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'Phffff! Books!' says the removal man, with a puff, a grunt, and a girding of his loins. 'Where do you want these, love?' He's lifting the heavy crate.

'Oh, anywhere!' I say. I haven't planned this at all. I certainly hadn't planned to move on the hottest day of the year so far at the end of June. But that is the great thing about leaping through a window of opportunity. Nothing is planned! And, right now, that feels wonderful! Except the books. I'll read them all now, I promise myself.

The removal-truck doors are wide open on the track beside the house. The whole world can see my belongings. It's like walking in and introducing yourself at a party completely naked! They've seen everything about you before you've even had a chance to say, 'Hello, nice to meet you.'

There's the smart gold-and-red-striped three-piece suite I bought when I could finally afford to walk into the showroom, turn down the monthly-repayment scheme and offer to settle up with cash. That was a day, I think. That's when I knew life was on the up.

Then there's the exercise bike I bought during lockdown, hoping to relieve some tension in the house and thinking it was time I got my body into shape: Josh had stopped looking at me, and once I started dating, I decided it would help. It didn't. The huge bouncy ball I sat on to keep myself moving at my office desk – it took up the spare room – makes a bid for escape out of the van. It rolls down the ramp, along the track and bounces across the main road, coming to a standstill by a group of locals beside a muddy tractor. Lexie, the removal woman, marches across the road in her steel-toe-capped boots, leopard-print leggings and short-sleeved polo shirt, company name on the breast, to retrieve it. Much to my relief I didn't have to. I'll introduce myself to the onlookers when I'm ready.

Lexie's dad is pulling out more boxes of hardback books, mostly on cookery, which I buy but never have time to read.

And there it is, centre stage, right in the middle of the removal van: the huge, battered pine kitchen table that had belonged to my grandparents. I refused to get rid of it after they died. This was where family life had taken

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place while I was growing up, round that table. Josh and I had bought our flat because it had a big enough kitchen to take the table. Just. The removal company were cursing me, I'm sure, getting the table into the flat and, by the sound of it, getting it out again. In this house, there is plenty of room for it in the kitchen.

I turn and stare at the house. I can't believe it's mine. I've always loved it, wondering what it would be like to live in it, to look right out to sea from the back garden. I'm sad for the people who had to sell it. It had been in their family for years and inheritance tax had made it impossible for the next generation to stay on. But at least they know it's gone to someone who loves it. I can't wait to get everything in and shut the door. But for now I'm still on full display, as if the travelling circus has arrived in town.

I hear another tractor pull up outside and stop. The chug-chug-chug of the engine cuts out.

'Shwmae, Dewi!'

'Shwmae, Lloyd!'

And the small gathering – two tractor drivers, Carys, an older woman I recognize straight away with two fidgeting Jack Russells, the window-cleaner, with his brush on a pole, and the postman, handing out mail to the group – loiters on the other side of the road, watching the removal van with interest. I'm standing just out of sight, under the shade of a larch tree hanging over the gateway.

'It's a bad business, all this,' Dewi Roberts says, climbing down from the cab of the tractor. He's barely changed, and neither has Carys. I smile, watching them from the shade of the tree.

The others shake their heads.

'Must have gone for a fortune!'

'All that money and gone on tax!'

They shake their heads again.

'You'd think the old man would have thought of it, passed it on before he died.'

'So sad. That family's been there for generations. Now all the money's gone.'

'It went on sale on the Friday, gone by the Monday morning. I heard buyers from London were calling and bidding on it, cash buyers. Buying it unseen!'

'Madness!'

I cringe a little.

'They're in pretty quick. Done and dusted within weeks.'

'Definitely a cash buyer.'

'Who'd buy a house they hadn't even seen?'

'And for how much?'

'I heard it went over the asking price. Ordinary folk didn't get a look in.'

'They should have sold to locals.'

'It's hard when rich families from London are offering you cash.'

'Without even coming to view it.'

'It's hard to turn it down. Money's money!'

'*le*, it is.'

'Second-home owners, are they?' Lloyd Owen, the other tractor driver, asks, watching my kitchen chairs and, in particular, the big old pine carver with the familiar worn cushion tied to its seat and a bag of bedding being removed from the van. 'Looks like posh stuff.'

'Could be a holiday-rental property.'

'Not with an old pine chair and table like that,' says Carys. 'Looks like it's come from a second-hand shop.'

I don't know whether to feel affronted or giggle.

The speculation continues. I'm finding it half cringeworthy and half funny. But at the same time, I can't help but chuckle about the 'table like that' finally coming home to Sŵn y Môr.

'Are you the new owner?' Dewi calls to the removal man across the road, over the cars with roof boxes, camper-vans and caravans heading along the coast.

He shakes his head.

'Only I wanted a word about renting some land,' Dewi continues. 'I have a proposition,' he says, walking across the road, nearly stepping out in front of a group of bikers, who manage to swerve and miss him.

I bet he does. He probably reckons the new owner knows nothing about how things work around here. Then I take a deep breath, glance back at the house – *my* house – and step out of the shadows of the larch.

'In that case, you're looking for me. I'm the new

owner,' I say, coming to stand in front of the open doors at the end of the van. 'And, no, it's not a second home or a holiday rental.'

The group are silenced and puzzled.

'Don't tell me you're going to knock it down and put up gerts, or whatever those tent things are called!' says Carys, with a scowl.

'Yurts, Carys, they're called yurts,' says Lloyd.

'Well, whatever. Bloody ugly things!'

'They'll take off from that headland in a brisk wind!' says the postie, who I recognize as Thomas Pritchard from school. 'We get a lot of wind here. Hot air, y'see. From the Gulf Stream.'

'Hot air is right,' mutters Carys.

'It's not like—' Lloyd starts.

'It's okay. I know what it's like,' I say, holding up a hand. 'But I'm not putting up yurts.' It's not a bad idea. But I'm not here to build a new business, far from it. I have other plans. I have everything I need, if I'm careful, enough to live on, and that's all I want right now. I'm not planning any more businesses. I've had quite enough of that.

'Well, what are you going to do with it?' says Lloyd, looking confused.

I take a deep breath. 'I'm going to live in it,' I say, and watch their faces. Their expressions change from surprise, to curiosity, to raised eyebrows.

'With your family?' asks Carys.

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'Just me,' I confirm, excitement growing.

'What? You bought this on your own?' says Carys, incredulously.

I sigh. Next they'll be asking how much I earn each year and to see my bank statements. 'Yes, I bought it. On my own,' I say firmly, finishing the conversation.

'In that case, could I have a word about renting your land? I'll give you a good price,' says Dewi.

'I'm sure,' I say, and laugh, which feels good. 'Like you offer all the newcomers around here. Don't think I don't know your tricks.'

The two farmers look at each other, then back at me. And suddenly I feel my past and present collide.

'Do I know you?' asks Lloyd, narrowing his eyes. The past twenty years haven't been kind to him. I remind myself that Lloyd Owen has always looked like an old man. I don't remember him not wearing wellingtons and a battered old fluorescent coat with string tumbling from the pockets.

I decide to put them out of their misery. 'I'm Beca, Beca Valentino, from Valentino's Gelateria, and, yes, I'm back to live here,' I say. 'Yes, I'm on my own and, no, I'm not doing yurts. Now, if you have all the information you need, I'm going to get on. Oh, and if you're thinking of making me an offer to rent my land, double it. I know the price of land rental around here.' I pick up a side table. They have all I'm prepared to tell them, for now.

Jo Thomas

'Well, *jiw, jiw*, if it isn't little Beca Valentino,' I hear, as I walk away.

'Thought she was in America.'

'I thought she died.'

'Where's she got that kind of money from, then?'

'Not from her family.'

'What she's doing back here, buying this place?'

I can still hear them as I'm walking up the driveway and the path towards the house. I look at the porch with its stained-glass window lit brightly in the warm sunshine and hear the seagulls calling overhead. I take in the long leaded windows on either side of the front door and the two smaller ones at roof level, equally distanced between the chimney stacks. And beyond the house, the green grass of the Pembrokeshire headland, overlooking sparkling blue sea, separating this west Wales coastline from Ireland, dotted with sailing boats enjoying the sea breeze. This place. It isn't love at first sight, because I've loved this house all my life. I didn't need to come and view it. It's exactly where I'm meant to be right now.

'It's a lot of rooms for just one person,' I hear someone call after me.

And I can't resist: I turn back to the group from beneath the neglected arbour with a rampant rambling rose over it. 'I have plans, Dewi Roberts, big plans,' I call back to the gossiping farmers, as I walk the last bit of the path, a thorn from the overgrown rose

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snagging at my top. Pruning it will be one of my first jobs. And despite the aches of packing and moving, the weeks of keeping the cleaning business going with absent staff, doing shifts myself so I could hand over the business to Maria, there's a swing in my stride and a spring in my step. In no time at all everyone will know who's bought Tŷ Mawr. Word of mouth. It's the one thing I couldn't stand when I left this place. But right now, if they want to gossip, let them. I breathe in the salty sea air. I'm back, I have plans, and this time they don't involve business.

2

I wave the truck off, then head inside and shut the door. I unwrap a mug and fill it with water from the kitchen tap, taking time to look out of the window at the field, full of grazing black and white cows, with calves, and the still sparkling sea beyond that. I'm here in the kitchen, in this house, Tŷ Mawr. I'm sipping the water – even that tastes like home, soft and refreshing, not chalky and hard – when I hear a car pulling up outside on the drive. I turn and see the boxes everywhere. I want to explore the house, unpack my belongings and put them in their places.

I can't believe I'm here. Bad things happen in threes, so they say, but so do good. Getting the offer from Maria, my top team leader, on Tidy!, my cleaning business, was certainly a good thing, once I'd had time to

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consider it. At first I thought, Oh no! She wants to leave. What will I do if I don't accept her offer and lose her? Then I thought, what will happen if I accept? Some careful financial-planning advice from one of our clients meant Maria could buy the business from me and secure her family's future, making it a family business of her own. And I can move on. A new beginning. No more difficult clients. No more staff shortages or late payments. I'm moving out of big business. I'm going for a quieter life. My business days are behind me. I want the simpler things in life. Just like I had growing up.

Making the first phone call to social services and being accepted, eventually, as a foster carer had been the second good thing.

And then this. It was like a sign. As a child I passed this house every day on the bus going to school and back again. In the evenings and weekends I would look up at it from the quiet sandy cove away from the tourists where we swam and gathered around the barbecue in the setting summer sun. And then it was on the market. I knew it wouldn't hang around. Properties in Sŵn y Môr don't these days. They come onto the market and are gone within days. There'd been so much interest in the house that it had gone straight to auction. Highest bidder by the end of the day. That's three good things.

I'm like a child wanting to open my presents on

Christmas morning, but that will have to wait. I have a herd of cows to get to know first.

'Well, well, if it isn't little Beca Valentino,' says the old man, as he struggles stiffly out of his faded red four-by-four, leaning heavily on his stick. 'This is my grandson.' He points the stick at the young man getting out on the other side and looking up at the house, like someone who knows he's punching above his weight.

'You won't have met him. Born after you left the area, I expect.'

I smile at him, but he's clearly unhappy about my presence on the front doorstep where, no doubt, he thinks *he* should be standing.

'I couldn't believe it when they told me who'd bought it,' says the old man, still leaning heavily on the stick with gnarled, arthritic hands. He starts walking towards me on bandy legs. He's wearing a flat cap and dark blue overalls, despite the heat.

'I'm sorry for . . .' I have no idea what to say. For your loss? 'I'm sorry it turned out this way for you,' I manage to say. 'And I'm sorry about your father too,' I add, looking at the tired old man.

'Well, it's not what we'd hoped for. Dad loved this place. Ninety-nine was a good age. Dare say I shan't be far behind him without the farm to keep me busy.'

I feel slightly awkward, as if I'm taking the family home. The young man glares.

'But maybe it's time I took things easier. We've managed to buy the bungalow and stay in the area. Who'd've thought a bungalow could cost as much as that, eh? And I've got the garden to plant up. It's not big, but I'll make it work. Beans, tomatoes,' he says thoughtfully, and manages a smile.

I nod. The grandson is still glowering and gazing up at the house as if he's imagining all the possibilities.

'Tsk, tsk. But I have to say, I'm grateful to you,' he says, with a slight shake in his voice. 'I'm glad it was someone local. Glad it's not going to be a second home or holiday let . . .'

'It's not, is it?' The grandson flips his stare accusingly to me.

I shake my head. 'It's not. First and foremost, it's going to be my home,' I reassure them.

'You've done well for yourself while you've been away, Beca Valentino. Your grandparents and parents would be proud.'

'Thank you.' This time it's me with the crack in my voice and I wish my grandparents were there. I wish my mum and dad were still alive to see this. I wish I hadn't stayed away so long.

'Right. Let me introduce you to the girls.' I go to follow him and then he stops. '*Diolch*,' he says in Welsh, thank you, 'for taking on the girls. It would have broken my heart to sell them. It's good to know they'll be staying here, on the headland where they belong.'

'It's fine,' I say, having no idea if it will be or not. It's been a long time since I've looked after a herd of cows. Not since Dad was a herdsman and I went to work with him: I did relief milking at weekends and holidays, then cleaned caravans. Round here, it was what we did: we all had two or more jobs. And this may be a hobby herd now, but it was the one stipulation when I was buying the house. The cows came too. And that's exactly what I want from my life. A simpler way of life, tending cows, being outdoors, and having evenings to myself, early nights, maybe even catching up on *Strictly*. Doing all the things I never had time to do when I ran the cleaning business. This is exactly where I want to be. Away from London, a quieter life. And, of course, there's my dream of sharing it with children. Fostering. I've been to the meetings, joined the support groups, finally been approved. It's this life I want to share with children in my care.

'I've always wanted to farm,' I say – lie. It's the last thing I wanted to do when I left this place. But after years of building the business, working with difficult clients, and never being off duty, I'm going back to where I started, with Dad in the milking parlour. Let's hope the cows don't answer back, make unreasonable requests or not turn up for work. The smile on the old man's face and the softening of his grandson's make me feel better. I'm going to be a dairy farmer. Fresh milk with morning tea. It may not make me a fortune,

but I'm in a house I love, in a place I want to be. I don't need to be a millionaire. I just want to be happy. Just me. Starting out on my own. But first I have to remember how to milk a cow.

As I step into the parlour, it's like no time has passed. I would say it's like riding a bike.

'This is Blodwyn. She'll look after you. She'll lead the other girls in when it's milking time. And this is Dorothy. Watch out for her, she can be a bit grouchy. And Rosina, give her a wide berth or she'll wee all over you when you pass by,' he says, as we walk down the six-berth milking parlour. The cows are already in here, ready for their full udders to be relieved.

He touches each on the hindquarters while his grandson gets to work washing udders and attaching the milking apparatus. I watch him, then join in.

'And this one is Arianwen. She has the star shape on her tail . . .' I'm trying to remember all their names.

'But mostly they answer to *i'r merched*.' He smiles, as do I, relaxing.

'The girls.' I nod, understanding. It's been a long time since I've spoken any Welsh. Not since school. There really wasn't a need for it once I left here. But it feels good to hear it again. I work side by side with the old man's grandson, seeing the girls in and out of the milking parlour onto the green pasture, the headland overlooking the sea, the orange ball of the sun sinking in the sky behind them. A small fishing boat is coming

in from a day's excursion, leaving a trail of white water in its wake that disappears as if it was never there.

'And, remember, the truck will come every afternoon to pick up two milkings' worth.'

'I will.'

'So that's it,' he says, standing in the doorway of the milking parlour, the setting sun behind him silhouetting his short, stout, slightly crumpled outline. A long way from the man who grew up on this farm, worked it, built it up and now is winding it down, retiring from it.

He's taking in the milking parlour, remembering his time there and saying goodbye. 'I'll wait outside,' I say, wanting to give him time.

I open the gate to the field and walk across to the headland. I pull my arms around me. It might be hot and sunny, but out here the wind is flicking across the grass and it feels so good on my face. I lift it to the breeze and drink it in. Then, I look down at the cove below and the waves, rolling back and forth on the shore. I'm where I belong. I breathe deeply. It's like the last twenty years never happened. I'm back in Sŵn y Môr, and no time has passed at all.

Suddenly I hear footsteps behind me. I turn. It's the grandson.

'I'm just giving him a minute with his cows,' he says, beside me, staring at the view.

For a moment neither of us says anything. We just

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watch the seagulls glide overhead in the sky filled with soft, white clouds.

'Like I say, I'm sorry things had to be this way for you,' I say, taking hold of the situation.

'None of us wanted it, but with my great-grandfather gone, tax and inheritance tax . . .'

'I'm going to keep the herd going.'

'I hope so,' he says. 'I hope you're not one of those move-out-of-the-city-for-a-taste-of-the-good-life types, thinking they can go back to where they started out. You left for a reason.'

I feel like I've walked into a gorse bush as I remember exactly why I left. Your business is never your own in a small town like this. And then I remember exactly why I came back.

'Whatever you may have heard,' I say evenly, 'I went away. Made good money. Enough to look after my family when they were still alive and let them live in the town where they grew up. Now I have enough to buy this place. And I'm back with good reason.' I shut down the conversation. I feel as prickly as that gorse bush. I hated gossip then, and still hate it now. I'm not going to let it in. I'm older, wiser and don't have room for it in my life.

'I doubt I'll ever be able to afford to buy a house in the town I grew up in,' he says, 'but at least I can get out of here now.'

In a way, then, this is an escape for him, however

much of a show he may be putting on. He's not tied to the farm any more. He may be scared of leaving, but this was the excuse he needed. He was pushed out, or so he thinks, but maybe it was the push he needed.

'You have your whole life ahead of you. Go and see the world if you want to. Or stay if you don't. But it's no one's fault. We all have to work our way up in the world. Find out what's important to you. Pick your mountain to climb,' I say. 'Just make sure it's the right one. You don't want to get to the top, and realize it was wrong!' He's like I was, angry and young, thinking there was more to life than this. 'If you want to go, go. But if you want to stay, there's no shame in that. Make your own path.'

He nods slowly, as if I've just said something he's never heard before. He lifts his head, looks across the headland.

'There's a whole world out there,' I say. 'But there's one here too. Whatever you decide to do.'

As he turns to me, his face softens. 'There is something I've wanted to do,' he says.

'Well, maybe now is your time.' I smile.

'Maybe it is.' He smiles back. And then, to my surprise, he says, 'Thank you.' As if in some way I had just given him the permission he was looking for to stop feeling angry about the sale of the farm, about life, and to find his own path. I wasn't expecting that, I thought.

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My experience of young people is, well, me. I felt trapped here, so I left, but I was angry when the *gelateria* was sold. I made my own path, but I think it was the wrong one. Now I plan to put that right.

'I've always wanted to see New Zealand, the farms there. Maybe I'll go. Maybe I'll come back one day.'

'Just make sure if you go that it's for the right reasons. Not because you couldn't see what you had here, or because you felt angry and blamed others. You still have this.' I gesture to the beach. 'It belongs to everybody.'

'You've got kids, right?' he asks. 'Away at school? Left home even? Now you're moving back?'

I swallow.

'No . . . no kids,' I say. It's always the same. People assume.

He raises a blond eyebrow. 'Shame.' He turns down the corners of his mouth. 'You're good at this shit.'

I laugh. 'Thank you.'

Not a parent . . . That time's passed me by. Or has it? I'd been married to the business. No time for anything else. Covid threw a dark cloak over so many aspects of life. Work became harder as restaurants closed and people stayed at home. Employees who tested positive couldn't turn up to work. Everything in my body was aching after months of having to cover for staff shortages, getting up at the crack of dawn to clean offices and restaurants before the staff got in. But now, being

here, he's making me feel I'm doing the right thing with my new plan and my spirits soar again. So, this is it. A new beginning. Just me. No more mourning my marriage. No more trying to get back to dating, definitely not. Dating after my marriage fizzled out became nigh on impossible, as my final years of fertility started slipping away. Dating, I realized, had become about the car you drive and your last holiday destination. Compatibility is about questionnaires and ticking boxes. It was time for a change. It was time to come home.

We walk back towards the milking parlour, savouring the setting sun on our backs, the sweet smell of grass and salt in the air, like all the ingredients of a simple but fabulous dish you'd remember for ever.

As the two men drive away I turn to the house. It's mine. As are the cows, I remember, with trepidation. My home.

3

My stomach rumbles. I can't remember when I last ate anything. When I went to bed I fell into a deep sleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. This morning I've managed to complete my first milking. And now, I think, as I wipe my hands and look at the washed-down parlour and the cows contentedly grazing outside, there's only one thing that will reassure me I really am home. I want *gelato*! Probably not everyone's idea of breakfast, but this is a special day. I've been dreaming of it ever since I agreed on the house. Not any old ice cream but from Valentino's, my grandparents' shop, just up from the harbour and the beach. They sold it years ago and it made them enough to buy the bungalow they retired to, where Dad lived after them. But they'd sold the café with the guarantee that it would stay the same, so Valentino's would

always be at the heart of the town. That's how things work around here. We like to make sure the person moving in keeps a bit of the life that was, just like the old man and his cows.

I'm dreaming of rum and raisin, mint choc chip, my favourites, to celebrate my new life in Sŵn y Môr.

After I've showered, dressed and slipped on my flip-flops, I walk across the field where the cows are grazing to the gate at the far side, then onto the narrow coast path and down the wooden steps, where long grasses stroke my ankles, to the cove. I pass the old boathouse – still standing, *just* – with its weather-beaten, blue-painted doors, then cross to the other side of the cove and the coast path. It's by far the best route into town – much quicker than going along the main road by car.

I feel like a teenager all over again, with a whole new lease on life, the warm, grainy sand shifting under my soles and between my toes, the sun on my face, like it's feeding my soul, while the sound of the waves soothes away my stress. I'm home, back in Pembrokeshire, as far west as you can go in Wales, and I couldn't be happier.

I walk along the coast path and up the hill towards the town with a smile as bright as the sun.

I stop and stare. Something doesn't feel right.

It's market day in the town. The road is closed to traffic. Beside the pond and the benches around it, the stalls with green and white awnings are starting to

pack up for the day. They sell everything from honey to vegetables straight from the ground, locally produced gin, dressed crabs, Welsh cakes, bread and even hand-made woollen blankets and throws. But, although it's busy and bustling, that's not what I'm staring at. There, where Valentino's has always been, with its red and white awning, takeaway service hatch at the front, with rows of ice creams behind the glass and the high counter is . . . Wildes. With a trendy grey and white sign and a front door that's now also grey with a chrome handle, instead of the big brass one I loved to pull back with a ding of the bell. For a moment I wonder if it's been so long since I've been back that I'm looking at the wrong shop. I haven't been here since Nonno died, nearly three years ago now. Seems like yesterday.

I look up and down the small high street. It's busy, like a butterfly emerging from the cocoon of the last two years, more beautiful and brighter than before. But . . . I stare at the building. No, that's definitely Valentino's. Only it's called Wildes. I walk slowly through the market stalls, like I'm twelve years old, finishing school and hopping off the bus to pop in on my grandparents for an ice cream or, on cold winter days, hot chocolate with extra cream and marshmallows. All my friends envied me, getting free Valentino's *gelato* whenever I liked. I liked to treat my best friend too – I can still hear Griff's voice calling me as I walk towards the

shop. We'd sit on the high stools at the polished bar while Nonna fussed over us, especially in summer, when we were crispy from dried sand and salt water and brown as berries, as she would say, from the sun. We'd sit outside sipping Coke floats from tall glasses with long straws, or eating knickerbocker glories, topped with sticky glacé cherries.

Now I stop and stare at the shop front, oblivious to the crowds moving around me, the holidaymakers meeting old friends and buying local produce to take back to their rented cottages, caravans and tents. Some children come out of the door. There's no bell ringing, but they're carrying ice creams. Not as big as I remember and, judging by the looks on their faces, and their father's, as he double-checks his receipt, it's not the treat they were expecting.

I look at the façade. I can't help hoping things have stayed the same inside. I step tentatively towards the double-fronted building, the door in the middle. I always loved its symmetry: it was just a stone house in the middle of the town until my grandparents turned it into one of the best-known ice-cream and coffee shops in the area.

I pull back the unfamiliar chrome handle, hoping to be transported back to the Valentino's I used to know, but inside, I barely recognize the place. I'm searching for any features that might remind me of what it used to be. The high stools at the polished bar, the Valen-

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tino's sign with Italian and Welsh flags, Dean Martin playing in the background. It still smells of coffee, but there's no hissing or calling over the noise of the machine, the clatter of cups into saucers. Now, there's gentle modern jazz. Inside, it's grey and chrome. All of the red-covered stools and banquettes are gone, with the *gelato*, the dessert menus on the tables and the pots of paper napkins.

There used to be big pictures on the wall of ice-cream sundaes topped with fudge and chocolate sauce, banana splits and, of course, knickerbocker glories that went on for ever, plus a little cottage made of ice cream – a favourite for birthday parties – treasure chests, a sailing boat and a clown with dolly mixtures for his features and red syrup for a smile . . . It's all tumbling into my head, as clear as if the pictures were right there in front of me. It was a joy to see children stare, eyes widening.

Now, in place of the pictures, there is a big board listing panini and suggestions for filled baguettes. There's a wall of wine bottles, and glasses hanging over the bar where ice-cream cones used to stand. There are families eating salads, quiche and soup of the day.

'Can I help you?' says a voice from behind the counter. I freeze. It can't be. I turn slowly. It is! I feel sick.

'Eddie?'

We say nothing for a second or two.

'Do I know you?' he says, and it feels like a punch in the guts.

'I . . .' I have no idea what to say. It's all so different. 'This is Valentino's,' I state, looking around again, trying to get my bearings.

'Was!' He beams. A smile I remember only too well. 'It's Wildes now. My place. Ed Wildes.'

This all feels so weird. A face I know behind the counter in my family's shop, which I barely recognize.

'Has it been sold?' I manage. It's like my childhood has been swept away and put out with the rubbish. The Llewellyns, who bought Valentino's from my grandparents, had run it for years, keeping it just the same, as they'd promised Nonno and Nonna. Just like it was when I was last here.

'Yes, to me!'

That smile, again. He wipes a wine glass with a tea towel and puts it on the shelf, among the fake trailing ivy.

'I thought . . . There was an agreement to keep the place as Valentino's,' I say.

He gives a little frown, but still with a smile.

'There was, for the last owners, but that finished when they sold it on to me,' he says, as he rings up a bill and a family of four heads off with a promise to call again before the end of their holiday. 'You seem to know a lot about this place.'

'I'm . . .' I take a deep breath. 'I'm Beca? Beca Valentino. Remember, Eddie?' I'm rattled. 'My grandparents owned this place.'

Summer at the Ice Cream Café

'Of course! Beca! I knew I recognized you!' he says, moving around the counter. 'Sorry. Gosh, a lot of time has passed since we . . . since I used to come here to my grandparents' holiday home. Haven't been called Eddie in years! It's Ed now.'

I nod.

'What are you doing back here? Holiday?' he says, but I'm not really taking it in. I'm still too shocked to see how much the place has changed and the fact that he's here.

'I hope you like what I've done with the place.' He holds out a hand proudly.

'It's very . . . modern,' is all I can say. My grandparents' taste might not have been everyone's, but at least it was fun.

'So, holiday, is it?' he asks again.

I tear my eyes away from the panini menu. 'No, I've moved here,' I say flatly.

'Ah, so it's you who's bought Big House, Tÿ Mawr?' He mispronounces it but I don't correct him.

I nod.

'I'd heard a familiar face had moved in.'

'One thing hasn't changed, then. Word gets around fast here,' I mutter.

'Oh, yes,' he says, moving back around the counter to serve ice creams from the upright freezer at the far end. Clearly I wasn't quiet enough.

I move towards him and peer over.

'Would you like one?' he says.

'Um, actually, yes. I came to get a pot to take away. Sort of a celebration of me moving in.'

'Well, what's it to be?' he says.

'Mint choc chip.' I smile at the thought of it. 'Always.'

'Mint choc chip it is,' he says, and takes a pot from the freezer. 'Go for another too?' His hand is hovering over the other flavours and I can't help smiling. I'm hoping my freezer will be up and running by the time I get back.

'Rum and raisin.' I go for Nonno's favourite.

'I hope you enjoy both.'

The door opens with more customers. I know this place is only busy because of the holidaymakers who come back year after year. That's what makes Sŵn y Môr the thriving little town it is.

'It's good to see you again, Beca,' he says.

'Thank you,' I say, keen to get out. I'm feeling all sorts of things I didn't expect to experience when I came into town.

'And Tŷ Mawr . . .' He brings me back to the here and now.

This time I correct him gently. He never could get his tongue around the Welsh language or place-names.

'You looking to rent it out?' he enquires. 'Holidays? Bought it as an investment?'

'I have plans,' I say, reluctant to share more, not yet.

He puts his hands together. 'Actually,' he says suddenly, as if something has just occurred to him. 'I have some things that might be of interest to you – well, belong to you,' he says. 'When we were clearing this place out for the renovation we found some bits and pieces left in the attic. I think they must be your grandparents'. I remember them.'

'Yes,' I agree.

'Why don't you pop in during the week and I'll give you the boxes?' He smiles again. The smile I remember from all those years ago. It's a nice smile. A very attractive one, actually.

'Sure,' I say, and dig in my wallet to pay for the *gelato*.

'No, no. On me,' he says. 'A welcome gift. Come back and see us again soon. We do lunch, and there's a great wine list. We're going to try out sushi soon.'

'Thank you.' I smile tightly, not sure how I feel about wine lists and sushi. I'm about to ask if the fish will be local. But instead I turn towards the door. I've had enough change for one day. I'm grateful for the *gelato* I'm holding in my arms, cold against my T-shirt. It's making me feel connected to this place. Just for a moment I have the feeling that comes with leaving Valentino's clutching *gelato*. I just wish my family was still here to share it with me.

'See you in the week,' he calls, wiping down the shiny chrome work surface.

'Yes,' I say, hoping I won't have to see him when I

pick up the boxes or, indeed, any time soon. I step outside and remind myself to breathe, as I stand on the small terrace, under the new grey awning, with triangular patio heaters for evenings and winter days, bay trees by the door.

I hurry away from the shop into the crowds as the stallholders continue to pack up for the day.

Again, I hear my old friend Griff's voice. But this time I really *can* hear it. I look around and there he is.

He's surrounded by crates of whole and dressed crabs, in a sun-bleached blue linen jacket, a loose white T-shirt under it and, despite the sunshine, a small woollen hat, his curly hair tumbling out of the front. Around the walls of his stall are paintings of lobsters, crabs and the harbour. His paintings. Suddenly it's like when we were teenagers, like I've just got back from cleaning caravans and he's just come in from the fishing boats with his dad.

'Griff!' I say, a pot of ice cream in each hand. He peers at me and I can feel his uncertainty. Don't tell me he doesn't recognize me. 'It's me, Beca!'

'Yes,' he says. Suddenly neither of us knows what to say. I feel myself blush. I swallow and do what I really want to do, forgetting everything about the last time I saw him. I throw open my arms. He steps towards me tentatively and then I go to hug him hard but end up clutching him awkwardly, with my pots of ice cream in