dog suddenly came darting out of a cave and was running towards her, ears flapping like wings and tail wagging furiously. Rhia stepped into the path of the dog and was bowled over like a skittle. She lay flat on her back as the dog went soaring past her, barking furiously at something or someone behind her.

Slightly dazed, Rhia took a moment or two to recover her senses and then became aware of a lean, sun-tanned hand reaching out towards her and a quiet but clearly masculine voice said, 'Are you okay, you're not hurt or anything are you?' Rhia found herself looking up into the face of a young and very good-looking guy with tousled blonde hair and amazing blue eyes. She noticed his nice smile was not far away from turning into a chuckle.

'I'm not hurt, well at least I don't think I'm hurt, except perhaps my dignity!' Rhia exclaimed in an irritated voice. 'I just don't know what's got into her. Crazy dog, she's

normally very obedient and not only comes when she's called but actually stops without slamming me to the ground!'

'So Bou's your dog then?' asked the young man with a somewhat bemused expression on his face. 'I'm guessing you must be Rhia?'

Rhia nodded but was clearly puzzled.

I'm Paul, your neighbour, I don't know if David mentioned me, but he told me that you were coming to stay and said he would introduce us. I'm sorry, but it's probably my fault that Bou bolted. I've been bringing her here most days and I've let her explore the tunnels. I could see that you were getting concerned that she might have disappeared down one and I thought I should help. It was probably my whistle that she was responding to and not you calling her.'

'Oh great, I've been dumped by a dog!' groaned Rhia, 'Story of my life!' Paul laughed and offered his hand to help her up off the ground where she sat in an undignified heap. She accepted his hand and as they touched, she felt what she could only describe as a jolt of electricity run up her arm. She quickly pulled her hand back, claiming that she still needed to get her breath back. She looked up into his face for any sign that he had felt the jolt too and decided that one of them must be charging static from their clothing. He gave no indication that he had felt anything. She was still sitting on the sand and looking up at Paul and could see that she was right to be impressed with what she had initially seen.

Paul was quite tall, not quite six foot, and she decided that he was probably still growing. He had long lean tanned legs showing beneath his shorts and she could see nicely defined chest muscles through his unbuttoned shirt. Suddenly he focussed his camera on her and clicked the shutter several times, clearly taking shots of her in her still undignified state. It was then that she understood that he was the mystery person on the rocks taking camera shots.

‘Why are you taking photographs of me?’ she asked accusingly.

‘Because you’re a good subject,’ came the swift response.

‘So you were taking photographs of me earlier as well?’

‘Yes I was. As I just said, you are a good subject and I couldn’t resist taking the opportunity of a few shots when I saw you running along the beach. You had such a, well I guess I would describe it a joyous expression on your face. I’m collecting emotional images and the impression that you created was just perfect for one of the projects I’m doing as part of my photography studies. I now have an image of ‘J’ for ‘Joy’ in my alphabet of emotions and you sitting on the sand here has just given me ‘I’ for ‘indignant!’

Rhia looked at him darkly, not quite sure how to respond, and he snapped again. ‘Now that’s an interesting expression, I think perhaps that can count as ‘W’ for ‘w.t.f.’ in text speak and will do very nicely.’

Rhia glared at him.

‘Oh, nice one, ‘T’ for ‘Threatening Behaviour!’ said Paul, with a huge grin that showed he was now enjoying himself immensely.

‘Bou, Kill!’ she instructed the dog, who responded by going to Paul and licking his outstretched hand.

‘Traitor!’ she yelled at the dog, who then wagged her tail even harder.

‘B for ‘Betrayal!’ enthused Paul, as he clicked his camera once again. ‘At this rate I’ll have the entire alphabet done in five minutes!’

Despite her slight annoyance at the cheek of him, Rhia could still see the funny side and she was warming to Paul’s sense of humour, but she wasn’t going to give too much away, not yet. She got up as gracefully as she could and began to walk away from him so that he could no longer see her face. She had decided to deny him the opportunity of taking any more shots. She did however keep the conversation going over her shoulder.

‘What had you got planned for ‘X’ then?’ she asked mischievously.

Click went the camera shutter again.

‘What can you possibly have come up with that from the back of me gives you any useful image?’

‘You’ve just given me a perfect shot for X. X being X-rated. I’ve got a dream shot of your bum, nice thong by the way; I’m quite partial to pink lace.’

‘What?’ squealed Rhia as she started checking her rear and with both hands on herself she soon realised that in her knocked down state she had somehow managed to get her skirt caught up and was displaying her near naked bottom to the world. ‘Don’t you dare use that photograph! I want that image deleted and I want it deleted right now!’ she yelled.

‘Now why would I want to delete such a perfect shot, and who would identify you anyway? It’s your bum, not your face that can be seen. So unless you make a habit of walking around showing it off, in which case it would be instantly recognisable, as it is rather lovely...then what’s the problem?’ said Paul with a feigned serious expression on his face. ‘I will however, have to think very carefully about whether it’s too risqué to include in my portfolio. Perhaps it would be best if I just keep it in my private collection instead...’

Rhia looked at him with a withering look. ‘Pervert’ she spat out.

‘I’ll have you know I’m an artiste and only use the very best looking models for my imagery. You can consider yourself seriously privileged that a man of my artistic talents has chosen you as a subject for this most prestigious task!’ said Paul in a Professorial tone. His manner then changed to one of seriousness. ‘Actually, you do have the most expressive face, ...as well as a very peachy bum,’ he added cheekily,.... ‘And, you are exceptionally photogenic. How would you feel about helping me out by letting me take some photographs of you?’

‘Do I get to keep my clothes on?’ asked Rhia wryly.

Paul laughed out loud. 'Only if you absolutely insist,' he replied audaciously.

Rhia could only grin in response.

'Okay, we may have a deal, but there are of course some conditions and, as a model of high repute, a fee will be required.'

'Name your price,' laughed Paul.

Rhia pretended to seriously contemplate what her fee would be.

'There are three conditions. Firstly, you delete that last photograph, permanently. If I ever find out it's been circulated by email, put on the web in any form or ends up on YouTube you will die a slow and horrible death. Secondly, I get editorial control over any images of me, I do have my reputation to consider and therefore can only agree to the most worthy shots being used.' she said gravely. Thirdly, there is the difficult question of my fee. My price is high.' She stressed this last point. 'Such services to photography will require regular bowlfuls of ice-cream from Nando's, payable in advance, the first payment being due right now!' said Rhia gleefully.

Paul smiled ruefully. 'Ah, Nando's. I've heard about your love of ice cream from David. Actually he did tell me that if I ever wanted any favours from you that all I had to do was offer to buy you an ice cream. He went so far as to say that you would sell your soul for two scoops of rum and raisin!'

With pretended outrage, Rhia aimed a swift but short punch at Paul's arm and he fell groaning to the ground, for the entire world it would appear as if he had been hit by a nuclear bomb.

Bou recognised the situation immediately and promptly attempted to give him the kiss of life by bounding up and slathering his face with sloppy dog kisses.

'Eeeurgh, get off you sappy mutt' yelled Paul who was back up on his feet in seconds wiping Bou's saliva from his face.

‘She’s a female remember and we females do know how to get what we want’ said Rhia with a giggle. She took hold of Paul’s arm and steered him in the direction of Nando’s Ice cream parlour. Paul did not seem to be resisting.

Over ice cream, Paul and Rhia chatted easily whilst Bou lapped at a bowlful of water considerately placed outside by the shop owners. Rhia learned that Paul had just finished taking a year out before he planned to go to University in October to study Archaeology. He was hoping that his photography skills would play a part in his hoped for career and he had plans to travel the globe discovering and photographing artefacts. He had a way of making what Rhia always thought was a rather dry subject into what now sounded very like “Indiana Jones.”

Rhia told Paul of her own creative interests and her tentative career plans. She talked of her own interest in photography but admitted that she was only a keen snapper but it was something she really did enjoy and she wanted to spend more time developing her skills. Paul offered to compare notes and they agreed to do so, although she would have to put her camera into repair first. They chatted for so long that both failed to realise that Nando’s staff were waiting for them to leave so they could close up and it was now beginning to grow darker outside.

‘Oh Lord, we’d better get a move on, Val and Dennis will be sending out a search party for me. I had only expected to be out for about an hour...’ said Rhia with some dismay. She couldn’t remember the last time she had felt so comfortable in the company of a guy, with the exception of David. She realised that she really liked Paul. In fact, she liked Paul a lot and she thought he liked her too.

They walked companionably home with Bou trotting beside them, clearly exhausted after the amazing run-a-round she had been privileged to have today. Paul revealed that he had been taking Bou for her early morning walks during the last couple of weeks and would do so

again tomorrow morning. He asked if she wanted to come along. She explained that she would probably be looking after Bou for the remainder of the summer if David had his way so perhaps she ought to get into the habit right away, so she agreed to meet up with him in the morning.

It wasn't quite the invitation to go on a date that she would have liked but she thought that she would enjoy spending more time with him and a walk on the beach was as good as a date at the cinema as far as she was concerned. She had always been an early riser who liked to be out of bed in the morning and so she asked Paul to tap on her bedroom window when he was ready, describing the room with the pink curtains of the dormer bungalow that backed onto his own house.

Having said goodbye to him Rhia stepped into her Aunt and Uncle's home who, in their preparations, had not noticed the time. They were therefore not unduly concerned until the moment she breezed back in with a happy expression on her face and a very weary dog at her side. Only then did they acknowledge the lateness of the hour and offered mild reproach for being out so late without telling them where she was. Once she had explained that she had met up with Paul, and had been escorted all the way home and was therefore perfectly safe, they were appeased. Anna was listening in and of course wanted a blow-by-blow account. Thankfully, David had gone out for the evening so she was spared his inevitable interrogation and likely teasing. Satisfying Anna's curiosity in brief succinct statements of fact that missed out all the interesting bits such as what lovely eyes Paul had, what a nice body he had and how much she fancied him, Rhia took herself off to bed where she gave quiet thought to how the summer might progress. Liam, she thought. Liam, who?

The following morning she was up early and had just finished dressing when she heard a light tap on the window. She drew back the curtains and there stood Paul grinning like a Cheshire cat. Rhia thought he looked even better this morning than he did yesterday and she

returned his grin with a 1000-megawatt smile of her own. She ran through the house into and grabbed the dog's lead from the kitchen, bundling an excited Bou out of the back door. She and Paul cheerfully headed off to the beach, which was a just a few minutes away.

They spent a good hour or more throwing sticks and balls for Bou to chase, who in her element, went literally barking mad, as first one missile was launched and then another quickly followed. It was doubtful she had ever had so much exercise in her life! There was more of the teasing banter that Paul had demonstrated the night before and an interesting demonstration of how to throw a ball properly. Paul had observed, rightly, that she threw a ball like a girl. It was a skill that she had tried to master, and David had certainly tried hard to teach her, but without a great deal of success, deciding to let her off as she could hit a ball with a cricket bat as well as anyone. She had questioned Paul's observation of her ball throwing skill, her argument being that she was after all female and therefore not likely to throw a ball like a twenty stone Russian hammer thrower. Laughing, Paul had dismissed her weak argument and taking hold of her arms had skilfully guided them whilst angling her body properly to make the most of the power of the throw. After a short time, she found that she was throwing the ball in the direction intended and achieving a fair distance. She had mentally struggled to resist falling back into his arms and wrapping them around her; having very much enjoyed the feel of his body close to hers and his warm breath on her neck. She learned the technique he was showing her very quickly but pretended to struggle for another few minutes so she could enjoy the physical nearness of him a little longer than was necessary.

If he had noticed her deception, he didn't give any clues to having done so. Eventually it was obvious that she had improved her technique sufficiently to warrant the cessation of the lesson and she reluctantly acknowledged to herself that she would have to come up with something else if she wanted to get near him like that again. She considered whether he

would consider her forward if she actually pounced on him and decided that he would. He was a gentleman; she would give him credit for that. Most other guys his age would have, and usually had, tried it on with her within 15 minutes of meeting. Although he had shown himself in his humour to be skilled at cheeky innuendo, he had not given any indication that he would act in any way that she would consider improper. She realised that she was disappointed, especially as he didn't give her any impression that he was likely to behave any differently in the near future.

Chapter 5

For the next few days, Rhia and Paul slipped into a pattern of taking Bou to the beach in the morning, sometimes staying and playing their own version of tennis, cricket or volleyball on the beach. In the evening, they would often take her out again and would stop off on the way back for an ice cream or a soft drink at Nandos. Once or twice, they had spent the afternoon just walking and talking with Paul periodically clicking his camera if he found an expression that he liked that fitted into his a-z image portfolio.

He was looking for only about half a dozen images now to finish that particular project. Once done he needed to consider what he was going to do for his major piece of work which had to be completed before the end of the summer. For now, he seemed content not to worry about this. Previously he had indicated that he had a lot riding on whether he could successfully produce work that satisfied the 2nd project outline which he had not yet specified to Rhia, but which he had already requested she help him with. Paul had inspired her and she wanted to get her own camera sorted out as she had seen so many things that she would like to have captured and had missed.

She looked forward to the moments she spent with Paul. On the few occasions where she had not been with him, such as the party with Anna that she had gone to and had not enjoyed, mostly because Anna had said that she couldn't invite Paul too as the numbers were strictly limited. It turned out not to be true, as it seemed to be full of gatecrashers. Whilst at the party, she had been chatted up by several attractive young men but didn't feel at all inclined to accept any of the offers to go out with any of them. It was whilst she was at the party and watching the couples pairing off that she realised she hadn't given any thought to Liam, which surprised her, as she had clearly written in her diary of her intentions this summer. Her thoughts were of no one except Paul. She had spent at least half an hour happily sending and receiving nonsense texts from him when she should have been enjoying the company of a

crowd of people whose main intention was to have a good time, get a bit drunk and find someone willing to have at least a kiss and cuddle with. She felt glad when the party ended and she could return home, albeit to the remonstrations of Anna who called her a 'wet blanket.'

When she wasn't with Paul, her time was largely spent in the company of her Aunt and Uncle. Rhia reasoned that once they had gone on their 'holiday' she would plan her time to start looking at courses she might attend, as well as finding that all important job. It was her intention to be financially independent long term. She had her small inheritance, which she had earmarked for her yet undetermined business, but she needed an employment foundation on which she could develop future career aspirations. She had been scouring the local newspaper for any opportunity that she could pursue and had placed a card in a shop window highlighting her obvious talents and willingness to take up work in a creative field. She had actually received one response to the card before she decided to remove it from the window, the response was querying whether she charged by the hour or the act. To her irritation Paul and David had both found this highly amusing.

Her aunt and uncle were giving no obvious clues as to the health issues that Val was undergoing but Rhia had noticed in the quiet of the evening that there was a contemplative atmosphere in the house. She would sit and read quietly or access the internet for inspiration and information and just quietly observe them both from a distance.

The days passed quickly and eventually the time came that by the end of the day it would be just David and Rhia. Rhia would have liked to spend most of the day with Paul as per usual, but she also knew she needed to stay around to see her Aunt and Uncle, and of course Anna, set off for their journeys. She did genuinely want to spend the last remnant of quality time with them as it could be some time before she saw them all again. However, before she committed herself to spending the rest of the day at home she knew there was one place she

had to go to. She made the excuse of needing to pick up some personal things from the local chemist and she grabbed her bag, which was already packed with candles and a torch and raced to the beach. Once there she glanced around to check that no one was in sight to see where she went, confident that she could not be seen she headed directly to 'her' cave. She was very worried about her Aunt and felt that she needed a little time to herself and to feel some of what she felt was a special healing energy that she was convinced the cave emanated.

Rhia was not a conventionally religious person, although she did believe in the notion of a soul and an afterlife, and possibly even other lives. She didn't buy the idea of having to undertake lots of ritual such as in the orthodox traditions of organised religions that purported to save your soul from eternal damnation. Her philosophy was very simple, lead an honest life, be kind to others and others will hopefully be kind to you. She also did not believe in the single entity that people called God as she felt it was impossible for just one being to be in charge of this entire planet. She felt there must be others who also have power to make things happen.

She had long been attracted to the stories of the ancient Gods and Goddesses that her grandmother had introduced to. In particular, she had an affinity with the Goddess Rhiannon, her namesake, and believed that if she asked with a sincere heart and with unselfish intent, what she asked for would be given to her. She wasn't entirely sure who or what responded to her but she certainly felt that something or someone was listening and would act in her best interests. There was an oddity though; the cave seemed never to have been discovered by anyone else, not since she had been visiting it anyway. It felt as if she was the only one who was able to see it and she had never heard anyone ever mention that there were such caves in the area, although the little narrow tunnels were common. Perhaps it was just coincidence or the mere fact that you did have to be quite flexible to be able to get it into in the first place

that meant it was apparently undiscovered by others. Whatever was going on she was here now for a particular purpose. She flicked the switch on her torch so that she could light her candles around the cave and she sat down to concentrate on what it was she needed to say at this time. Ten minutes later she was clear on what it was she wanted.

‘Goddess Rhiannon, I’ve come to you today to ask you to take care of my Aunt during her new sickness. I ask that whatever it is that fate has in store for her, that my Aunt will not suffer in any way. Please take care of My Uncle Dennis whom I know must be worried out of his mind; ease his anguish and strengthen him so he can be the support that Val needs at this time. I ask you also to help me to be strong for David too who tries so hard to be strong and to pretend things don’t worry him when I know that inside he’s churning up. If you do all these things, I promise always to try my best to make a difference to the lives of the people I meet. There’s one more thing Rhiannon, I’ve just met someone really special and it just feels so right, here inside my heart. I know I shouldn’t ask for things for myself but I would like you to consider whether you could persuade him to like me as much as I like him, well I know he likes me, but I would like it to be more than just liking. I know it probably sounds juvenile to someone who is so ancient and wise but I know it’s not a crush, it’s too intense for a crush, and it feels as if I’ve been waiting for him for my whole life. I find myself thinking about him constantly and each time I see him my heart feels as though it will burst out of my body.’

She stopped for a moment to reflect on what she had just said.

‘Sorry I shouldn’t have asked for that, strike that from the record. I just want you to look after Aunt Val and everyone for me. Thank you. I’ll speak to you again soon. Love from me.’

She started to blow out the first of the dozen or so candles one by one, carefully checking each was stubbed out before placing them carefully in the tin box in her bag. She was just

dowsing the fourth candle when she heard a noise. It was a bit of a shuffle and she thought she heard a small thud.

‘Who’s there?’ she called nervously. ‘Is there someone there?’ she called again.

‘It’s me’ came a voice, ‘Paul, is everything all right? I was taking photographs from the cliff when I saw you walking on the beach and I saw you disappear into here some time ago. I was worried that you might have fallen or were trapped or something. Where are you anyway? I can hear you but I can’t see anything as it’s pitch black out here!’

‘I’m fine, I’ll be out in a minute or two, you don’t need to come any further.’ called Rhia, a little relieved but also a little disturbed that she had been discovered. She didn’t want Paul to come into her secret place, not yet at least, as she thought he might make light of it and that if he did it would somehow diminish the almost sacredness of it for her. She also wondered how long he had been outside and whether he had heard what she had just asked for.

It was too late. At that moment Paul, scabbling along on his stomach, had spotted the flickering lights through the darkness and like a moth to a flame had begun to wriggle through the opening into Rhia’s private little world. He stopped suddenly and looked around him with astonishment. Rhia stayed as still as a statue, expecting to hear some smart comment.

‘Wow, this is incredible! What a fantastic place!’ said Paul with undiluted awe. ‘How did you find it?’

Rhia couldn’t quite believe what she was hearing. She had always vowed to herself never to reveal this place to anyone whom she had felt wouldn’t appreciate its beauty, and yet, here was Paul, whom she was now beginning to think of as ‘her’ Paul who looked enraptured over what he was seeing. She was inwardly thrilled, but it was tinged with a tiny disappointment, as she knew this would no longer be her place alone and she hadn’t yet had time to assimilate how she felt about that.

‘Bou found it a long time ago, well at least she found the entrance to it, she has never been in this part, although I’ve let her sit outside and chew a bone where you’ve just come in from.’

‘I think I found the bone on the way in!’ said Paul with a look of disgust on his face.

She considered her thoughts for a moment before going on. ‘How long have you been there, were you listening to me?’

‘I’ve only been here for a moment. I could hear a voice but I couldn’t be sure it was you or make out what you were saying, who were you talking to anyway?’

Rhia hesitated before answering. ‘Oh, I was just saying things aloud. I like to do that sometimes. It feels good to be able to say what’s on my mind and let the words go out to whoever might be listening.’ As long as it wasn’t you listening, she thought to herself.

Paul pulled himself right into the cave and able to now stand up he examined the space fully for himself. ‘This is just fabulous; it would make a great backdrop for some photographic shots.’

He saw Rhia waver and came to a realisation. ‘I guess I’ve just intruded and perhaps it’s not a welcome intrusion. I’ll leave you alone and wait outside for you, or would you rather I just went home?’

Rhia made a momentous decision. ‘No, please stay. Let me introduce you to my special cave, where you are very welcome as my guest.... But remember’ she said threateningly, ‘this is MY cave and you are my guest!’

‘That’s very generous of you’ replied Paul with total sincerity. ‘This has given me a great idea for my second and major photography project. It has a mystical feel to it hasn’t it? The theme I have to work with is Myth and Fantasy and this cave might work as a great feature in my photographs, or at least offer inspiration for other shots. I’d certainly like to experiment with some lighting in here.’

‘Myth and Fantasy is my specialist subject, if you want me to help I would love to’
exclaimed Rhia excitedly.

‘Absolutely, I want you on board; if you can conjure up a bit of magic for me in your cave then I will be even more delighted to have your help.’

Rhia smiled; glad that she was quickly beginning to feel that having Paul share her special place was the right thing to do, that he truly would understand how she felt about the place.

‘What did you mean about this place being special, apart from the fact that it is incredibly beautiful?’

It was then that Rhia invited Paul to sit beside her and she slowly began to explain what it was that she felt about the qualities of this wondrous little cavern. As it grew chilly, Rhia gave an involuntary shiver and Paul placed his arm across her shoulder and shared the warmth of his body with her, pulling her closer to him so that she could continue telling him her story. Rhia felt warmth spreading throughout her body and an inward glow reached every part of her. She spoke of her grandmother’s stories, and how she had felt the Goddess Rhiannon, if indeed that was her name, had been an influence in her life. She told him the story of how she was named after her and related tales that had never been told to anyone before, not even Anna and David. Paul listened intently.

She explained how she came here to voice her troubles aloud and that somehow she always felt she was being listened to. She seemed to get answers and solutions, though not always in the manner she would have chosen. Paul stayed silent throughout but Rhia never once felt that he doubted what she was saying or saw her as foolish in any way. He seemed more than interested and as the tales unfolded and the air got chillier he just held her more closely, pressing his lips to her head now and again when she came to a particularly interesting part of her story. It was about an hour later when she had finished and Paul finally looked at her as if he had just listened to the secrets of her heart. His eyes, rested on her face

and she thought he was going to kiss her. He didn't. Somehow, though she didn't feel as disappointed as she might have as instinctively she knew that they had crossed a threshold from which they would not return, and that her sharing her most intimate thoughts with him had brought them both to a new level that would surely reap its dividends soon.

'Did you know that the Goddess Rhiannon is the Goddess of Inspiration?' she asked. Paul replied that he didn't know that, but smiling he expressed the thought that perhaps she was listening and would provide him with a great idea for his Myth and Fantasy project.

'I find that if I want inspiration for something then not only is it helpful to come here and ask, but also I sometimes come to this site, not just the cave but outside, amongst the rocks, and I watch the sun set and the moon rise in the sky, particularly when it's a bright moon' said Rhia. 'As I told you, Rhiannon is the Celtic Moon Goddess and it is said that she is at her most powerful on a bright moonlit night. We could come up here one night and try it out if you like' said Rhia only half-jokingly, not quite sure how Paul would take this suggestion and whether perhaps, it was a bit of madness gone too far.

'I think that would be a great idea, I could do with some help and if you think that this would help, then, well I believe you. I'm certainly willing to have a go anyway!' said Paul with a level of enthusiasm Rhia had not anticipated, although it was to her immense satisfaction and delight.

They acknowledged that it was time to leave and Paul helped to extinguish the remaining candles whilst asking Rhia if she minded if he came back with her again here sometime. Rhia was pleased to be able to answer yes to the question and inwardly felt that the end of her prayer had perhaps been answered after all. They left the cave and were soon back on the homeward bound path, Paul's arm draped lazily around Rhia's shoulders. She slipped her arm around his waist and feeling no resistance whatsoever leaned into him as they walked. He tightened his grip around her shoulder and pulled her closer. She thought they had taken

many steps tonight in their growing relationship. It was only later, when she awoke during the night that the thought suddenly struck her that Paul had found her so easily when no one else ever had.

Chapter 6

The next morning Rhia awoke, reflecting on what had happened the previous day. Her Aunt, Uncle and Anna had all now left, each spinning their own little webs of deceit, albeit her Aunt's was perhaps more justifiable than the lies which Anna was weaving. She had spent a few moments with Anna trying to impress upon her the need to be absolutely sure of whatever choices she would make in the foreseeable future. Anna had promised that she would be careful but she already knew what her feelings were and was confident of Michel's feelings for her too. She chided Rhia for not being as supportive as she ought to be. Rhia gave her a hug and told her 'Just be happy.'

Saying goodbye to her aunt and uncle was much more difficult and she didn't quite manage to hold back a tear. She didn't think her aunt had suspected the real reason for this; she thought she had managed to convince her that it was simply that it would be the first summer that she had not been there for her. She told her she would miss having her to gossip with. Her aunt patted her indulgently and told her that she was no longer a child but a woman, and a beautiful one at that, and that she must start to live the life for herself that was destined for her. Val went on to tell her that whatever happened she would always love her as if she was her own and would always be around for her, even if not physically present. Rhia picked up the tone of the message without revealing anything that she knew and held onto her aunt for much longer than she should have. Her aunt didn't mind at all and seemed to want to keep hold of Rhia herself.

David was given a long list of instructions before they left and given strict orders to make sure that Rhia had a good time and was not left alone too often. David's response was to laugh uproariously.

‘It’s likely to be me that’s neglected; you have noticed how much time she’s been spending with Paul haven’t you?’ Apparently, they had not and both looked quite surprised at this revelation.

‘Well she could do a lot worse than Paul, but still you should make sure that she takes things slowly, no use rushing into relationships. If it doesn’t work out remember he’ll still be living next door and it could be awkward in future’ was the opinion of her uncle.

It had apparently been the same advice that Paul had received from his mother who was becoming concerned over the time he was spending with Rhia. She had admitted that Rhia seemed a nice girl and was, at the moment at least, having a very positive effect on her son whom she had to say she had never seen so happy. Nonetheless, she had concerns over Paul’s future as he was due to go to University in Durham in a couple of months or so and she didn’t want his studies affected by concerns about leaving a beautiful girlfriend behind. Rhia, in her opinion was much too pretty for her own good and would always receive a lot of attention. She feared that if her son were away Rhia would find some of the attention she would inevitably receive too hard to resist. She knew her son would have his heart broken if he came back and found she was with someone else. All of her anxieties in this respect had been passed on to her son who had listened impassively.

Chapter 7

The following morning was a grey dreary one; the walk to the beach was abandoned in favour of a quick run through the trees at the very head of the cliff tops, with Bou racing ahead of them.

‘So what are your plans for today?’ asked Paul.

‘I feel somewhat inspired to decorate my bedroom, want to help me?’

‘Not really, but I don’t think that will stop you from getting me involved will it?’ grinned Paul.

‘That is absolutely correct!’ countered Rhia, ‘Seriously though I could do with a bit of a hand in stripping off the wallpaper. I can probably manage most of everything else myself but I’m not great with ladders etc. so an extra pair of arms for the high bits would be very much appreciated.’

‘If it’s a stripper you want, then I am extremely good at stripping, I do like to keep my socks on though....’

Rhia gave him a puzzled look before she finally got the joke and when she did, she aimed a swift kick at his leg. She missed, just managing to avoid toppling to the ground by grabbing hold of Paul on the way down and hauling herself back up by hanging onto his belt.

‘Control yourself Rhia, I can see you’re massively disappointed that I’m not about to strip for you right here, but contain yourself, all will be revealed later’ said Paul with a cheeky smirk.

‘I might just hold you to what you’ve said just to see if you can put your money where your mouth is, although I suspect you’re all mouth and no trousers.’

‘As I said before, you’ll find out about the no trousers later on....’ This time Rhia did manage to land the kick. She enjoyed the moment or two’s entertainment watching Paul hop around on one leg in pretended agony whilst trying to check the other for protruding bones,

blood, dislodged muscle and flaying skin. He seemed disappointed that there wasn't the slightest sign of a mark of any description.

Eventually he finished making a meal out of the situation and they returned back home with plans for Paul to come around for a couple of hours later. He had agreed to help her strip the walls of her bedroom and she just had time to clear her things away tidily and cover up the furniture in her room. Paul had further agreed that he would go with her to Truro in the next day or two so that she could buy some paper, new bed linen and curtains.

A little to Rhia's surprise, she learned that David had invited Paul round, along with some of his rowdy friends to watch a big football match on TV that afternoon. Great, she thought, I'm going to be in for a right ribbing today then. It did also occur to her however that perhaps this wasn't a bad thing after all. If she could get her room stripped quite quickly, it could be an advantage to have a houseful of strapping men around to help her re-arrange the furniture in her room. She kept this thought to herself though, no point alerting Paul to this, as he would likely tip everyone off to her plans.

Later that morning, Paul and Rhia had made exceptional progress, and had managed to strip the entire room. She decided that once she had cleaned up the stripped paper she could probably manage to paint the ceiling during the afternoon. She knew there was white paint in the garage that was supposed to be quick drying. As it was the coolest day of the summer thus far, she felt that the opportunity to get on and work whilst the conditions were good was not to be missed. Paul had, in Rhia's opinion, unfortunately failed to deliver on his boast of being an excellent stripper, and had kept not only his socks on, but also his trousers and shirt. Rhia had called him to question and he had responded that he normally operated as part of a double act and that if she were willing to get her tassels and fluffy 'g' string out of the laundry basket then he would certainly reconsider giving a performance. Rhia declined the suggestion and flashed one of her most withering looks at Paul who found it all very funny.

David was exceptionally helpful today and actually cooked most of the lunch that they ate sitting in the lounge with their plates on their laps. It wasn't exactly the usual Sunday roast that Val would have prepared, but it was a very acceptable lamb chop with mashed potato, carrots and broccoli that went down exceptionally well. Rhia knew there must be a payoff coming. There was.

'I've invited some of the lads around this afternoon to watch the big match on TV' he advised.

Rhia did of course know this as Paul had tipped her off unintentionally, but she didn't tell David this.

'WellI wondered if you would mind rustling up some sandwiches to keep us all going... nothing fancy, ham, cheese, beef, a bit of salad, some tomatoes, onions, some of those crispy things and if you could whip up a couple of dips as well that would be great. And some coffee too, I've got a few beers in the boot of the car but I'm guessing we might need some black coffee to follow.'

All of this was delivered deadpan with no suggestion that he was asking her to do anything that required more than a moment's effort.

'I was actually planning to paint the ceiling of my bedroom this afternoon and to keep out of your way' retorted Rhia.

'Put that on hold, I don't think the lads will appreciate the smell of paint with their sandwiches' offered David, keeping his face straight. 'In any case it will only take you a few minutes to knock up a few snacks.'

Rhia was outraged. 'A few minutes? A few minutes to spread the butter onto bread, a few minutes to add fillings, another few minutes to make dips, another few minutes to put on plates and SERVE to you and your mates, and about two hours to clean up after you all.'

‘Oh go on, you know how much you love being my slave. If you carry out your duties properly, I promise not to beat you too badly later. And, as a bonus, I’ll take you down to St Ives when I have a day off on Wednesday....’ teased David, knowing he had her where he wanted.

To Rhia, this suggestion was a good one and offered the possibility of finding some more inspiration for Paul and his project. St Ives was full of little art studios where currently there did seem to be a popularity for “magick and myth” type artwork. She thought if Paul would come along there was a chance of working towards finding a definitive theme that they could work on. She also liked to go to St Ives to look at the little craft shops; in particular, there was a very nice little jeweller’s workshop that she liked to visit where they made relatively inexpensive jewellery that she would like to take a little peek. It was her birthday coming up in just a few weeks and it would be nice to find something with which she could treat herself.

‘Okay, you’re on, just this once though, do NOT think this will become a habit...’ she said threateningly. ‘And one more thing,’ this was by way of a further condition, ‘Have you had any luck in tracking a car down for me yet?’ Rhia had agreed a sum of money that she would give to David to buy her a car, trusting his judgement absolutely, knowing that he would drive a hard bargain and get her absolutely what she needed.

‘Not yet but I’m working on it, I sent one of the apprentices out to look at one the other day but the price was too high for the amount of work that would need to be done. I reckon if I leave it another week or so the price might well drop. If it does I’ll buy it as I think it will fit Madam’s very exacting requirements.’

Rhia was keen to begin to get herself mobile so that she could explore more of the Cornish coastline; in particular, she wanted to go to Penzance and from there to St Michael’s Mount which was a renowned place of legends.

Rhia had a quiet hour following lunch and a general tidy up where she studied magazines for some ideas on different looks for her bedroom. Having decided the general look she was aiming for, which was pretty and feminine, and in the style of a French boudoir, she knew that there was no reason why she shouldn't just get on and paint her ceiling. She had found some paint in the garage that she recognised as one with very low odour. She was keen to get on with moving her plans forward and create her perfect room.

She thought that she could get sandwiches and the other bits ready early and put them in the fridge for later, that way she could keep out of the way of David's friends until the absolute last minute. Hopefully, their mouths would then be so full of food she could reduce the amount of wisecracking she would receive and which she knew was inevitable.

She got to work on producing a mountain of sandwiches and created a couple of interesting dips from mayo and yoghurt adding a few fresh herbs from the garden for flavour. She got out a stack of plates, emptied crisps into bowls and put out a plate of cookies that Val had made before she left and had hidden from David. With everything ready, she went back to her room and got the painting materials ready. She pulled on an old shirt, which she tied just above her waist, and pulled on a pair of old cut down jeans, finally covering her hair with a bright bandana so as not to get paint on to her curls.

It was whilst she was in the middle of her preparations for painting that the rabble of David's friends started to arrive and the house was very soon filled with the sounds of raucous laughter and the smell of sweaty trainers, all of which were dumped in the hallway just a few feet outside her room. She heard David clattering through the kitchen to collect the 'few cans of beer,' which more accurately amounted to several crates, and which he was not lifting out of the boot of his car. He popped his head round her bedroom door to check that all was still on for later with respect to the refreshments he had asked her to do.

‘I’ve done everything as requested Your Highness... I’ve made arsenic dips and added ground glass to the sandwiches, just to make sure that I never have to do this again.’ she explained sweetly. ‘I’ve also added a few spoonful’s of bromide to the Coffee, my contribution to society in order to make sure that the birth population within a 30 mile radius of here stays under control, we really don’t want some of your friends creating miniature versions of themselves, now do we?’

‘Well I’m glad to hear that you are so considerate of us all, in fact I’m delighted to hear what you have to say and will enjoy telling the guys that all of their needs have been so well catered for’ said David with a chuckle.

‘I hope you’re not intending to poison me as well?’ came a voice that Rhia recognised, but had not heard for some considerable time. She was halfway up a ladder at the time, making sure she had positioned it correctly ready for painting the ceiling. Liam had stepped into her room, without invitation. She hadn’t seen him for some time now and was not totally surprised to see that he was even more handsome than she had remembered. Like David, he had also put on more muscle and his tan was a deep brown Mediterranean colour, which she suspected had been acquired through some serious sun bed sessions. There was something else too, something about his mouth; and then she realised he had done something to his teeth because he now had the smile of a Hollywood film star; eat your heart out Tom Cruise! Rhia looked at him appreciatively, she could see why she had held such a crush on him for the past couple of years, he really was gorgeous looking. Yet, the old fluttering that she had felt when she had been in his presence previously, was just not there. She checked again to make sure, and no, it had definitely gone. However, she couldn’t fail to notice that he was definitely giving her a very full appraisal. His eyes were lingering on her legs and what could be seen through her open necked shirt, all of which made her feel rather uncomfortable.

‘Well look at little Rhia, all grown up and looking very sexy.’ He said with in sweet talking manner that was his forte. ‘You could just be capable of breaking my heart Rhia,’ he continued, giving her a look that Rhia thought was not far short of a leer. For the first time, Rhia could see clearly how he operated and why he was so successful with women, women who weren’t her, women who weren’t in love with someone else.

‘Why thank you Liam,’ she answered with a level of assuredness that surprised even her, ‘I do believe you are also more handsome than when I last saw you. I imagine you will have got a number of girl’s hearts hereabouts all in a flutter.’ She said this with, what for her, was a heavy dollop of tongue in cheek but which Liam accepted as a statement of fact.

‘You know me Rhia, never one to hold back if there’s a pretty girl available, although when it’s the prettiest girl I’ve seen in a very long time standing on a ladder in front of me, well it’s clear that I may well have to revise my modus operandi and consider monogamy instead.’

Rhia couldn’t help feeling just a little flattered but she was also aware this was Liam’s line of business and so the feeling wore off quickly and she reverted to not being particularly impressed. Liam had a whole archive of compliments in his repertoire, and she knew that the same lines would have been trotted out on dozens, if not hundreds, of girls. However, she did get the distinct impression that if she didn’t watch it she could well be his next target, something that less than two weeks ago she would have been ecstatic about, but now offered no appeal whatsoever. She realised that she no longer had any interest in Liam and would have to devise a strategy to ensure that he knew that. The next moment, Liam went to move towards her, presumably, to kiss her on the cheek but for some reason the suddenness of his movement put her off balance and she found herself tumbling forwards, directly into his quite unexpectedly strong arms. It was at this moment that Paul appeared, finding Rhia in the arms

of Liam who was holding onto her as if they were lovers and was giving no indication that he was going to put her down.

She noted the brief look of what she thought might be close to anger on Paul's face and threw him her best smile. Despite her furious blushes, she knew what this must look like to him.

'Thanks for saving me from falling, Liam, but you can put me down now' she begged.

Was it her imagination or did Liam pull her rather too close to him as he literally slid her down his body until her feet were back on the floor. She realised that he had been quite deliberate in this, and she was hugely embarrassed to become aware that on the way down she could feel the hardness of his manhood pushed against her.

Paul turned and left the room, she could see by the way he held himself that he was a little put out by what he had seen. She didn't think that he understood the exact nature of her blushes, albeit she thought Liam certainly did.

'Paul, come back I need your opinion on my plans' she called out. At first she thought he had not heard her and then she realised he was trying to ignore her. She called out again and this time he returned, apparently reluctant to be rude, but his face displayed a suppressed annoyance she had not previously seen in him.

By this time Liam had let her go, and was giving Paul what seemed like a territorial once over as he came fully into the room and stood in front of Rhia. On an impulse, Rhia threw her arms around Paul's neck and planted as many kisses as she thought she might get away with on his shocked mouth. To say he was stunned was an understatement; she could see he was somewhat gobsmacked, although as she was facing Liam she knew he couldn't see Paul's face. As close as they were becoming they had not yet shared a kiss; this was despite the fact that she believed she had been giving him plenty of signals that it was what she wanted but he just hadn't given any indication that he was wanting to do so.

‘I just wanted to say thank you for all the help this morning,’ she said as breezily as she could, whilst still keeping her arms wrapped tightly around his neck. She was hoping desperately that he wouldn’t pull away and give her little game away, the theme of which was to suggest to Liam that she and Paul were most definitely an item. In her own mind, she and Paul were an item, but they had never had ‘the’ discussion. In the absence of confirming kisses to seal the relationship, she couldn’t say to Liam in all honesty that Paul was her boyfriend, although she did think of him as such. She turned to Liam who was now looking somewhat darkly at Paul.

‘I’ll be back later to claim my reward for saving your life,’ Liam said slowly with much emphasis, and with a glance at Paul that suggested that if he thought he was just going to walk away because of a ‘friendly’ kiss then he was sadly mistaken ‘I expect my reward to be a good one,’ he winked.

Paul’s mood by this stage had changed to one of a mixture of bemusement and puzzlement. Rhia still had her arms firmly round his neck and was not about to let go anytime soon, in fact she had no intention of doing so until she was sure that Liam was well out of earshot and Paul indicated that he wanted her to.

‘So can you tell me what this is all about?’ asked Paul with one eyebrow raised, although he seemed in no hurry to get Rhia to remove her arms from around his neck.

‘Sorry’ apologised Rhia ‘I just didn’t want Liam to get any ideas about me. I might be wrong but I thought he was giving me signals that he was interested in me.’

‘Oh he’s definitely interested in you, and why wouldn’t he be? He’s pretty confident that every girl around for miles would give her right arm for a date with him so he probably expects that you are just one of many who fall into that category.’

‘Well I’m not. I admit that I used to fancy him at one time,’ she said, adding for good measure a note of what she hoped Paul would accept as appeasement, ‘when I was much

younger of course. But I don't fancy him now and I don't want him to think that I could be another notch on his belt.'

Paul gave her a curious look but just then was called by David who was announcing that the match was about to start. Reluctantly Rhia loosened her grip around his neck and let him go.

Rhia was unnerved by what had just happened but was also clear in her own mind about where her feelings lay. She wanted Paul, she had no interest in Liam, but she needed to be sure that Liam understood that. That would mean that she needed Paul to make his intentions towards her much clearer if she was to ensure Liam knew that she was not available. It crossed her mind that perhaps Paul didn't see her as girlfriend material. If that was the case, she thought she would have to change his mind.

In the background, she could hear David's friends commenting about this shot or that shot, or whether that was a fair tackle or an unfair decision. She could hear the Referee's paternity also being called into question. She heard words that she knew the meaning of but was surprised to hear with such frequency. She wasn't sure whether to go and make her presence felt by asking them to tone it down a bit but decided that she had no right to comment and should just get on with what she was doing and leave them to their devices. She began to lay everything out in the kitchen ready for later and she did this as quickly as possible, reasoning that all that had to be done now was to pour boiling water into coffee mugs, which they could do for themselves.

At half time David popped his head round the door to see if she was okay and he thanked her for doing the sandwiches, having spotted that she had set everything out ready for later.

'You'll get your reward in Heaven Rhia, I guarantee it, and I'll speak to the Big Man personally.' He grinned wickedly at her withering expression.

She had hoped that Paul would come and see her at this time but he didn't do so, although she could overhear his voice and it was clear that he was caught up in conversation with some of the guys watching the match.

Chapter 8

Over the next half hour, she made very good progress and had only about a quarter of the ceiling left to paint. She was planning on doing one coat only as it was in pretty good condition and just needed freshening up. She had accomplished her task largely by shuffling the stepladder around the room into the relevant position ready for each section. It was tiring work. She didn't want to keep moving the steps about every few inches of ceiling that she painted, which would have been perhaps the sensible but time-consuming thing to do. It did mean however, that she had to stretch quite a bit to reach the areas that needing painting. And that was her fatal error. Overstretching herself she found herself with one leg on the steps and one leg in mid-air and knew there was only one place she could hope to land, and that was the bed. Fortunately she did land safely, albeit clumsily, and was pleased that she had come off relatively unscathed. Nonetheless, the stepladder had a less than comfortable landing and clattered noisily to the floor, fortunately missing the paint pot but knocking over a stack of books. They scattered across the floor like dominos.

Paul was the first to arrive to investigate the noise, quickly followed by David and Liam. It was Liam who manoeuvred himself at the speed of light to reach her before anyone else had even assessed the situation. Suddenly he was holding her in his arms and asking her if she was all right. Again, she felt uncomfortable at the closeness of his touch, and though he sounded genuinely concerned, there was a part of her that knew he was enjoying this for the physical contact it engendered. Paul picked up the steps, restacked the books, and generally put everything back into order whilst Liam persisted in holding onto her, despite her protestations that everything was fine. She had thanked him for his concern and repeatedly said he didn't need to worry, he could put her down and she could carry on without any problem.

David must have sensed her discomfort, and thanking Liam he persuaded him that all was well and there was a match to be watched. She noted some silent communication between him and Paul who had resolutely stayed put.

‘You and ladders don’t get on do you?’ he offered with a voice devoid of humour. ‘Are you sure you’re all right?’

‘I’m fine, really, although I think I might give the painting a miss for a while whilst I get my breath back.’

Paul looked up and could see the progress that had been made. ‘It seems a shame not to finish it seeing as you’ve got so far. Come on, I can help you finish it off, the football match is as good as lost so I’m not bothered about watching the rest of it.’

‘No Paul, you’re dressed in nice clothes and I don’t want you getting paint over them,’ replied Rhia.

‘I’ll take them off then!’ he exclaimed with a brightness that made Rhia laugh out loud.

‘What, all of them?’ asked Rhia cheekily.

Paul didn’t answer and instead started unbuttoning his shirt, and headed for the little ensuite just off her room. He came back, bare-chested and bare legged and with a white towel wrapped around his middle. Rhia thought she had died and gone to heaven.

‘Please don’t tell me that you are naked under that towel!’ she squealed.

‘Want to see?’ he teased, and before she could answer, he gave her a quick flash, revealing that he had kept on his white boxers underneath. ‘I have a suggestion,’ he continued. ‘You don’t like ladders and I don’t much like this particular stepladder, agreed?’

Rhia nodded her head.

‘What if you sit on my shoulders and I just keep walking you round until the job’s done. A few minutes more should see the whole ceiling finished.’

Rhia laughed at the absurdity of the idea but for the sake of a much-needed distraction agreed to give it a go.

They both giggled at her first attempt to sit astride Paul's shoulders without somersaulting over his head, but eventually they managed to stop falling about long enough to hold it together. They got themselves into a comfortable position where Paul could place both his hands on her thighs and hold her steady. Once she had found her balance, she found she was just at the right height, the walls being high, and would easily be able to see what she was doing without smashing her head on the ceiling. Trying to direct Paul when he couldn't move his head up or down without setting her off balance was much more difficult. There was plenty of laughter as she tried to instruct him where to move. 'Left a bit, no too far, right a bit more, no, not enough, just a few centimetres, slow, oh back a bit, I've just seen a patch' and so on.

It took just under 10 minutes and they finished the task easily. However, in dismounting Rhia managed to catch the paintbrush across her shirt and could feel the thick white emulsion soaking right through to her bra. She wasn't worried about paint on her shirt but her bra was a new one and she was not going to let it be spoilt. She took immediate action by rushing into the bathroom, where she closed the door behind her, and removed the bra so that she could carefully rinse out all traces of paint before it began to set. She succeeded in doing this, before it became apparent that in her haste she was now half naked in the bathroom, without a fresh set of clothes and Paul was outside. She briefly considered putting Paul's shirt on but decided against it and instead grabbed a towel. The only one readily available was a bath sheet, and she carefully wrapped it around herself, like a strapless dress, making sure it was tight and secure so that she was ready to come out and search for a clean bra and top from under the covered chest of drawers. When she did venture out she found Paul was lying flat on his back on her bed, scrutinising the ceiling.

‘Come here, does that look like a patch or is that bit dry and the surrounding bit still wet?’ he asked intently.

Rhia, a little unsure herself, tentatively lay down beside him on the bed and looked up, scanning the newly painted areas cautiously.

‘No, it’s definitely not a patch; in fact it looks very much from this position as if we’ve cracked it.’

They continued to lay side by side, apparently examining the ceiling for any signs that more work was still required, and as they did so Paul reached out for her hand, ostensibly to pat it in a congratulatory way, but instead somehow caught up Rhia’s fingers and laced them with his own.

Rhia smiled warmly and turned to look at him, at the same time he turned to look at her.

It was at this moment that the door burst open and in walked Liam.

It was then that realisation struck of what this scene must look like. Both looked as if underneath their protective towels they must be naked, Rhia showing bare legs and shoulders and Paul bare-chested and bare legged and both laying facing one another like lovers on her bed.

Liam looked surprised at first and then just smiled wickedly.

‘Well, well, not such an innocent after all then.’ He tapped a finger against his nose as a gesture of secrecy. ‘Your secret is safe with me’ he grinned and winking at Rhia shut the door.

‘Oh my God!’ squealed Rhia, ‘you do know what he thought, don’t you?’ she shrieked

‘I think I can guess’ said Paul ruefully, ‘and I doubt that anything we say at this moment would convince him or anyone else otherwise.’

Rhia was horrified that untruths might get around that questioned her moral virtue. If she had slept with Paul, she wouldn’t have been ashamed to admit it. As it was they had done

little more than innocent hugging and hand holding and it would be entirely undeserved to be given a bad reputation in this manner.

‘We have to go and try and put him right’ she suggested. ‘Let’s both go and get dressed properly and then we can explain.’

They got up and both headed for the bathroom at the same time, before realising that they were actually just compounding the situation.

‘You go first, all your stuff’s in there anyway. I’ll find myself a clean top and bra and get dressed out here, don’t come out though until I tell you to!’

Paul agreed and Rhia removed the covers from her wardrobe and chest of drawers, dug out a fresh bra and top, and was proceeding to put her clean bra on when the door opened again and David popped his head around. Fortunately, Rhia had her back to him and quickly grabbed her towel but it was still evident that she was topless.

‘Where’s Paul?’ David asked in an unusually sharp tone.

‘He’s in the bathroom’ responded Rhia, ‘He’s just putting his clothes on....’ Too late, she realised what she had just said and accepted that this was going to take an enormous amount of explaining.

‘I am supposed to be taking responsibility for you Rhia so we will have a talk later,’ said David in a disapproving tone, ‘I know you’re both adults, but there’s a time and place and a bit more discretion would have been appreciated..’

Paul, overhearing David, emerged from the bathroom at this precise moment. ‘You’ve got it wrong David; it’s not what it looks like. I promise it’s not at all what it looks; you only saw what you imagined happened...’

David cut him short. ‘Okay, I’ll hear what you’ve got to say later, but in the meantime will you please get some clothes on Rhia or the others out there will definitely get wind of

this and you won't have a chance to explain before everyone will know what you may or may not have been up to.'

Neither Paul nor Rhia dared say that Liam had already got wind of what he presumed had been going on.

Suddenly Rhia felt very indignant and her anger took over.

'David you are not listening! Paul and I were painting the ceiling. He took off his outer clothes so as not to get paint on them. I got paint on my top and it went right through my bra and onto my skin. I had just washed the paint out before you came in and was getting fresh clothes whilst Paul was getting dressed...' she stopped briefly at the expression on David's face but ignored it and continued. 'Paul and I have done absolutely nothing wrong, God I wish we had it would have been easier than this, but I won't have you thinking badly of either of us in this way. Do you seriously think that we would be having sex with a roomful of your friends just feet away, any one of whom could walk in at any time if they chose! God, give us both credit for that! When the time comes for activity of the sort you are imagining it will not be at 4.30pm in the afternoon with a crowd waiting in the wings!'

David hesitated, and then chuckled, putting his hands up in the air in a display of submission. 'Okay, Okay, you just made a valid point and I'm beginning to see that it might have happened as you said. However, you have to accept that you both were in a compromising situation and you can't really blame anyone for getting the wrong idea. However, I'm happy to be proved wrong, and Rhia you can put the knife down that you were planning to use on me later. God you're feisty sometimes!' He winced. 'Hurry up the two of you and come into the lounge, the match has finished. They lost in case you're wondering, and the sandwiches, nice touch with the broken glass by the way, are disappearing at a rate of knots!'

‘We’ll be right out, just give us a sec’ said Paul, who wanted to make sure that Rhia was okay as he felt responsible for the event, albeit it had been a lot of fun to the point where first Liam and then David had come in.

‘I’m fine,’ said Rhia, ‘just disappointed that David’s first reaction was to think wrongly of me. He knows that I’m not the sort to behave in that way and yet he immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion. This sort of thing seems to happen to me a lot, people getting the wrong idea about me I mean. If Liam spills the beans, it’s obvious what others will think. It’s not just my reputation; it’s not fair on yours either.’

Paul burst out laughing. ‘My reputation would be greatly enhanced if anyone was daft enough to think that I had managed to get you to sleep with me!’ He stood for a moment in apparent deep thought. ‘Actually that’s not a bad idea. I think I’ll go and tell everyone about what’s just happened, leaving out a few key elements, such as the truth!’

‘Don’t you dare!’ said Rhia, although she knew instinctively that he would do no such thing.

Rhia dressed and got herself sufficiently composed to venture out into the throng of young men that was now threatening to take over the whole house. She made her entrance to an unexpectedly responsive and friendly group.

‘Hey, Rhia, come over here and sit on your future husband’s knee’ called out the oldest member of the group, 26 year old Tom who was often the instigator of some of the rudest banter amongst David’s friends.

‘Behave yourself!’ she called back, knowing he was actually a happily married man with a couple of very young kids. He had never been able to resist teasing her with the suggestion that she become his second wife every time he saw her.

Liam caught her eye and gave her a knowing wink. She turned away quickly.

Oh Lord, I'm going to have to find a way to keep him at bay, thought Rhia, he obviously thinks I'm a raging nymphomaniac now and therefore he won't hold back on his attentions if he believes I'm now a woman of the world.

She was considering the merit of having a quiet word to put him straight when suddenly one of the group came in with a guitar that he started strumming.

'Hey Davey boy, can you play this?' said one of the lads, one that Rhia didn't know, but whose name she later discovered was Jake and who had just started working in the same garage as David.

'Yeah, I can play it well enough, but I'm a bit rusty and only an average player at best. If it's decent guitar you want then Liam and Paul are the ones you should ask to play.'

This was the first mention that Rhia had heard of Paul's musical ability since David had told her on the journey here that he played guitar. She had never heard him play, and was exceptionally keen to do so now.

But Liam had got in first, and had reached over and taken the guitar from Jake and was now sitting carefully re-tuning the strings. He started to strum a couple of chords and quietly hummed to himself until he found the tone to his liking when he began to settle down on the arm of a chair ready to give a performance. Rhia knew his preference was rock, and in particular, she knew he liked to sing rock anthems. She was somewhat surprised when he chose to sing what turned out to be a very good and soulful version of 'I don't want to miss a thing.'

'I don't want to close my eyes, I don't want to fall asleep, 'cause I'd miss you babe, and I don't want to miss a thing....' The notes sang out strong, loud and clear. The whole room went quiet as they listened. He really did have a very good voice and it was difficult not to be impressed.

He ended the song to much whooping and hollering from the group.

‘Your turn now Paul’ said Liam thrusting the guitar at him.

‘No, not me, I can’t follow that’ said Paul getting a little flustered.

‘Come on; show us what you can do. I’ve heard from David that you play good guitar and I’ve also heard that you sing a bit too, so come on and step up to the mike,’ instructed Liam. Rhia was unsure what Liam’s intentions were but wondered if perhaps he might be attempting to try and make Paul look a bit of a fool.

Paul tried hard to resist attempts to get him to play. He had almost convinced everyone that he wasn’t up for it until David opened his mouth.

‘Come on Paul, I’ve heard you both play and sing and I know you’re very good. I’m sure the others here would all like to hear you play something.’

Rhia knew David would not set Paul up and would only have suggested he sing, if in fact, he was confident that Paul would do himself justice.

She decided it was time that she spoke up. ‘I’d really like to hear you sing as well,’ she said, looking directly into his eyes in what she hoped he would take as a challenge.

Paul was undoubtedly cornered. On the one hand, he had no wish to embarrass himself by being compared unfavourably to Liam, who after all, was a seasoned performer, but then, could he turn down a challenge from Rhia?

He paused for a moment whilst he considered his options. ‘Okay, I’ll do it, but don’t blame me if you all go deaf.’ he said this with not an ounce of false modesty evident.

He sat on the sofa where one of the guys made more room for him. David then offered Rhia, who was standing, his seat that was now opposite Paul. She gratefully accepted the offer and settled herself to listen to what Paul was readying himself to do.

She watched closely as his long slim fingers began to pluck at the strings of the guitar and Rhia very early on recognised the opening chords that he started to play. As he began the song, Rhia felt her emotions stir; it was an intense ballad and a long-time favourite of hers.

He started to sing: ‘The first time, ever I saw your face, I thought the sun rose in your eyes....’ He didn’t play to the room, he looked directly at Rhia, never taking his eyes off her for the entire first verse, and she felt the song had been written just for her, about her, and was being sung for her alone. ‘And the moon and stars were the gifts you gave ... to the night and the empty skies, my love, to the night and the empty skies.’ Thankfully, he didn’t hold her gaze through the next verses, which were much more intimate and referred to a more physical relationship than she had yet to experience.

Rhia couldn’t believe what a beautiful melodic voice Paul had. She had thought Liam was good, but Paul, well Paul was superb!

At the end of the song, everyone sat in a stunned silence for a few seconds and then a huge round of applause broke out, much more than Liam had received. Rhia was quick to notice that he was a lot less enthusiastic than the others were, although he was polite enough to clap and told Paul he’d done a good job with the song. Even so, he did dampen the praise a bit by adding that it wasn’t a song he was particularly fond of himself as it was too sentimental for his taste. ‘Rubbish’ thought Rhia, Liam had just sung one of the most sentimental songs ever in singing the theme from the film Armageddon!

The others however all wanted to hear another song and at the point following David’s next revelation that Paul wrote his own songs too, Liam became very much more interested.

‘I’d like to hear something you’ve written,’ he said. ‘You know I’ve got a band and we’re close to getting a recording contract but we really need some original music. I write a bit myself but I’m more into the music and not a particular lyricist by nature. I could do with getting together with someone who writes better words than I can come up with. If you’re interested in getting together I’d obviously make sure you get credit on anything that we might record.’

Paul nodded and said that he did indeed like to write lyrics and usually started writing something he considered meaningful first and then adding the music to fit the way the words seemed to be asking to be sung. He agreed that he would be happy to meet up with Liam sometime and to see if they could collaborate in some way. Privately, he was hoping that by cooperating in this way he would get Liam on to his side, perhaps as a friend. He doubted that he would be successful in securing his friendship but felt it was worth a try and the result might be that Liam would lay off Rhia, keeping his hands and comments to himself in the future.

The group tried to persuade Paul to sing one of his own songs but this time he was adamant that he would not.

David crossed the room to where both Paul and Liam sat in opposite seats and whispered something in both their ears. Paul smiled, Liam snorted and Liam then called the room to attention.

‘We shall now perform a duet in honour of our host’s most beautiful cousin, Rhia.’ He bowed regally and took the guitar from Paul. Evidently, Liam would play guitar and Paul would sing assumed Rhia. She wasn’t however prepared for what came next.

‘My Rhia, My Rhia, I’ve just met a girl called My Rhia....’ Started Paul and Rhia ran from the room screaming... ‘No, No, David, you are going to die the most horrible death for this!’ There was much raucous laughter as Rhia left the room and shut the door behind her, holding it tightly shut so she didn’t have to hear. The family joke was now a public one and she knew it would likely run and run. Paul, and obviously David, would no doubt get a great deal of mileage from this. She did have to admit however that she had never heard it sung so beautifully and the way that Paul sang ‘My Rhia’ did touch a chord in her heart. She began to believe that she was being ungracious by not at least giving Paul’s performance an ounce

of credibility by staying put, and she returned to the room, pink-cheeked, where she was subjected to the whole room singing the chorus lines.

Later that same evening, as the group began to break up, there was a few minutes of madness with a few of the guys leaving insisting on kissing her as they left. Liam was no exception and was rather more enthusiastic than the others who played it for laughs and kept it chaste. He managed to not only plant his mouth fully onto hers but even had the audacity to try to force his tongue between her lips. She was rescued by David, who insisted that a kiss on the cheeks was all that was allowed. Liam did not apologise but instead picked up her hand and kissed it in the supposed gallantry of a gentleman. 'We'll meet again' he said, 'and soon.'

Finally, it was just David and Paul left, and Paul was beginning to say his own goodbyes when David asked him to stay a little longer.

Rhia was asked if she would mind making coffee and she got the distinct impression that she was being ushered out of the room so a private chat could take place. She hoped that David wasn't revisiting what had happened earlier and having a go at Paul, especially since she thought he had accepted that what he had seen was entirely misinterpreted. She put an ear to the door and picked up a portion of the conversation before both deliberately lowered their voices.

She managed to catch the fact that David wasn't referring to the afternoon events specifically at all. As far as he was concerned, he had accepted the word of Rhia and Paul just from the partial explanation he had heard. What he did want from Paul was an assurance that he wasn't going to be leading her on to then drop her. He knew Rhia well enough to know that she had developed feelings for him and wanted to know what Paul's feelings towards Rhia were. Rhia didn't hear the response from Paul but whatever was said seemed to

have satisfied David who, when Rhia returned with coffees, was slapping Paul on the back in a congratulatory way.

‘Rhia, I know I promised to take you to St Ives this week as a thank you for what you did this afternoon but I don’t think I’m going to be able to do it now. I’ve literally just had a text which will mean I will have to work instead.’

Rhia groaned, she had been looking forward to the trip but she did understand that David had work commitments that sometimes came unexpectedly.

‘I’m putting a lot of trust in both of you so don’t let me down, but I’ve just suggested to Paul that if you are both in agreement to take extreme care I will loan Paul my car, not Dad’s car, but my car.’ David’s car was a souped up and customised elderly BMW that all but flew down the notorious Cornish lanes, which were often no more than dirt tracks. His car was the definitive boy racer car.

‘That would be great’ said Paul with enthusiasm. ‘I’ve wanted to go to St Ives ever since I got here but without a car of my own, having had to sell my last car to pay for my camera, I’ve not been able to get there. Dad won’t let me use his car at all.’

Rhia was unsurprised by this, as it was a top of the range Saab.

Paul continued. ‘Mum has been so busy lately she needs her own car practically all the time so no chance of borrowing hers either. I swear I’ll take good care of yours. Thanks very much!’

Rhia was over the moon, and even more elated to discover that they could have the car tomorrow as long as they agreed to drop off David at his workplace and pick him up at the end of the day. Rhia did wonder what sort of driver Paul would be; David’s car was a perfect tool for anyone who had a penchant for driving too fast.

Paul said goodbye and Rhia saw him to the back door where he would cross the lawn and climb the fence to his own house.

‘Thanks for today, despite the little episode earlier it was a lot of fun and I do have a great ceiling and a blank canvas ready for my artistic creations. It won’t be long before I have a fantastic bedroom. And of course I thank you for fulfilling the promise, well partially fulfilling it anyway by giving me the striptease that you had promised earlier!’ she added with a saucy grin.

‘Mmmm, well I have to say I did feel a bit cheated by that, as although you did begin to participate towards the end, I didn’t see any evidence of the tassels or ‘g’ string that were meant to be part of the show.’ he responded cheekily.

‘Ooh, now that I can promise you is a sight you will have to wait a long time to see. Although If you were to sing to me to like you did tonight I might just be persuaded to consider reviewing the situation.’

‘My Rhia, My Rhia’ Paul began to sing before receiving a jab in the ribs.

‘You know you have a beautiful voice, better than Liam in fact, have you ever thought that you might earn a living from singing?’

‘Never!’ said Paul dismissively. I’m not a performer, although I can manage to put on an act amongst family and friends. Apart from the fact that my Mum and Dad would go absolutely spare at the thought, I don’t hanker after the life-style of a musician, travelling from town to town, living out of a suitcase, a different girl in every town....’ He stopped there as if considering carefully what he had just said, but he didn’t continue.

‘So you’re telling me you wouldn’t want a bevy of beautiful girls then?’ asked Rhia coyly.

‘No, just one will do for me’ replied Paul seriously.

On an impulse, Rhia reached up and placed her arms around his neck, giving him a single kiss on the lips.

‘That’s the second time you’ve kissed me today’ exclaimed Paul, ‘anyone would think you were trying to seduce me!’

‘If I was, I suspect I wouldn’t get very far’ stressed Rhia showing her inner exasperation, ‘you don’t seem keen to kiss me back...’ She regretted what she had said immediately as Paul’s face demonstrated that he was a little surprised by what she had just stated.

‘Rhia,’ he said carefully, ‘I prefer to choose my own moments.’ he turned quickly before Rhia could respond and he walked away, leaving her staring at his departing back hoping that it wouldn’t be too long before he found the moment.

This is the end of this excerpt – if you enjoyed it and want to find out how it ends, do please check [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) or [amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk) for purchase details. Thank you for reading.