Which by Its Splendor Rivals the Heavens

by Lucretiassister

Summary

Dr. Dwight Enys and Dr. Demelza Carne, of Cornwall Ecological Associates, have returned to the north coast for what they think is a routine ecological appraisal. But soon after they are hired, they are met with obstacles that change the nature of their stay. These unexpected threats--to both their professional and their personal partnerships--come from foes and friends alike and will change their lives forever.

A modern Poldark AU.

There will be tropes!

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Chapter 1

Prologue

“Demelza!” Dwight called into the evil, crying wind. There was no answer other than the distant shrieks of gulls and the thunderous crash of waves on the rocks below. Every muscle in his body twitched with the urge to act, and yet there was nothing he could do.

Where could she be?

Still unable to fully grasp the the worst, Dwight steeled his nerves and leaning forward, peered down at the violent surf sixty feet below the clifftop. He saw nothing but the swirling foam of the sea, roaring with anger at the jagged rocks that stood guard to thwart its murderous pounding. He looked to Ross frozen beside him.

Ross’s hands were balled in fists and his eyes were as dark and stormy as the sky closing in around them.

“Good god!” Ross gasped. “We’ve lost her and it’s all my fault.”
Here is Where the Birds Sing

*Five weeks earlier*

It was almost seven o’clock in the evening when Dr. Dwight Enys pulled up to the stone cottage by the sea. The battered Defender may have seen better days but these old Land Rovers were workhorses and no doubt this one would prove essential getting around the rugged coastal terrain. He’d only borrowed it from a mate for the month.

One month.

Dwight knew it wasn’t really much time and he certainly had a big job ahead of him. And where would he be in one month once this project was completed? He’d only recently dared to think about what it would be like if he stayed on in Cornwall longer than just the month. For starters, he’d invest in a permanent, maybe more attractive, company vehicle. Perhaps with a magnet of the company name and logo on its side?

**Cornwall Ecological Associates**

As he put the car in park, he spied another faint set of tire tracks in the muddy gravel leading up to the cottage and smiled. There was no other car present now but she did say she’d get a taxi from Newquay. His partner, Dr. Demelza Carne, must have arrived.

Demelza was an ornithologist and while perhaps not yet his partner in the business, she would at least be assisting him on this ecological impact assessment. Dwight had known Demelza for years and had partnered with her in many different settings. Certainly he could think of no one he trusted more. She was bright, observant, and he’d always found her humour made even the most tedious work more enjoyable. And as he mused about a professional future in Cornwall, Dwight hoped he could convince Demelza to remain on and take a more formalised partner role in Cornwall Ecological Associates.

Right now Dwight was in fact the only associate. He hired on freelance technicians or field scientists according to the needs of each job and had managed that way for the past year. Yet business had been going well in recent months so it was time to make a change. In the past he’d had to travel a great deal but now he hoped he could keep up a presence on the north coast.

Dwight was scarcely through the door when Demelza flew to meet him, arms open wide. He was immediately enveloped in a tight hug, his face smothered in a tangle of flaming red hair.

“Dwight! You’re here, finally,” she cried with joy. “I was starting to get nervous I was in the wrong house.”

“You are absolutely in the right place.” He gave her another warm squeeze, then kissed her cheek.

“And it’s a lovely place, Dwight. Is it really an old mine engine house?” she asked, gesturing to the white-washed stucco walls of the cottage around them.

“No, it’s called that but I don’t think it was an actual engine house, those tend to be much taller. But this was some sort of mine outpost, a captain's office or even his lodgings. You can see loads of other mine ruins along the coast," he explained.

“I saw you’d unpacked already so I assumed the empty front room upstairs was for me?” she asked. “But Dwight, are you sure? It looks like it has the best view. Have you not seen the sea? Are you
“Please Demelza, don’t make me quote from *Room with a View.* ‘Here is where the sun shine shines!’” He closed his eyes and dramatically thumped his chest.

“Close but not exactly. ’Here is where the birds sing, here is where the sky is blue!’”

“Birds, of course. How could I forget birds…?”

“You always loved that film. You are such a mush, Dwight, after all these years. Still, the view is stunning. I can just imagine the sunset...have you seen it? Oh, of course you have! You’ve been here a week already.” She whirled around with glee and suddenly looked like a young girl not the seasoned, world travelling field scientist he knew.

“Good god, Demelza, it’s brilliant to see you again...to be with you again. I’m so happy we could make this work,” he said.

“Oh, Dwight! Me too.”

“And that smells amazing,” he closed his pale blue eyes and inhaled the delicious smells coming from the cooker she had been standing over before he arrived.

“I hope you’re hungry. It’s only pasta but as luck would have it, all the ingredients for a good carbonara were right here. Fresh eggs, cheese, cream and this--well it’s not pancetta but it looks to be good local bacon, if you don’t mind,” she winked. She knew him well enough to be sure he wouldn’t mind. Dwight had a healthy appetite and a rather undiscerning palate.

“That’s amazing, Demelza. Thank you.”

“Thank you, Dwight. This place is so well stocked. I mean, look at the wine rack!” she continued.

“Yes, and Verity said there are a few bottles of single malt in the cabinet by the hearth as well.”

“Verity?”

“Verity Poldark is our landlady and a bit of a local hero. She’s an architect but also leads the historical trust to preserve old buildings. These mine buildings along the coast are her latest project. They’ve been redone—in some cases rebuilt from ruins—and are let for the holidays to bring some tourist cash and also media attention to the area. She seems to painstakingly attend to the details too. The stone floors, the fixtures, the ceiling beams are all reclaimed from other old buildings. Her work has been featured in a number of magazines and professional design journals.”

Dwight considered himself rather fortunate to have booked the cottage at a good rate for the duration of their stay in Cornwall. The engine house was remarkably charming as a holiday home. Up the narrow wooden staircase, were two cosy bedrooms and a bath with a deep, clawfoot tub. The kitchen had both historical features of wooden cupboards, built in benches, and shelves laden with old stone ware but also spotless stainless steel appliances and a pristine granite work surface. In the sitting area, deep squashy chairs were strategically placed before the hearth, and though Dwight had only been there a week, he’d on several occasions found them perfect for afternoon dozing.

And each day he stayed on, Dwight found himself more and more anxiously awaiting Demelza’s arrival knowing how much she’d appreciate all the details in the snug retreat by the sea. He had said as much to Verity when she first showed him the place.

*I wonder if Verity is related to Ross Poldark?* Dwight thought to himself, surprised he hadn’t made
that connection before.

“Well this place is simply gorgeous. Part of me wants to just admire it all and not touch a thing and the other part feels so perfectly at home.” Demelza wiggled her bare feet and padded back to the pot on the flame.

“This is going to be ready in a jiffy. Are you ready to eat?” she asked.

“Always”.

“Oh! I almost forgot--the parsley is from this kitchen garden!” she continued, almost squealing with delight as she pointed out the potted herbs on the sill.

“I could see how you’d like that. Speaking of gardens, Verity Poldark has invited us over to see her family's ancestral home. It’s one of those big, old estates and only open to the public a few days each month but she’s promised us a private tour. It is said to have amazing gardens and original tapestries.”

“And I thought we were here to work? I was ready to dig in right away but you’re once again proving to be an indulgent employer. Or am I just your favourite, Dwight?” she winked.

At this he felt himself blush a bit.

“Right. Why don’t I make myself useful and pour us some wine?” he said.

*It was bound to come up sometime.* Dwight laughed lightly to himself and went to work on the cork.

Dwight and Demelza’s relationship could be described as complicated. They’d been friends for almost a decade, before that he had been her teacher, and on and off he’d been her employer. They’d also, on many occasions, been lovers.

Dwight disliked the phrase “friends with benefits” and thought it somehow cheapened the intimate time they had spent together. It wasn’t a benefit they owed one another and it was certainly never a given. Whenever they met up again throughout the years it wasn’t automatic that they’d reunite as lovers, and there had never been hard feelings between them when it just didn’t feel right.

Maybe their relationship was actually quite uncomplicated. There were never any games between them nor jealousy. Friendship was always at the centre.

Dwight considered what they had to be a healthy attraction. There were no lightning force surges of desire, no need to take her on the kitchen table. It was more of a constant low simmer, and when in bed together, there was warmth, tenderness, trust. More than with any other lover, he’d found enjoyment with her in giving pleasure as much as receiving. Perhaps because they were friends first and foremost or because they were just both alike in their personalities--giving and attentive to others. They just worked well together.

Yet if he reflected longer on it, Dwight would have seen that the last few times they met up they had slept together straight away; remaining just friends was perhaps a bit more difficult than he was admitting.

He tried to push back the thought but he couldn't help wonder how things would end up between them this time.

*That’s not why you asked her on this project,* he chided himself--and he truly believed he was being honest.
“Did you see the outbuilding about a hundred yards up the hill?” Dwight asked as they sat lingering at the table in the rustic kitchen. The steaming bowls Demelza had put in front of them were long gone, as was nearly an entire bottle of wine. “I thought we’d make it our field laboratory—the perfect place for Cornwall Ecological Associates to set about our work. We can spread out all the charts and maps, store the smelly samples, slop about with our muddy waders with no worries. And it has good wifi.”

Demelza looked across the oak table at Dwight. After all these years, he really didn't seem to have aged. He had some new wrinkles around his eyes from squinting into the sun and, just at his temple, a few grey hairs had come in but were hardly noticeable in his full head of light brown hair. Or was his hair dark blonde?

*Depends on how much he’s been outdoors.*

She smiled to herself thinking how his eyes also seemed to change between blue and grey, depending on his mood. She’d learned to read them over time and knew they were grey when he was troubled but most brilliantly blue when he was aroused.

*He’ll be a gorgeous silver fox when he gets old and I’ll be the batty bird lady all alone,* she thought.

She’d always found Dwight attractive but she mostly enjoyed being near him for other reasons. He was warm and kind and had a calming effect on her. She found herself relaxing—muscles loosening, blood pressure lowering, laughter coming easily—whenever she was in his presence. Whether other people felt that around him too or if it was just her, she couldn’t say. Perhaps the two of them were just in sync.

Demelza was not really in contact with her brothers and her father was dead, so in many ways Dwight was the closest thing she had to family now. He was a connection to her past but also someone who showed an interest in her present endeavors as well. And it worked both ways for them. When Dwight broke his leg several years ago, it was Demelza he called to stay with him until he could get around on his own again.

Well, maybe family wasn’t quite the right distinction, certainly she’d never say he was “like a brother” since their relationship was also at times sexual. She laughed again thinking of the last time they’d gone to bed together. They weren’t in a bed at all but a tent in Scotland during an unexpected thunderstorm. And then he hadn’t been either calm nor calming but in fact quite passionate and exhilarating.

Yes, Dwight Enys was lovely.

*How easy would it be now to reach across the table and trace that muscle on his forearm with my finger tip?* she wondered. *Easy, Carne. You’ve only been with him a few hours. Surely that’s the wine talking.*

She immediately dismissed the idea and went so far as to fold her hands in her lap lest they act on memories of their own.

“That sounds like a grand work space but tell me, Dwight. Have you any? Associates, that is?” she teased.

“No, but I’m hoping to gain some, the most promising prospect is sitting across from me now. Listen
Demelza, we can really settle in here and expand. There’s work for us I believe,” he explained.

“Really?” she questioned.

“Well, every time someone wants to build a road or an industry wants to expand they’ll need an ecological appraisal. Or even new home construction, swimming pools… and whilst those jobs may seem insignificant they…”

“Keep food on the table and the electricity on?” Demelza offered.

“And establish the name of the firm so we can then do the meatier projects. You know working with the woodland and the historical trusts, projects that really matter. After all Demelza, as natives of the region, having knowledge of ecological issues specific to Cornwall, especially those involving former mine sites, will be an advantage.”

“Natives?” she laughed. “Dwight, neither one of us have lived here for years! We are just as much outsiders as…”

“Shh...we needn't reveal that detail. Couldn’t we just say Cornwall is in our blood?”

“Well, I’m happy to help you in any way I can, Dwight,” she said brightly.

“I was hoping you’d say that. This job is bigger and possibly more contentious than the last one I did around here so I’ll need all the help I can get. There’s a lot of data to analyse and multiple reports—conflicting reports—to reconcile but also there’s field work, which I know you love. And no doubt you’ll correct all my mistakes as you usually do.”

At this last attempt to flatter her, Demelza smiled. She knew this was rubbish—Dwight was such a fastidious professional and rarely made mistakes. But they’d had a good working relationship in the past where they both could challenge each other’s findings without any hard feelings. She loved that give and take and rarely found it on other research teams she’d been part of.

“By the way Trinidad seems to have agreed with you,” he said, noting the glow she had to her usually creamy white skin. He had been pleased that the timing of this assignment had worked out; Demelza was just finishing up a research fellowship at the Asa Wright Bird Centre when he had invited her to join him in Cornwall.

“Yes, it was only six months but such a fun diversion! And while the Scarlet Ibis isn’t exactly my bird, it is fascinating and the research centre was simply amazing. Great people doing wonderful work and of course, such a setting. I’d like to take you there someday,” she beamed. Talking about birds and travel always excited her.

“Hope you soaked in as much sunshine as you could. It looks to be a bit gloomy here this spring.”

“Oh, I like it. It’s cosy and even though there’s still a chill in the air, spring rain feels fresh. Turns out after all these years of traveling as far as I could to get away from here, maybe I had missed Cornwall after all.”

“Good god, you see the good in everything, don’t you?” he said.

“And is it me or is it actually hot in here?” Demelza answered, flushing a bit.

“It is a bit warm. I’ll see if I can adjust the thermostat.”
The next few days were spent in their laboratory building sorting through reports and documents in order to begin work on the Preliminary Ecological Appraisal they were hired to do. The downpour had been relentless and the only time they spent outdoors was dashing back and forth from the lab back to the cottage. But late Saturday afternoon the rain suddenly paused and they were desperate to get out for a walk.

“I once had a wise teacher who’d say ‘In ecology if you spend all your time indoors, then you are doing something terribly wrong’,,”’ Demelza laughed. It had been Dwight who’d said that many years ago, trying to encourage some of his lazier students to get more field experience. He’d never had to work hard to convince Demelza though. It was her love of the outdoors, not tedious data analysis, that had led her to this line of work in the first place.

Demelza was an ornithologist but was trained in basic field ecology--by Dwight in fact--and occasionally worked these sorts of projects when she was between research jobs. But since it was spring, this assignment would also involve a lot of nest counts so her expertise would not go to waste.

Finally freed from their indoor prison, the two friends walked slowly along the cliffs that overlooked the sea, breathing deeply and enjoying the magnificent beauty around them. The air was cool on their faces but held the promise of some warmth to come as the sunshine spread overhead. Below, the sea looked somewhat calm too--the white foam deposited on the shore by the waves was thick but not violently upset. Along the grassy slopes the small pink and yellow flowers that had fought the rain mightily now waved proudly in the sun, heralding the spring.

“So the first study we are reviewing is the one commissioned by the mining consortium. And they are called a mining consortium but they are not actually miners?” she asked, as they walked down the escarpment through the tall sea grass.

“Yes, now they just run quarries. In fact there is only one real mine currently in Cornwall, and that’s owned by George Warleggan.”

“The name sounds quarrelsome,” she mused.

“Let’s hope he’s not. He’s the one who hired us on to reconcile the findings of his Phase I Habitat Survey from this autumn and one the consortium undertook last year.”

“Do all the quarries work together?” she asked.

“Not all of them but these do. Tressida, Tonkin, Blewett, Johnson, Trevaunance and a few others. Not Warleggan—he’s on his own. It’s an old affiliation I believe, but seems to be a good business model for them,” he explained.

“So the consortium had a survey completed that suggested any expansion would cause too great an environmental impact to the habitats and protected species near the quarry sites. And Warleggan had a similar one done that showed no such threat?” She hoped she didn’t sound thick but was merely trying to get the players and the politics of this job worked out.

“Yes, the consortium had it done two years ago. They weren’t even looking to do any expansion, it
was just part of a longer term strategic planning process. Whereas Warleggan does want to expand his mine and his quarry, and has been very vocal about it.”

“And it was the same firm that did both reports? How odd!”

“Some low level office assistant noticed the disparities and contacted the consortium,” he explained.

“So then what does the ecologist who’d done the original work have to say?” she asked.

“Yes, well...he’s retired to Spain and no one has been able to contact him.”

“Dwight, do you think something dodgy is going on with Warleggan?” she asked with a raised brow.

“No, he’s the one who suggested the new assessment by a third party,” Dwight replied. “Why would he push for that if he’s planning something untoward?”

A brisk wind picked up and whipped Demelza’s loose hair around her face. Laughing, she struggled to pull it back into a knot.

The sky over the sea had grown darker grey mixed with an angry orange now, suggesting the brief bit of sunshine would soon be ending. Reluctantly they turned and climbed back along the cliff towards the engine house. Further up the coast, beyond their cottage, the ruins of another old mine was visible in the distance--one that had not been restored and looked to be in danger of crumbling into the sea.

“So many old mines around Cornwall, just imagine the unchecked environmental damages all those centuries ago. Not only to wildlife, to the people too...all that heavy metal runoff in your potato patch is bound to cause some neurological damage.”

“That probably wouldn’t be what killed you because you’d die of something else first. Like a sore throat or an infected blister,” he reasoned.

“For women the dangers were mostly kitchen fires and childbirth. I guess for men it would be lung conditions or accidents from the mines?”

“Was it better to be a fisherman and risk being lost at sea, I wonder? But I suppose you did what you had to, and in most cases, had no choice.”

“No, I’d choose the sea,” Demelza said emphatically. “Put me on a boat or even in the water anyday. I could never be a miner, I’m too claustrophobic. What about you. Dwight, would you rather be buried alive or drown?”

“A mining accident you could do both you know,” he said.

“Come on, answer the question.”

“Neither, Demelza!” he laughed. He had forgotten how her games of Would You Rather tended to be rather grim.

“Ok, would you rather a long slow death with ample time to make amends and put your affairs in order or a quick and painless one you never saw coming?” she asked.

“Oh, let me see. Do I get a loved one with me in the slow death?” he asked. “Because then yes,
always the slow death. But only if I’m with someone I love.” He grinned, feeling rather satisfied with his response.

“How does a heart that big even fit into such a chest?” she asked facetiously.

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“Are you saying my chest is small?”

“No Dwight, you’re just as chiseled and strong as you were in your youth.” Now she rolled her eyes.

“Are you saying I’m no longer in my youth? Is this where you tease me mercilessly about my age and my gym obsession?”

“Heavens, I would never dare to tease you, Dwight,” she said with a straight face but her laughing eyes gave her away.

They did like to tease each other but it was mostly Dwight who teased Demelza about her age--she was almost ten years younger than he was. And Dwight did have a disciplined gym regime that she found curious. Dwight was rather sure Demelza had never picked up a weight in her life but she was strong and fit nonetheless, mostly from running. Despite their different approaches, both used their workouts to sort through problems and think out complex ideas. Until recently he’d had a string of academic posts that allowed him free access to gyms; he’d have to find one around here if he stayed. Or perhaps he’d take up running with Demelza along the cliffs in such a lovely countryside.

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The following Monday morning found them in Truro preparing to present to all the parties involved with the project. Both Warleggan and the consortium had each proposed using their own executive suites but instead after some back and forth, they reluctantly agreed to book a conference room in a local hotel that was deemed to be neutral territory.

As they had planned, Demelza and Dwight reported early and began to set up before anyone else arrived. This meeting was to just introduce themselves and reiterate the scope of the project. But it was also their public debut as a professional team and there was a charged energy in the empty room as neither was sure what to expect. She laid out the information packets at each seat while he ran through his planned remarks.

“Okay so I’ll go over the preliminary schedule and let them know what stages to expect. And you can add in the details that make us sound like we know what we’re doing,” he laughed, then cleared his throat.

“Hmm hmm. CEA have considerable experience producing impact assessment reports according to the latest guidelines from the CIEEM…” he began, his voice taking on a more solemn professional demeanor.

“And since there are a number of different types of bird surveys you may require for building and development, such as breeding birds, wintering birds and migrant birds, I’m happy to introduce my esteemed colleague, Dr. Carne.”

“You mean the gorgeously stunning and brilliant, Dr. Carne,” she added with a wink and a smile.

“Our ecologists undertaking your PEA will be able to advise you on the scope of any further surveys required,” he went on. He had been rehearsing these opening remarks for days now and had them down pat. “Once the survey has been completed, we will have flagged any issues that may have an impact on the proposed development. Our final report at this juncture will include an executive summary, methodology, desk study, and survey results. Now, sirs, if you would kindly handover my
“Well I’m convinced,” she laughed, then her face froze in panic. “Oh Dwight! I stupidly left the laptop in the car. I need it to project the digital terrain models we generated from the Ordnance Survey data. I’ll just run and get it. If you must, go ahead and start without me. I promise I’ll be fast!”

Luck was not on her side. The Defender was in a carpark a few streets over from the hotel so Demelza had some distance to cover in order to retrieve her computer. She was anxious to be there for the start of the meeting and jogged back as quickly as she could.

Laptop tucked under her arm and a bit breathless, she was just about to open the conference room door when it was jerked open from the inside and a strange man stormed through it.

He had been exiting with such speed and ferocity and apparently had paid no mind to what was in front of him. At once he collided with the unexpecting Demelza, who helplessly saw her laptop careening towards the floor. Just before it hit, he reached down and caught it in his large hand then thrust it back towards her in one powerful move.

She stood silently for what seemed like minutes but was only a few seconds, waiting for him to speak, or at least offer an apology for their collision. But he said nothing and walked away still breathing heavily in what she could only assume was anger.

Demelza remained frozen, her mouth agape, desperately trying to process what had just happened so quickly, her defenses still up after having been charged by such a strong body. She hadn’t had long to fully take him in but saw that he was a tall man, with black curly hair and intensely dark eyes.

The floor looked to be cold, hard tile so she was instantly glad her new laptop hadn’t been smashed. Just the month before her old Macbook had been lost in a mangrove swamp so she wasn’t eager to replace it yet again.

But who was this man and why was he so angry and rude?

Dwight came out soon after, grey faced and solemn. Demelza was struck at once by the expression she’d never seen him wear before.

“What in god’s name just happened?” she gasped. She had restrained the urge to use stronger language since they were in public.

“That might have been the shortest job CEA has ever undertaken. It seems, Demelza, the project is off,” he said grimly.

“Oh Dwight, no!”

“George Warleggan is questioning our fitness for the project, claiming we have personal connections to the consortium and thus a conflict of interest.”

“A what?”

“He’s presenting my prior relationship with Ross Poldark as an excuse to remove us from the job.”

“Not so fast Enys--it may not come to that.” Another man came through the door and clapped Dwight reassuringly on the shoulder. His dark hair and beard had a silky sheen and his eyes seemed kind.

“We all--the rest of the consortium that is--agreed to this independent review and we are demanding
it go forward. This will now go before the ethics review board to see if your prior relationship with Ross Poldark impacts your impartiality. The claim is a load of rubbish, if you ask me. If the review board agrees with George, you’ll be paid for the preliminary work you’ve done, travel expenses, plus an additional compensation for the termination of your contract. If they side with the rest of us, George will be required to pay for all the days you’ve remained in Cornwall on retainer before you could begin your work. It’s in his best interest too this get resolved with haste.”

“Demelza, this is Richard Tonkin. He owns Cornwall Mineral Corp. in Looe. Richard, this is my associate, Dr. Demelza Carne.”

“My pleasure, Dr. Carne. We look forward to working with you both and hope we’ll get this sorted quickly.”

“Dwight! I still don’t understand. Who is Ross Poldark?” Demelza asked. “Was he was the man who almost knocked me down or was that George Warleggan?”

“That must have been Ross—he did storm out in a huff. No, George isn’t even here. He sent his proxy Tankard to deliver the news,” Dwight explained. “Ross Poldark owns Grace Quarry. And I do know him...he’s an old friend, I’ve known him for years.”

“But didn’t that Warleggan man hire you? Wasn’t it his responsibility to suss out any relationships you have with the companies? You didn’t mislead him did you? No, of course you wouldn’t…”

“No, in my contract I was asked if I had any familial relationships with any parties involved and I don’t. Ross Poldark and I were flatmates in London almost two decades ago. I haven't seen him in ages. I think of him as a friend but in truth we haven’t been close in years.”

“Did you know he was part of the consortium?”

“It would seem sloppy to say no. His names are on the documents but it really hadn’t occurred to me that it was the same man or that this would be an issue. I’m terribly sorry for everyone’s time.” He felt unsettled and embarrassed—it was unlike him to make mistakes like this.

“Dwight, it will be alright,” Demelza said gently to him and able to detect his fragile state, took his hand in hers.

Dwight sensed a shift at that moment—she was his friend talking now, no longer his business acquaintance. There had been times she’d offered comfort to him in moments of distress and he knew how he’d welcomed it. If they were alone would she have kissed him?

“We’ll get this sorted,” she said softly.

Demelza didn't let go of his hand and he gave hers a squeeze in return.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to https://www.cecenvironment.co.uk for the technical terminology and general gist of things in the ecological consulting field. I beg forgiveness from any reader who
sees through my flimsy research. I swear 'twas all done in the name of adventure and romance.
Le Corbusier of Cornwall

Dwight sat by the hearth in the engine house trying to sort his feelings and make, what he hoped to be, a rational plan of what to do next. It was morning but the sky was as dark and grey as evening. Still he did not bother to turn on any lights in the cottage and instead sat alone in the gloom. The now familiar spring rain drummed the slate roof persistently, threatening to interrupt his thoughts.

Yes, we must remain rational and not succumb to emotion, he told himself.

Dwight was decidedly too balanced to be paranoid or to take a professional setback as a personal insult. But since the disastrous meeting in Truro there had been other smaller incidents that had caused concern or at least given him pause. He’d received several calls on his mobile from unknown numbers at odd hours. On the occasions when he picked up, no one was there. And then, just the night before, the rubbish bin outside the laboratory had been knocked over and that had him more than puzzled.

At first he had thought it was foxes-- they were in the country after all-- but why was the bin from the laboratory rummaged through and not the one from the kitchen? And if it wasn’t a scavenger but a prowler responsible, just what might they be looking for? There was nothing of importance in there, no top secret documents, no really any personal information. Was there?

And were those fresh tire tracks he spied this morning next to the Defender that had been parked in the drive all night?

No, of course not. You are tired and are overreacting, he chided himself.

He weighed whether to share these observations with Demelza but concluded he shouldn’t trouble her. He settled deeper into the chair and closed his eyes.

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Demelza came downstairs to find Dwight asleep in the armchair by the fireplace. The flames had nearly gone out so she added another log and poked the ashes until its vigor was renewed. Yesterday it had been overly warm in the engine house but today felt cold. It was raining again, and a bitter chill seemed to seep through the ancient flagstone floors.

Poor Dwight.

She’d listened to him walking around in the night, obviously too anxious to sleep. At one point it sounded as though he’d even gone out up the path to their laboratory building. She’d heard the door to the lab creak open but never did see a light go on, so maybe she’d imagined it after all. But it wouldn’t have surprised her if he had; it was just like Dwight to dig into his work if he was feeling distress.

Demelza decided to let him rest and covered him with one of the thick wool blankets folded in a basket by the chair--another detail in the cottage that looked attractive but was also entirely practical. She’d take the Defender to the Trenwith estate alone. It was more important that Dwight catch up on his sleep so later they could work out a plan together.

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Even in the rain, it was a lovely trip from the engine house to Trenwith, first as Demelza drove along the coastal road, and then when she swung inland as the SATNAV instructed. It wasn’t long before
she stopped the car at Trenwith’s ancient iron gates and unrolled her window to speak to a spotty-faced teenager clutching a clipboard.

“I’m here to see…” she began to explain.

“Yes, yes... take the drive to the left around the back,” he replied without letting her finish. He seemed to want to check her registration plates against the list he held but in the end couldn't be bothered. “You're rather late you know,” he added snidely.

Late? Dwight had said to arrive at ten which gave her another fifteen minutes by her watch. She checked the time on her mobile just to be sure. Maybe the house got crowded and she’d need to queue for a tour?

From its exterior, Demelza couldn’t quite place the age of the main house. She’d always liked history but relied upon others to know all the specific details that separated one historic period from another. All she could say was that it was grey stone and definitely looked old. And big. Although she supposed it wasn't as massive as some estates, to her it was still rather impressive.

The fine gravel under the tires soon became coarser stone as she drove around the back of the estate as instructed. At once she saw a swarm of parked vans, trucks, and cars. An area of courtyard had been marked off by a paper sign, now soggy from the rain and twisting in the wind, that was barely legible. Event parking/staff and others.

Demelza pulled the Defender in as tightly as she could, figuring she counted as an “other”.

Yes, it did look crowded. Maybe the extra time the boy alluded to was to go through some sort of security screening? She decided to leave her rucksack in the car and shoved her mobile and wallet into the deep pocket of the gilet she’d borrowed from Dwight. She was forever impressed by how many pockets men’s clothing seemed to have compared to women’s.

“Tell me you didn’t just drive over the cables?” a stout ginger man growled as she stepped into the drizzle.

“Oh, I didn’t notice…” she began. Now she did see criss-crossing the drive were thick black electrical cables, the serious industrial kind for external powers sources, generators, lights and whatnot.

What exactly is going on here?

“Well, it’s too late now. You’d better get in and get orders since you're so late,” he said gruffly, looking at his watch and taking off at a quick march in the opposite direction across the lawn.

Hastily she moved out of the rain and through an open door that led into what appeared to be an old scullery. It too was bustling with people wearing headsets, looking at clipboards, carrying loads on their shoulders. Of what, she couldn’t quite make out. Metal poles and black cases--lighting equipment maybe? No one seemed to notice her standing in the doorway, they all had jobs to do.

For the second time in just under a week she asked herself if she was in the right place.

“Are you one of the models?” a voice asked behind her. She turned to see an attractive young woman looking her up and down.

Dressed head to toe in black, this woman was stylish and breathtakingly stunning. Though her clothes were simple, subtleties in the cut of her trousers and the drape of her jersey top suggested they were expensive. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a sleek ponytail and her flawless white skin
was professionally made up in such a way that she didn't seem made up at all. Kohl lightly lined her pale blue eyes without creating an overly dark or dramatic look; her pale lips were pulled into an inscrutable expression. She was tall and lean enough to be a model herself, but judging by the headset she wore around her neck, the leather portfolio she held in her hand, and the confident air she radiated, she seemed to have another job at the moment.

Demelza suddenly felt underdressed in her jeans and trainers, and poorly groomed as well. Her hair already piled in a messy bun was now damp from just a few minutes out in the rain, her bare skin freckled and pink from the sun and wind. She laughed aloud that anyone might mistake her for a model.

“Good god, no. I think I’m in the wrong place. I’m supposed to meet Verity Poldark, she’s my landlady.”

“Oh, then you are one of the ecologists staying at the engine house. Verity told me about you. You’re the... ornithologist, right? Come this way,” the woman said. Her voice suddenly warmed and she smiled at Demelza as though they were old friends. She certainly seemed to know more about Demelza than Demelza did about her.

*How does she know I'm an ornithologist? What has Dwight said about me?*

“Nevermind all this,” Caroline said, waving her hand dismissively, as though she wished she could make the other people and buzz around them disappear. “We’re doing a photoshoot on the grounds today--haute couture in a Gothic setting-- but it’s raining, of course, so it’s all been moved indoors and everyone’s cross that they have to adjust their schedules. But we have plenty of places in this big old house with the same charm and mood so we’ll be fine.”

“Do you live here too?” Demelza asked

“Live here? At Trenwith? No one really lives here anymore, not in the main part of the house anyway. Well, I suppose the family has apartments in the west wing but they mostly spend their time in Truro and rarely are ever here. No, I take that back, the great aunt does still live on the grounds. Maybe you’ll get to meet her today. She’s wildly entertaining.”

“And Verity Poldark?”

“Verity Poldark runs the trust and cares for the estate until her nephew comes of age. She’s working around here somewhere.”

They turned a corner and entered a great hallway, impressive in its grandeur but fairly dark. Polished mahogany wall paneling rose up to the high ceilings, the only light entering came from a somewhat cloudy leaded glass window. The large stone hearths at either end of the room stood empty and cold. Demelza couldn't help but think how energy inefficient such an old drafty manor would be.

She looked up to the minstrel gallery, also empty, that lined the room on one side.

*Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang...* She suddenly remembered the line she’d once learned at school. *Was that Sonnet 73?*

“Oh, you must be Dr. Carne!” A friendly voice came down the stairs and shook Demelza from her
“Yes, please call me Demelza,” she said, relieved to finally meet the woman she had come to see.

Demelza was expecting someone older, a woman in her sixties maybe, based on Verity’s professional reputation as Dwight had described it. While Demelza couldn’t make out her hostess’s exact age—probably somewhere in her late thirties—Verity’s genuine smile, round cheeks, and youthful energy made her seem even younger still. And for just a moment her shining brown eyes reminded Demelza of an intense pair that had flashed at her with anger just a few days before.

Dwight said Verity is Ross Poldark’s cousin. Of course there could be a family resemblance, she thought.

“Let’s go in the drawing room and have some tea to warm us, shall we? Caroline, you’ll come too, of course. Goodness it’s grown so chilly again,” Verity said, leading them through the great hall into a cosier room just beyond.

“Please tell me, Dr. Carne, I mean Demelza—such a lovely old Cornish name by the way—has the engine house been too drafty?”

“Oh no. It is perfectly comfortable. We’ve no complaints, I assure you.” In fact, they’d been struggling to get the thermostat to work properly and if anything the engine house had been rather toasty. She was hoping the slight chill she felt this morning meant they’d finally managed to properly adjust the heat.

They sat and Verity and Caroline immediately began to ask Demelza questions about herself—where she was from, how she’d come to know Dwight, and what brought her to Cornwall again. Demelza had envisioned a more formal tour of the historic estate and hadn’t expected to be so warmly received into the cheering company of these two women. After such a bewildering beginning to her visit, she now felt curiously welcome.

Maybe Dwight was right about coming back to Cornwall. Could this be where we--where I--belong?

And as the three chatted before the crackling fire, she realised it had been days since she had a good laugh. A bit of a grey cloud had hovered over the engine house since the meeting with the mining consortium in Truro. She’d been afraid to say the wrong thing to Dwight—she’d been so worried about him—so she’d said very little at all. And unbeknownst to Demelza, Dwight hadn’t wanted to trouble her so he’d been tight lipped as well.

I need to find a way to raise his spirits and ease the tension, she resolved, then turned her attention back to the conversation around her.

“Caroline, you haven’t told me what you do here?” Demelza asked.

“Caroline is Trenwith’s official stylist,” Verity explained. “I couldn’t do anything without her and her eye.”

“Nonsense. I just follow your instructions to the letter, Verity,” Caroline began. “She really knows her period details and if I so much as put a candle stick out of place she graciously points out my historical inaccuracies.”

There was something about the way these two women spoke to one another—positive and supportive—that warmed Demelza more than the fire and the hot tea.
Is everyone in Cornwall so friendly? she wondered then remembered George Warleggan and Ross Poldark.

“Do you live in the west wing with the rest of your family, Verity?” Demelza asked.

“Oh no, that’s just Aunt Agatha. My new brother-in-law and I... don't really get on so well,” Verity replied slowly, carefully choosing her words.

“Rather hard to believe, isn’t it, that someone wouldn’t get on with Verity? But then again he doesn't really get on well with anyone but his wife,” Caroline interjected quickly.

“Thankfully they aren't here much and he’s not really my brother-in-law...he’s married to my late brother’s widow.”

“Oh I’m sorry,” Demelza said.

“We are all sorry she married him,” Caroline laughed.

“Let’s just say, he’s not my favourite family member. But I do this--run the historic trust and keep up the estate for my nephew, who is among my favourites.”

“Verity is a skilled diplomat. How else could an avowed modernist be appointed to run an Elizabethan estate?”

“Modernist?” Demelza asked in amazement.

“Oh, it's hardly a secret. Verity is an architect by training. The house she designed for herself at Falmouth won several awards. It’s gorgeous--all straight lines, glass and steel, open floor plan. She’s like le Corbusier of Cornwall.”

Verity blushed a deep scarlet but didn't say anything.

“Oh, to live in your dream home that you designed yourself! That must be so satisfying!” Demelza gushed.

At this Verity blushed deeply. Quickly she rose to her feet and muttered, “I’ll go see to some more tea.”

“Oh no, I fear I touched a nerve,” Demelza worried softly, once Verity had left the room. “Don’t tell me the roof leaks?”

“No, I’m the clumsy one here,” Caroline said. “I should have known better than to mention it. Verity designed it for her and her fiance but they split before it was finished and they never did marry. Now every time it wins an award the knife twists further in the wound. It was her late brother that forced them to part.”

“How tragic.”

“And thoroughly *un*-modern,” Caroline added.

“But now that her brother is...gone...I mean...couldn't she...?”

“Yes she could but I think she feels that chapter is closed. She’s thrown herself into her work and all her new historical Cornwall ventures since then.”

“Work can help keep loneliness at bay, but not forever,” Demelza said solemnly.
“Okay, Dr. Carne, explain to me how someone who studies pretty birds is involved with the ugly business of quarries and mining?” Caroline asked.

“Yes, it turns out it can get rather ugly, can’t it?”

When Verity returned several minutes later with another tray of tea and biscuits, Caroline and Demelza had already made an unspoken agreement to change the subject away from Verity’s work and extended family.

“It sounds as though Dr. Enys wants to stay in Cornwall. Will you stay with him, Demelza?” Verity asked.

“I’m not sure. It’s certainly an intriguing prospect. I’m recently a finalist for a job in Chicago so I need to see what comes of that before I make any decisions. Usually I’m begging for work but now it’s my good fortune to perhaps choose my next move.”

“From what I know of Chicago, it is terribly far away and dreadfully cold in the winter,” Caroline said with a finality suggesting that for her the case was settled. Of course, Demelza would not take a position in such a place.

Demelza didn't think it was the time to go further into the details of the Chicago job that only a few weeks before she’d been desperate to secure. The Field Museum had become a leading force in international bird research largely due to its extensive collection of specimens. But somehow she figured if Caroline found mining ugly, then hearing about old, stuffed birds would be even less agreeable.

“Verity, we must appeal to Demelza to stay here and show her the Cornish countryside is just as alluring as some large American city. Oh, I know! Demelza and her partner must come to the gala on Saturday.”

“Gala?” Demelza laughed looking down at her trainers.

“Every now and then charities hire out Trenwith for big parties. There's one this weekend to benefit Cornwall Historic Trust,” Verity explained. “You and Dr. Enys should definitely come.”

Demelza was struggling to come up with a polite way of declining, fearing that any charitable event probably came with a hefty price tag per plate. Neither she nor Dwight could afford to drop hundreds, or maybe even thousands of pounds in one evening, regardless of the cause. But before she could speak Caroline seemed to have read her thoughts.

“You’ll come as my guests, naturally.”

“I thought my cousin Ross was your guest, Caroline?” Verity laughed.

“Since when do I have to limit my entourage, Verity? I bought three tables so I need to fill them with all the interesting people I know, even if I just met them.”

“That’s very kind of you but I’m afraid I only packed work clothes so I’ve hardly a ball gown with me,” Demelza said.

*Nor have I ever owned one*, she thought.

“No excuses, Dr. Carne!” Caroline quipped. With that she picked up the headset dangling around her neck that she’d ignored for the better part of the last hour and spoke into it.
“Lorenzo? Tell me, where have you set up the dressing area? Lovely, we’ll be down in a moment. Yes, yes, I know you’re frightfully busy but you do owe me a favor. Quite a few in fact.” Then she smiled and rose to her feet. “It’s all settled then. Come with me, Demelza. You’ll excuse us, Verity?”

“But Caroline! Verity has yet to show me the tapestries…” Demelza protested.

“They’ve survived for five hundred years so I don’t suppose another few hours will cause them to disappear?”

“I don’t think we can argue with her, my dear. No one can,” Verity laughed. “See you Saturday then!”
“Caroline needs your measurements too, Dwight, so she can find you suitable attire for the evening. I have no idea what that means exactly but I’d expect formal,” Demelza said coming into their laboratory space with a tape measure. It was one meant for measuring longer distances in the field, not for dress making, but was all she had and would have to do.

“Just as long as I don’t end up looking like the wait staff. Goodness, I have not been fitted for a suit since Ross Poldark’s wedding to Elizabeth Chynoweth years ago.”

“Ross Poldark is married?” Demelza asked.

“No, they have long since separated,” Dwight explained. “Elizabeth then married Ross’s cousin, Francis, who sadly died in an accident—he drowned. She’s now, in fact, married to George Warleggan.”

“Warleggan? The same horrid Warleggan who is stopping the project? So the animosity between the men is maybe personal?”

“Yes, there has been a strange rivalry between them for ages. Now it may no longer be personal, it’s purely business but unfortunately just as cut-throat.”

“Yet all of Cornwall need pay for it? I mean if there are going to be ecological consequences and irreversible damage just because one man is greedy and another is stubborn…”

*How could she rightly guess that Ross is stubborn?* Dwight wondered.

“Well let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” he said. “And who is Caroline Penvenen again?”

“She’s a friend of Verity Poldark. I thought she just styled Trenwith House—you know dressing the rooms for magazine shoots and such, but it turns out she also dresses the inhabitants—she’s a professional stylist. And she’s a publicist herself so she really knows everyone around here and…”

“And makes money being a socialite and looking pretty?” Dwight offered.

“That’s a bit more judgmental than I’d expect from you Dwight. She is certainly more posh than you or me but she seems a nice person at heart. She’s been nothing but welcoming to me—and you by extension. Besides, when did you become such a champion of the people?”

“When I saw how those with money and power around push others around. Demelza, it has been that way for centuries here. And this is the one thing we can do, to protect this land from unchecked development. I believe the words you just used were ‘ecological consequences and irreversible damage’.”

“I can assure you, Dwight, that Caroline Penvenen is no threat to wildlife,” she interrupted and put a soothing hand on his chest. She was surprised to feel his heart beating so vigorously. Just what had gotten his dander up?

“She is a champion of our cause and knows that any quarry or mine expansions would hurt the region. It would certainly be detrimental to tourism.”

“Well, I admit, you are usually a good judge of character,” he said.
“Okay then Dwight, are you ready? I must find something to divert me until we can start this project! I’ve got the tape measure so let’s check your arms, chest, and neck, shall we? And of course your waist and inseam,” she added with a coy smile.

“You? You’ll be taking my…”

“Yes, Dwight. You’ll recall what a brilliant student I was at data analysis. I’m good at collecting it as well. Don’t you trust me?”

“Of course I trust you, Demelza,” he said earnestly.

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Almost a decade before they were occupying the engine house together in Cornwall, Dwight Enys had taken a position as lecturer at Sheffield and it was then that he had first met Demelza Carne. At the time she was a young university student with a bright future-- one that she almost gave up on.

One grey February morning Dwight sat alone in the windowless, cluttered office he shared with four other junior faculty in the Department of Animal and Plant Sciences. No one seemed to know for sure if the yellowed, overstuffed files and dusty books stacked on the shelves belonged to the room’s current occupants or to those who had long since moved on. That day Dwight’s colleagues were all either out in the field or teaching, and since he was behind on a research proposal he had to submit later that same week, he was pleased to have the place to himself. Yet when he heard a tentative knock on the door, followed by the earnest face of one of his second year students peering in, he found he welcomed the distraction.

“I’m sorry to bother you, sir, but do you have a minute?” she asked. Students visiting him during office hours were usually nervous because they had fallen behind in their work or arrogantly over-confident, if they were angling for a better mark. This young woman seemed neither and stood inscrutable and tall in the doorway, waiting to be invited in.

“Yes, come in, please,” he said. “Miss Cane is it?”

“Carne, Demelza Carne,” she gently corrected. “I’m in your Conservation Principles lecture…”

She entered and sat in the chair opposite his desk, tugging at the strap of a heavy leather bag that dug into her shoulder. When she finally put it to the floor by her feet, it had already left an angry red mark on her pale skin. She pulled at the gaping neck of her top as if to cover up before anyone noticed. Flustered, Dwight quickly looked away. He was always extra cautious around his female students lest they think he was leering; he often found himself looking off into the distance or at their shoes just to be safe. Before him now was an attractive young woman, with shining blue eyes and bright red hair plaited neatly down her back. Her neck was long and even as she attempted to cover up, the creamy smooth skin of her collar bone peeked out. After another moment, Dwight remembered this woman more clearly from class, but it was not for her looks.

“Yes, you do good work, Miss Carne. What can I help you with?”

“I’m sorry I missed yesterday. I had a...family crisis I needed to attend to. Well, I tried to help them anyway but there’s only so much I can do by telephone….” she began.

“Are your family far away?”

“Far enough, they’re in Cornwall, which mostly suits me fine, but sometimes...they need me... But that’s why I’m here to talk to you. I wanted you to know that ...I think I need to leave…”
“Leave the course?”

“No, leave university.”

“No, certainly not! You are such a bright mind, Miss Carne! Don’t give up on yourself,” he said.

“It’s not that. I’m not doubting myself, I know I can do this or... I’m fairly sure anyway. It’s just my brothers, they’re alone with my father back home and there’s just not much I can do for them up here.”

She looked down at her lap and Dwight worried she might be tearing up. Her face had flushed pink and she was biting her lip. Later, when Dwight knew her better, he’d come to recognize that was the expression she wore when she was angry and frustrated.

And when he knew more of her home life he’d understand this latest infuriating and frustrating situation was yet another ploy of her father’s to hurt her. This time it was through her brothers, for Tom Carne knew Demelza had a soft spot for the youngest ones, and surely this was a way to draw her back home.

“I’ve just made some tea. Let’s have some and we can talk about this. Do you have a minute?”

“That’s very kind of you,” she said with a smile. It was warm and genuine and its brightness seemed to be matched by a sparkle in her eyes. It wasn’t hard to imagine she’d be a good sister or a good friend.

And he wasn’t being polite when he called her a bright mind earlier. Demelza had top marks, learned fast, and seemed to forget nothing so she was adept at making connections with other modules of study that surprised even Dwight. But she was also that rare combination of student who is naturally clever but worked hard all the same. He couldn’t say that was true for many of his students who were well-qualified but came across as entitled, lazy, ready to rest on their laurels. If this driven young woman left her studies, it would be a great tragedy. He had to try a different approach to reach her.

“Miss Carne, do you play chess?” he asked simply.

“Uh... somewhat. I’m no master, that’s for sure,” she laughed.

“Milk or lemon?” he asked.

For a confused moment she seemed to think he was still speaking about chess then saw he was offering her tea.

“Milk please,” she said and started to rise to assist him. He bade her to remain in her seat while he opened a small refrigerator next to the file cabinet, then sniffed the container of milk.

“Well, in chess do you just react and make a single move?” he asked her and handed her a black mug with the Sheffield Sharks logo in gold. He picked up his own and when she saw it had *World’s Best Mum* emblazoned on the side, she tried to contain a snicker. Instead she took a sip of her tea, followed by a deep breath; she could tell where he was going.

“No, of course not. You plan a few moves ahead,” she said and, exasperated, looked at him with twisted lips and raised brow.

“Right, so you leaving your studies now is a reactionary move. What if you did just that and get wiped off the board in the next move? Would you be able to help your family then? Wouldn’t you be
better off, finishing the game and winning? You’d be a much bigger asset to them then.”

“Winning?” she laughed. “Look, I see what you are saying but Dr. Enys, I’m studying ornithology. It’s not as though at the end of my time at uni I’ll be a banker or brain surgeon.”

“Oh, but to have pursued something you love, for yourself? That’s worth more than gold.”

She maintained her skeptical look but a smile twitched in the corner of her mouth; she was at least appreciative of his efforts.

“Well I admit, gold would help a bit,” he added. “Alright, tell me, what do you want most for your brothers?”

“You mean beyond just staying safe and out of trouble? I want them to be happy. To follow their dreams whatever they may be and to find something meaningful…” she began and then saw she had walked into his trap.

“Ah ha. So wouldn't it be a help to them if they knew someone who had done just that? An example to aspire to, to give them hope?”

“And that’s supposed to be me?”

“And that will be you, Miss Carne,” he said firmly.

“Dr. Enys, I’m grateful for your time and the advice. I know you don’t have all morning to keep chatting me up with your pep talks,” she said. “I need to get going but I promise I will at least think through all my moves and not act impulsively.”

“Well, I suppose that is satisfactory, for now,” he smiled and dared to look up into her eyes.

He was not terribly surprised and certainly not disappointed when Demelza Carne returned to his office two days later.

“Dr. Enys?” she asked, this time without knocking. The door was open and she had already stepped inside. She seemed eager to speak to him and had a playful grin on her face as though she was bursting with a secret.

“Miss Carne, glad to see you’re…”

“Still here?” she said. “Yes, well I’ve decided to at least stick out the term. But that’s not what I came to tell you. I have something for you, Dr. Enys. I found it in a charity shop on Abbeydale Road and thought of you.”

She reached into her heavy leather bag and pulled out a white mug that read *World’s Best Granddad*.

“Now you have a matched set…of sorts,” she grinned. She was clearly proud of her find.

When Dwight laughed he was surprised at how relieved he felt. Was it that he had successfully reached her or that she was such a warm and joyous presence in an otherwise cheerless and depressing space?

“This calls for more tea. If you’ve the time?” he said. She nodded and sat herself in the same chair she had occupied a few days earlier.

“I didn’t tell you Miss Carne, I’m from Cornwall myself. Well, when I was young but of course I’ve moved around a great deal since,” he explained.
“That explains why I didn’t hear it when you spoke. Whereabouts? I’m from the west, Illogan, which is nowhere really. A tiny village with more cars than people.”

“My father’s family are from Penzance. Tell me, Miss Carne, where are you considering for a field course your third year?” he asked. “Maybe your family in Cornwall would trouble you less if you were even farther away…”

“Like Borneo?”

“No, there’s also Arctic Sweden, or the Mediterranean, or even some here in the UK, like Anglesey.”

“Well, I suppose I’d better go where the birds are,” she answered.

“I promise you will not regret it,” he said.

“I’m quite glad Professor Fleming wasn’t in the other morning—she’s my advisor, you know. You’ve been far more helpful than she’s ever been. But then again, you are the world’s greatest mum, aren’t you, Dr. Enys?” she laughed.

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It was only their second real conversation and it too was brief. But Dwight’s cheering words that day and on her previous visit had indeed made an impact on Demelza. In her almost twenty years, she hadn’t had many voices encouraging her and somehow she had found Dwight Enys particularly convincing. When she left his office she was resolved to continue her studies, and later that week filed her application for an environmental science field course at County Mayo, Ireland.

That rest of that winter Demelza often found herself meeting with Dr. Enys outside of class—sometimes to talk about temperate marine ecosystems and population viability analysis and other times to talk about family obligations and life in Cornwall. As expected, Demelza ended the term well and she gladly seized the opportunity to stay in Sheffield over the summer to work as Dr. Enys’s research assistant before she left for Ireland in the autumn. And when the course in County Mayo concluded, she immediately followed it with a bird survey in Tanzania, beginning many years of following the birds wherever they might take her to study and work.

Now these same beloved birds had finally brought Demelza back to Cornwall and back to the company of her old friend and mentor, Dwight Enys.
A Night at Trenwith

The chilly spring mist was refreshing to Demelza as she took her daily run on the grassy path along the cliffs. It was afternoon but the sky was that peculiar mix of orange, pink, and soldier blue found at dawn or dusk and kept the residents of the north coast forever unsure of the weather. Actually there really was no guessing, as surely rain would be returning soon.

Demelza would have liked to go another few kilometers but had reluctantly turned back towards the engine house before she’d really hit her stride. It was her habit to run until she’d worked off whatever stress--or in this case anger-- was churning inside her, and she did not yet feel as though she’d found the peace she sought.

Yes, it was anger. She was angry that someone had purposely done something to upset Dwight, for he was such a kind man and so undeserving of any ill will. She was angry that George Warleggan was continuing to halt their work, despite the concessions the mining consortium members were prepared to make. In fact Warleggan seemed to scoff at their diplomacy and over the past week had dug his heels in further.

And how could George Warleggan have known about Dwight’s friendship with Ross Poldark? she wondered. It just didn't sit right with her. Someone must have alerted him to the fact. But why wait until the very day CEA were ready to begin to object to their involvement in the project?

Demelza paused to stretch, then found herself staring out at the sea. Her quick-dry athletic wear had kept her comfortable in the damp outdoors but she felt certain that her hair was probably a fluffy mess. On most days that wouldn’t bother her but not today. She wished she could stay and stare at the distant horizon even longer but there no time to waste. Caroline’s assistant would be arriving soon to dress her for the gala she and Dwight were to attend that evening at Trenwith.

She sighed then began to make her way back to the engine house.

Sure enough, as she came upon the gravel path outside the cottage, she spied a metallic blue Ford Focus already parked next to the Defender.

A young woman with bright eyes and blonde hair piled on her round head was busy unloading the boot. Already four black suitcases were on the drive while she carefully lifted out a long garment bag.

“You Dr. Carne then?” she called to Demelza

“I am. And you must be Emma. Caroline said you’d be by about now. My goodness, so many cases!” Demelza remarked just as Dwight came out to join them.

“Big job, you know,” Emma laughed. “Hair, makeup, shoes, undergarments. If you’ll give me a hand? I’ll get started on Dr. Carne then attend to you, Dr. Enys,” she said with a wink.

“You most certainly will not,” he said emphatically.

“Are you sure?” she asked with a raised brow. “There are some things you might need help fitting properly. Especially in the trousers, you know.” She was clearly enjoying watching Dwight squirm.

Demelza laughed and led Emma towards the house.

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On Demelza’s visit to Trenwith earlier in the week, she never did see the tapestries. Caroline had whisked her off to a room below stairs with racks of gowns, each Demelza suspected was worth more than whatever income she’d managed so far that year. She wasn’t sure if her sudden friendship with Caroline Penvenen meant she’d hit the jackpot or walked into some dangerous crosshairs.

Caroline seemed to know what she was looking for and spoke to the man she’d summoned, Lorenzo, as though Demelza wasn’t even in the room.

“With her colouring there are many different directions we could go,” she said.

Lorenzo handed her an iPad and Caroline swiped through images impatiently.

“I really want to see her in green. You know the shade I’m talking about. It was colour of the year... it’s called…”

“You mean **Greenery**?” Lorenzo offered.

“Oh no, forget green, this one!” Caroline stopped her swiping to show him the screen.

“Caroline, this is a country party. It really would be out of place,” he countered.

Demelza thought she detected a slight accent when he spoke that she couldn’t quite place. He certainly wasn’t from Cornwall.

“Do I get to see?” Demelza interjected. “Good god, how does that even stay in place?” She was aghast to see a gown with a neckline that plunged nearly to the waist, defying physics and begging for a wardrobe malfunction. It was a lovely gown for a red carpet maybe, delicately embellished with flowers and sequins, but certainly not her style. Then again, just what was **her** style?

“Lots of double sided tape,” Caroline said with a wink. “Ok, you're right Lorenzo. What about this one? It’s not too pale is it?”

“Not if we accent with some bold jewelry,” Lorenzo nodded in agreement. “Maybe you can have your green after all, Caroline.”

So in the end Caroline and Lorenzo had selected a powder pastel degrade tulle bustier dress and even if Demelza had objected, it was doubtful they would have heeded her opinion.

Now she stood in her dressing gown in her engine house bedroom as Emma prepared to style her in the borrowed couture gown.

Brows furrowed, Emma circled Demelza, looking her up and down, as she puzzled out the raw material she’d been given.

“Your legs...shaved or waxed?” Emma asked, brusquely opening Demelza’s robe.

“Um...shaved?” Demelza replied, hoping it was an acceptable answer.

“When last?”

“Today?” Demelza replied.

“Good that’ll do...don’t look so surprised. You’re going to be bare legged, you know. Okay, no Spanx needed for you, you’re flat enough here,” Emma said slapping Demelza on the stomach. “But also a bit **too** flat here, love.” She was now referring to Demelza’s breasts. “No worries, we can remedy that!”
She reached into one of her back cases and pulled out a brassiere that was so structured and heavily padded it resembled a cushion. “This pushes every bit of flesh into just the right place. We’ll give even you some enviable cleavage yet!”

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Shortly before seven PM a black sedan pulled up to the engine house to take Dwight and Demelza to Trenwith. At first Dwight balked at yet another service arranged by Caroline, their self-appointed benefactress of the evening, until Demelza rightly pointed out that they couldn’t really drive up to a fancy do in the battered old Defender.

“Besides, this way you get to drink all the champagne you like without a care for getting us home,” she reminded him.

“No, I plan to be on guard with the drink tonight lest I say something stupid to the wrong person and further delay our work,” he grumbled.

“Nonsense, Dwight. You are a bright and charming drunk and always have been,” she teased. “Speak to the right person and you may in fact open a door for us!”

Meanwhile she hoped her inelegant wobbling in the heels Emma had fitted her with wouldn’t prove an embarrassment. It had been ages since Demelza had worn anything but trainers, waders, or wellies and she was greatly out of practice.

The party was not to be held in Trenwith House itself but in a stretch marquee set behind its southern gardens. Dwight and Demelza had arrived on time but already the grounds seemed crowded with scores of elegantly clad guests that they could only imagine were important, or at least well-connected, people. Eager event staff met guests at their cars with large umbrellas and escorted them along the covered walkway into the gala.

“By the way, Demelza,” Dwight said taking her hand as she exited the car. “I’m not sure I have adequately expressed how beautiful you look tonight.” “It’s really quite astonishing.”

“You mean because this is so far from my ordinary appearance?” she laughed. “Oh, I know it’s strange to be so dressed up. But you too, Dwight. You look brilliant.”

While she had undergone a dramatic transformation at Emma’s hands, Demelza thought Dwight did not really look much different tonight. Of course tonight he wasn’t wearing field gear and convincingly looked the part of a well dressed man attending a fancy dinner. But to her, he remained the same handsome man he always was. A strand of thick sandy hair fell boyishly across his forehead and the dark suit set off his pale grey-blue eyes.

“Well, we look brilliant together then, Dr. Carne,” he said.

As they walked together towards the marquee, Demelza spied a tall figure smoking a cigarette under a stone archway near the edge of the garden wall.

It was curious. He seemed an outsider, isolated from the rest of the crowd, and yet he also looked as though he belonged there, leaning on the wall as though it was his or at least he had a deep familiarity with the place.

The man was dressed in a dark suit—she couldn’t tell if it was black or dark blue—and while his head was bowed she could make out his black curls, almost unruly and struggling to remain tamed. Demelza also noticed the swell of his powerful legs in his smart trousers. Even from a distance she registered how attractive he was.
She looked away in panic when she saw the man had looked up and caught her eyes on his trousers.

He contained a laugh but smiled with his eyes. They were kind and dark but also intense. The same eyes she had seen before in the hotel lobby in Truro.

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Despite Dwight’s promise to stick by her side for the evening he quickly spied Trevaunance and Tressida, influential members of the mining consortium—certainly more even-tempered ones than Ross Poldark. Dwight was eager to get their assessment of what might be happening behind closed doors, so with an apologetic smile and an encouraging squeeze to her hand, he left Demelza to seek out other company. But she needn’t have worried for it wasn’t long before Caroline and Verity found her.

Caroline was ravishing in a black strapless gown. Her long blonde hair hung down her back and as usual, she looked absolutely flawless. Verity wore a flattering draped silk dress in a deep shade of blue and a triumphant smile that illuminated the whole room.

“This whole evening is so lovely. I could just people watch for hours!” Demelza exclaimed.

“I think the people are equally as interested in watching you,” Verity said with a smile. “You do know how absolutely gorgeous you look?”

“Nonsense, or should I say it is all Caroline and Emma’s work. But oh, I do feel a bit conspicuous.”

Just then a woman walked past and without the slightest pretense of discretion, stared in awe at Demelza’s necklace. Demelza knew her gown was quite a treasure but she had no idea the bold green and white jewelry on loan to her for the evening were in fact real emeralds and diamonds.

“Verity, do you think this event will be a success? For the historical trust, I mean,” Demelza asked.

“Yes, it already is and that’s before any silent auction or additional pledges. The turn out is brilliant, thanks to Caroline’s assistance. She knew exactly who to invite.”

“I do have a talent for convincing close minded people to open their purses. And speak of the devil, here’s our little friend, Mr. George Warleggan now,” Caroline smiled playfully.

At the mention of the name, Demelza tried to conceal the sneer she felt creeping on her face and forced a contrived smile. Her personal quarrel with Warleggan mustn't spoil Verity’s fine evening.

The man who approached was considerably shorter than the woman he was with, and seemed to sport a lot of pomade tempering his thick wavy hair. His suit was a rather shiny blue-grey and while some might consider it fashionable, Demelza found it off-putting.

She had somehow expected George Warleggan to be bigger or burlier than this flashy over-styled person but she supposed a coldly calculating small man could be just as menacing. At once she knew she didn’t like his shifty eyes nor his pompous manner.

“Elizabeth you are looking radiant this evening,” Verity said to the attractive, dark-haired woman on his arm, with only the slightest acknowledgement of George.

“Verity, so good of you to say so. Please don’t let us interrupt your conversation.” The woman addressed Verity politely but with a notable familiarity. She lowered her eyes and gave a gracious nod to the others, waiting for an introduction that was not forthcoming.
“We were just talking about natterjack toads with Dr. Carne here,” Caroline said with a sly grin.

Indeed they had been doing no such thing. Demelza stifled a laugh.

“Good lord. I hate them. So glad we rid our land of them years ago,” George muttered.

“You do know they are protected, don’t you?” Demelza asked with an incredulous smile. She resisted mentioning Schedule 5 of the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act.

(Of course I know that. I’m sure it was all done above board. Now if you’ll excuse us,” he muttered and led his wife away.

“Good god, Elizabeth. It’s bad enough to have to deal with Enys, that lackey Ross Poldark has hired!” George sputtered while they were still quite within earshot.

“I thought it was you, dear, that engaged Enys’s firm?” his wife responded coolly.

“Yes, yes I did. He came highly recommended but now it seems all very suspect. The whole thing reeks of conspiracy. And that woman also seems like trouble. Who was she?”

“She’s no one, my dear. I'm quite sure she’s no one.”

At this last overheard line Caroline’s laugh peeled through the tent and caused the woman on George’s arm to turn with an embarrassed flush. They quickly exited to the other side of the marquee to seek more suitable company.

“Here’s to our new friend, Demelza,” Caroline raised her glass. “My favourite troublemaking no one!”

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Demelza was pleased when the couple walked away. It wasn’t just George Warleggan’s opposition to CEA’s engagement but something else about them that she found unsettling, something in their presumptive and entitled airs.

Caroline sent her the most subtle eye roll to register her boredom while the Warleggans were speaking to Verity; Demelza would have to ask Caroline later what her relationship to them was.

The woman-- Verity had called her Elizabeth --was beautiful but just traveling in the world at a different pace than Demelza was, or was it a different world altogether? Demelza had long ago come to grips with the fact that not everyone thought like her, but she had a serious distaste for both the passivity and privilege Elizabeth seemed to exude in the brief moment they met.

Could that have been the same Elizabeth that once had been married to Ross Poldark? To Demelza they seemed poorly matched but then again, she had never properly met Ross Poldark. Maybe there were facets of his personality that aligned with Elizabeth’s after all.

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At dinner Demelza had been relieved to be seated next to Dwight but he was immediately monopolized by a talkative woman to his right leaving Demelza’s attention to the gentleman on her left. The man seemed to be somewhat hard of hearing and as a coping mechanism had grown accustomed to doing all the talking and allowing very little in the way of response from any conversation. Tonight he was talking about “the war” but Demelza had no idea which war he was referring to and simply smiled and nodded at appropriate intervals.
As expected, dinner was an elegant affair but Demelza felt too anxious to really eat more than a few morsels lest she unwittingly dribble anything on her gown. In fact all night she had been terribly conscious of its state, convinced that she, so used to being wild and dirty, would inevitably ruin it. She refused any red wine that would have gone well with the wild boar since it seemed too great a risk, and also declined the lovely chocolate gateau, passing her dish silently to Dwight. He sensed her concern and gave her a reassuring pat on the arm before he happily ate her dessert as well as his own.

_His such a sweet tooth_, she thought fondly.

Despite the cold night air outside, heaters at the edges of the tent were blasting hot air so the space was overly warm. Demelza looked down at the empty glass in front of her and felt she was now in need of some cool refreshment. The bar on the other side of the dance floor was swarmed with people but she thought she’d give it a go.

She excused herself and after waiting an eternity at the bar queue, ordered a cold vodka and lime.

Demelza was pleased with the evening so far. While certainly not her usual crowd, the scene was fascinating and mostly everyone had been quite pleasant. She was also relieved to get Dwight out of the engine house and away from his worries.

_Poor Dwight. I hope he is loosening up and isn’t just talking to stuffy quarry owners tonight. I should get him a drink as well_, she thought. But before she could give this further consideration she found herself face to face with an unexpected threat.

A small boy in a light blue linen suit came towards her with a fiendish giggle and chocolate covered hands. He hadn’t just eaten his gateau but had apparently taken great joy in smearing it all over his fingers, which he now wiggled tauntingly at Demelza. He looked to be around seven years old with big eyes and a mop of dark curls; he was rather handsome and seemed to know it.

Demelza didn't believe in spanking children but thought this boy certainly needed a good talking to. Who were his parents and why would a child that young even be at such an elegant benefit? The boy stared at her with a clearly well-practiced smile that he believed to be charming, his chocolate paws held out menacingly towards her.

Demelza quickly reviewed her options. If he’d had been a wild animal threatening her she’d know exactly what to do. Stand still if a moose, make a loud noise to divert a bear, run away in a zig zag from an alligator, punch a shark in the eye. She couldn't punch the child although certainly she might have considered this option had it been one of her own brothers. She thought again about the expensive dress she was wearing and knew she needed to flee.

Holding her vodka and lime close to her, she moved quickly back towards the bar queue to make her escape. She had just glanced back over her shoulder at the laughing boy when a tall man, who had been standing in front of her, turned around suddenly and bumped into her with enough force that she nearly tumbled over.

The rest happened rather fast.
I Fall in Love Too Easily

The entire contents of Demelza’s glass--and maybe the man’s too-- was spreading down her front while she stood frozen for what seemed like minutes. Her mouth hung open in shock, but no sound came out. A moment later she was firmly led to a nearby chair.

She heard nothing or rather she couldn't make out the individual words being spoken by the people around her; the impatient ones muttered that the wait at the bar was now even longer, while the kinder ones offered suggestions of what she should do next.

Dumbfounded she looked down to a large hand confidently shoving a serviette down her dress. She peered up trying to read the serious, focused face in front of her.

“You should be more careful in future,” he said in a low voice.

It was Ross Poldark, the same dark haired man who had knocked into her the previous week.

She looked at him in disbelief. Was he really suggesting this was her fault? Her mouth opened to reply but again nothing came out; she was still too stunned and the wet mess seeping into her borrowed bra felt shockingly cold.

“I’m sorry?” she began. She was not actually apologising but merely questioning whether she’d heard him correctly. He didn't seem to hear her.

But he did suddenly realise how forward he was being, so he put Demelza’s own hand on the serviette to hold it in place herself, then stepped back. Standing, he towered over her as she sat small in the chair.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“No, no, I’m not hurt. It’s...this dress is on loan to me.” Her voice was quivering now.

Except at the cinema where she was could sometimes be a weepy faucet, Demelza rarely cried; even when she was a little girl she had been good at holding it all in until she was alone. But somehow now it was all too much-- the ice lodged in her cleavage, the realisation that despite all her care she might have ruined the precious gown, the attention this man was showing her, and finally the embarrassment that everyone was looking at her chest. Her eyes glistened and she made an awkward snuffle.

“Your gown doesn’t appear to be wet at all,” he said.

“Looks like the padding of your brassiere soaked most of it right up,” a woman standing next to her said with naughty smile. Based on her black trousers and white blouse she appeared to be some sort of serving staff.
Sure enough Demelza’s bra was thoroughly saturated but at least nothing was not showing through the front of the gown. She put the cloth back to her cleavage as though hoping to conceal herself.

“Maybe I can…” she tried to finish her sentence but felt herself unraveling fast. She wished she were closer to the door and could just sprint out quickly without making a further scene. No, that would not be possible in those shoes anyway.

“Come on. Let’s get you to the ladies’ straight away. You’ll be cleaned up in a jiffy, no worries,” the server said without hesitation, and lifted Demelza up from her chair by the elbow.

Just then the wild little boy tore past them again, shrieking with glee, only now it seemed the chocolate was spread across his face. Demelza sighed with relief as he headed for the other side of the tent.

“What a holy terror!” she sputtered, then looked up at Ross’s bewildered face. A horrible thought crossed her mind and she put her hand to her mouth. “Oh good god? That isn’t your child, is it?” she asked Ross.

“No, no he is not,” Ross said simply.

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The ladies room was not in the main house but in an out building especially provided for the occasion. It was no ordinary port-a-loo but Demelza was not surprised. That certainly would not have done for the grandeur of tonight’s affair. She tentatively climbed the low steps to a white trailer that opened into a charming space. Softly muted light shone from wall sconces and recessed fixtures in the ceilings, understated vines and swags crawled up the wallpaper. An impressively tall vase bore fragrant flowers—creamy sweet peas and bulging, fleshy peonies probably picked from some high-end nursery that very day. A low chintz settee sat empty against a wall adjacent to the gleaming porcelain basins and spotless mirrors. Demelza was struck by how pleasant the room was overall. With its subtle potpourri and hushed ventilation, it actually smelled nicer than the damp engine house.

She slipped behind a white slatted stall door and exhaled an audible sigh, enjoying the brief moment of solitude. It was quiet; if any other souls were present, they, like the decor, were muted and didn’t seem to interfere with the peaceful atmosphere.

Awkwardly reaching behind her, first she unfastened the dress then the wet bra. She could only hope she wouldn’t gape at the bust now that Emma’s carefully adjusted foundation was removed. Perhaps the only thing worse than spilling a drink on a borrowed couture gown would be flashing her flat chest at the distinguished Trenwith guests.

"Face it Carne, you don’t belong here," she laughed lightly.

She shoved the bra into her handbag and struggled to refasten the dress. She certainly could have used Emma’s help now. Maybe she could find the friendly server again and ask her. Or perhaps Verity? Maybe not. Demelza was still contemplating keeping this mishap a secret from Caroline and if Verity knew, might she not be compelled to tell?

When Demelza emerged from the stall she found she was not alone but it was not someone she was willing to approach for assistance.

Elizabeth Warleggan, dressed in an off the shoulder black dress, was reapplying her red lipstick and assessing her makeup with gentle fingertips. She peered into the mirror with a peculiar look,
practicing raising her eyebrows and sucking in her cheekbones, before she noticed Demelza behind her. Elizabeth quickly smiled and snapping her beaded bag shut with a flourish, turned to leave.

Demelza couldn’t help but think the woman had looked sad.

*Does she still think about Ross Poldark?* she wondered.

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“Dwight can you hold my mobile? It no longer fits in my...” When she opened her handbag to let Dwight see the bra stuffed inside, he stifled a light snort.

“Demelza, you are... most resourceful. Yes, I will hold your mobile,” he said and slipped it into his breast pocket. “I’m sure there is a good story behind this,” he smiled.

“Indeed. And I will explain later, I promise.” Then she lowered her voice. “Tell me, am I properly closed in the back?” she asked and turned for his inspection.

“Perfect. You look as amazingly perfect as you did hours ago. Oh, now there’s Tonkin! I didn’t expect to see him here. I should really go speak to him. Won’t you come too?” Dwight asked her.

“No, you go on. I’d like to sit for a moment. My feet hurt like hell.”

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She was pleased the table was now empty and she wouldn’t be forced to make small talk with the other guests who had surrounded her at dinner. But she’d only just sat down when she heard a familiar voice behind her.

“You’re Dr. Carne, Dwight Enys’s partner, are you not?”

It was Ross Poldark again.

She looked up and before she responded, he’d already taken the vacant seat beside her.

“Yes, though please call me Demelza. And you’re Ross Poldark, we’ve run into each other before, you know. In Truro?” she laughed lightly and held out her hand to him. She had not expected him to bring it to his lips and her eyes darted about nervously before he released it and she could pull it back to her lap.

“That was you, of course,” he said but still did not apologise.

“I’m not really Dwight’s partner, sort of an old colleague helping him on this project. We’ve worked together loads of times over the years,” she explained. “He’s got the deeper background in conservation whereas I...I’m an ornithologist, you see. Although I can certainly help him here,” she quickly added lest Ross Poldark think she was unqualified for the job he’d hired her to do.

“What led you to that? As a profession I mean,” he asked. There was now a sincerity in his voice that seemed to go well beyond small talk and registering this, she felt compelled to answer honestly.

“Well I used to love to go outdoors and daydream when I was girl. Then I learned that if I paid attention to what was going on around me, it was called science. I was hooked. And I’m lucky--birds travel so I get to as well.”

“Yes, Dwight once mentioned you studied in Tanzania.”
“And Ireland. He did? He told you that?” she asked.

*Why was Dwight talking about me to Ross Poldark?*

“Did he tell you I almost gave birds up to study eels but he talked me out of it?” She read his brow raised in curiosity and laughed. “Oh it’s not really that different, studying the migration patterns and all that. Eels have magnetite in their heads too you know. But then I met turtle doves. And I fell in love.”

“In love?” he asked.

“With the birds,” she clarified and realised she was blushing. “European turtle doves are considered a vulnerable in many areas but especially here in Cornwall.”

“Tell me, Demelza, do they really mate for life?”

“Well they try but you know sometimes things get in the way.”

“Turtle doves? That brings to mind, what’s the verse, now? Let me see ...” he said, then knit his brow in exaggerated concentration. “Yes, it’s ‘In this castle which by its splendor rivals the heavens, this castle to which sovereigns succeeded with delight, we have seen a turtledove-- Ha! See that’s where I was going with this,” he interrupted himself with a grin then continued. 'Seated on the ruined battlements crying: Kou, kou, kou, kou. Where? Where?’” When he smiled the tip of his tongue peeked out playfully between his lips.

“What?” she asked, laughing.

“That’s from the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.”

“I don’t know that one,” she said, still laughing, unaware at how captivating her smiling eyes had grown. All her defenses were now down, she’d been thoroughly caught off guard.

Earlier this man was taciturn and brusque and now he was reciting poetry and asking her about her work and whether birds mated for life? Just who was he and why was he so enigmatic? And so undeniably attractive.

“Or something like that. Every now and then a poet comes to mind but really I wasn’t very attentive in school, if you must know,” he said, lowering his eyes and looking away with a smile that pretended to be bashful.

“It’s odd how that happens,” she cocked her head and nodded in agreement. “Same with me. I’ll be analysing water pH data and then some line from Shakespeare or Emerson will come to mind.”

“It never does come as at an opportune time, does it?” he said.

Demelza was finding herself less able to deal with his charming facial expressions and began to speak faster and more furiously in her nervousness.

“There was a time I thought I may as well have studied something lovely but impractical, like poetry, the number of times I was asked what I would ‘do’ with a degree in ornithology anyway. That was mostly from smug law students-- or worse--the soulless engineering students.”

He laughed again.

She looked up into his face, his brows now raised in surprise, mock surprise perhaps.
“Bloody hell,” she said and at once put the back of her hand to her mouth in regret. “You’re a lawyer or an engineer, aren’t you? And I’m a right arsehole.”

“I am indeed a geological engineer-- and from a family of soulless engineers no less,” he said, the playful tone returning.

*He is enjoying watching me squirm*, she thought.

“So now I’ve insulted your father too?” she said, quite sure she was now flushing red with embarrassment.

“No, my mum actually.” It was too much for him and he let out another deep chuckle. He had a wonderful laugh.

“Great. So I’m a *sexist* arsehole too. Jesus fuck, you should pour *that* drink down my dress as well,” she said, and slumped back in her chair in resignation, hoping he wasn’t also religious. She took a long sip, draining her glass, and wished she could disappear.

At the mention of her dress, his eyes darted down her front and lingered there. The tip of his tongue peeked out slightly and touched his upper lip again.

*Does he realize he is doing that?*

“I think you need another drink, Demelza,” he said with a smile. “I certainly owe it to you.”

“Yes,” she said weakly and followed him back to the bar.

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“So you were once Dwight’s student?” Ross asked Demelza as they moved away from the crowd, trying to find a more quiet space to resume their conversation. He’d ordered them each another vodka and lime; hers was delightfully cold and refreshing but Demelza was determined to drink more slowly now to ensure she didn’t put her foot further into her mouth.

“Yes, that’s how we met. Seems like years ago,” she answered.

*Good god, that’s a silly thing to have said!*

“I mean I suppose it was-- years ago. I was in school for a long time,” she muttered, trying not to sound flustered.

“And you liked that? School, I mean,” he asked.

“I loved school mostly because it was an excuse to stay away from home. No one would fault me if I was working hard at my studies and so they started to leave me alone. Eventually they sort of forgot about me.”

“I can hardly imagine that was true,” he said with a flattering tone.

“Oh I can assure you, it’s true. My father was an alcoholic who reminded us daily of his temper until he found the Lord and then reminded us daily of our sins. I’m not sure which was more harmful to his family.”

“Mine was nothing special either…” he replied.

“And your mother? The engineer?” she asked.
“She died when I was a boy.”

“Oh I’m sorry,” she said and touched his arm softly. “Mine died too... but maybe let’s change the subject to something more cheerful, shall we?”

“Or better yet, let’s dance?” he offered. “It’s alright, finish your drink first.”

So despite Demelza’s pledge to drink slowly, at Ross’s coaxing she finished what was in her glass in just a few graceless gulps. He seemed eager to take her hand and lead her across the tent towards the dance floor.

The full orchestra that had been playing all night had taken a break and now a single vocalist with simple accompaniment was doing his best Chet Baker impersonation.

My heart should be well schooled
’Cause I’ve been fooled in the past

But still I fall in love too easily

I fall in love too fast

Demelza looked across the floor to see Dwight dancing with Caroline Penvenen. This was a surprise. And yet Dwight did not seem as miserable as she might have expected considering how he had spoken of Caroline earlier. In fact, he looked as though he was chatting pleasantly with her.

Caroline Penvenen has special talents, she thought.

Demelza knew Ross had come as Caroline’s date but with the exception of dinner, they didn’t seem to have spent any time together. But perhaps they’d still be going home together later?

“Ross,” Demelza began hesitantly. “Please don’t tell Caroline about the spill and the dress.”

“If you say,” he said. “But since there’s no actual damage, I doubt she’ll care,” he added reassuringly.

“Maybe so. But in truth I...well at best I find Caroline a bit intimidating. Other times I find her positively frightening,” she admitted.

“Me too,” Ross laughed.

They moved slowly together, Demelza’s fingers laced in his as he clutched her right hand. It wasn’t long before she felt his other hand migrate from her waist down to her lower back. He leaned in and rested his cheek gently on her temple taking in the scent of her hair.

Demelza heard his long inhale and looked up.

“I must smell like a distillery,” she joked. She went to tuck a tendril of flaming hair behind her ear but as she raised her hand, she accidentally brushed against his face.

His beard was soft, not at all what she expected. She was close enough to him now, just a few inches away in fact, that she spied the smallest curls at the ends of his facial hair that matched the thick dark curls on his head. She held her breath then felt something shift in her stomach.

She was relieved the music stopped just then and broke the tension of the moment.
“Another dance?” Ross asked her as the musicians prepared for another song.

“I think I might need to sit down or maybe see where Dwight is,” she said and abruptly dropped his hand. It was suddenly all a bit much for her. The dancing, the drink, the man.

“I’ll join you,” he said quickly.

She took this merely as a friendly gesture--he and Dwight were old friends after all. His face was now inscrutable and his body had once again stiffened formally as they left the dance floor together.

She would never have guessed the truth --that he didn't want to leave her company and if he could contrive to be by her side for even just a few minutes more, he’d have agreed to follow her just about anywhere.

“Demelza, there you are!” Dwight called happily as they approached. “Tell me, are you as exhausted as I am?”

“Poor Dwight hasn’t been sleeping well lately,” Demelza shared with Ross, and took Dwight’s arm in hers. “You look ready to go home, Dwight,” she observed.

“Yes but are you?” Dwight asked.

“It’s been quite an eventful evening,” Demelza reassured him.

“Don't leave on my account,” Ross joked sheepishly.

"No, Ross,” Demelza smiled. She had long forgiven him for the spill. “I think I should like to make an early start tomorrow to begin... oh, um...” she caught herself before she revealed her intention of beginning some of their work even though they had not yet been approved to do so.

“It’s okay, we can trust Ross,” Dwight said to her, then turned to Ross and spoke with a lowered voice. “Demelza is starting an unofficial nest count.”

“Just a survey of the nests along the coast and the cliffs,” she explained.

“You know there are loads of caves and openings along the sea that once were part of old mines. Beginnings of exploratory tunnels that were later abandoned when they proved fruitless. We used to foolishly play around in them when we were lads--they are teeming with birds now,” Ross said.

“Oh just imagine what's been inhabiting those! Where did you say these were?” she asked eagerly.

“The one I’m thinking of is at a spot called Kellow’s Ladder, not too far from Nampara Cove on my land. But don’t go alone, it’s very dangerous. Perhaps I can show you...both,” he added.

“Oh please, let’s!” If Demelza hadn’t been wearing heels she’d have been jumping up and down with excitement.

“We’d have to plan ahead. The old wooden ladder is rotted away in some places, so to reach them, one needs proper climbing equipment--ropes and harnesses.”

“You mean abseil down a cliff?” she asked, eyes wide.

“Does that deter you?” Ross asked.

“On the contrary, now Demelza will think of nothing else. I’m afraid you two are on your own for that feat,” Dwight said.
“Dwight doesn’t really care for heights that much,” Demelza said gently, squeezing Dwight’s arm again.

“But don’t let that interfere with your mission. Watch out Poldark, Demelza is rather fearless. She might be almost as reckless an adventurer as you,” Dwight said with just a hint of pride in his voice.

“Oh Dwight, I am no such thing. Come, let’s get you home. Good night, Ross. Thank you for…” she laughed then blushed again.

“Yes, my pleasure.” His eyes sparkled playfully but this time they refrained from looking down her dress. Then they grew dark and sincere. “I’m glad to have finally met you, Demelza. And it was good to see you again, Dwight,” he said and clasped Dwight’s arm.

They were almost out the door when Demelza spotted Caroline and hastened to speak to her while Dwight waited for their car.

“Oh Caroline, I have to thank you for such a wonderful evening. It was simply brilliant,” Demelza gushed.

“I’m sorry you are leaving so early but of course I’m glad you and Dr. Enys both were able to enjoy yourselves. You know, Demelza, you and I happen to share something very important,” Caroline said slyly.

“Oh yes? I can’t imagine what that can that be, Caroline.”

“An attraction to difficult, complex, and devastatingly handsome men.”

“Uh, I’m not sure what you mean…”

“Oh stop the farce. I saw you with Ross Poldark earlier.”

“Caroline, we were just talking, I know he’s your date…” Demelza was suddenly panic stricken and hoped her face did not betray her thoughts.

“Please, Demelza. Ross and I are just old friends. And while we’ve had our…fun…over the years we are too much alike to go any further. But I think the electrical surge between you two might have made the lights in here flicker,” Caroline laughed, her eyes sparkling naughtily.

“Oh, no, I…” Demelza stammered again.

“And besides, I might have felt a surge or two just now when I danced with your Dr. Enys. I won’t tell you where I felt it, for I’m sure you’d blush.”

“Would I?” Demelza laughed.

“But somehow I’m not sure you’d hold it against me, would you?”
Ross Poldark pulled his coat collar higher and he faced the brisk wind along the sea cliffs. He’d hardly had a productive day at work and while he knew he should have stayed on later at the quarry, he’d found he was irritated, restless, unable to concentrate. Finally he gave up and drove home early but rather than face his empty house, he went for a walk in the early evening gloom.

*Everything I touch turns to ash,* he thought.

Ross could shake neither his anger that Warleggan had thwarted this environmental assessment nor his guilt that it was his friendship with Dwight Enys that was the cause. The setback, no doubt born from the long standing animosity between him and George Warleggan, did not affect Ross alone, for the other members of the consortium and Dwight were now paying the price as well.

*I have no business judging others. It’s not as though I’m some sort of environmental hero myself,* he thought.

Grace Quarry was a blight on the landscape like any other industrial park. It’s ugly towers, rising above the high barbed wire gates and rusted from the abrasive coastal air, hardly made for a pleasant sight. And then there was the constant booming of the machinery, the barreling lorries kicking up dust as they crushed down the back roads daily.

*What would Demelza Carne think if she saw it all?* he found himself wondering.

He had found himself thinking of her more than a few times since the party at Trenwith. She was so easy to talk to—no pretenses, so genuine. And although he had tried hard to maintain a disciplined formality while they moved slowly together on the dance floor, he knew his hand had migrated down to her lower back.

He regretted this now. Of course it wouldn’t do to make grabby hands at Dwight’s colleague, one whose evening he had already ruined with his clumsy moves. Ross knew what esteem Dwight had for her and felt he owed something to them both.

Yet the curve of her body had drawn him in, and it was so easy for his hand to slip down the elegant fabric of her dress and settle just where her back met her bum. And then she had touched his face. Did she even notice he’d hitched a breath when her delicate finger stroked his beard? He knew it had been an accidental brush but it had caught him off guard nonetheless.

But then moments later he watched her take Dwight’s arm. Was it friendly affection? Or more than that?

*Is she keeping him up in the night? Is that why he’s so tired?* Ross wondered, then grew embarrassed that such a thought had even crossed his mind. *This woman’s love life is none of your business, Poldark.*

The rain had stopped but the air was cold and wet around him; he jammed his hands into his pockets and he walked aimlessly on. He’d need to stop feeling sorry for himself, that was for certain.

“Ross!” a familiar voice called to him.

“Dwight, I might have expected to run into you!” Ross was glad to see his old friend again walking towards him, the wind whipping at his back. Ross should have realised his wanderings were taking him up the coast close the engine house where Dwight—and Demelza—were staying.
They met in the tall sea grass and walked on together.

“Was it the glorious sunshine that brought you out this evening?” Dwight joked.

“I thought I’d clear my head. My father would have advised a bracing dip in the sea. But that might be a bit too cold for today,” Ross laughed.

“No doubt dangerously so?” Dwight asked.

“Well old Joshua swam in all seasons. He said it was all about mastering the shock, the difference between planning to jump into cold water or merely finding yourself in it unwilling.”

_Am I turning into my father?_ Ross wondered.

“You should come to supper, Ross,” Dwight said as they approached the engine house.

“I wouldn’t want to impose,” Ross mumbled.

“Nonsense. Demelza would love the extra company.”

“Can you be sure?” Ross asked. Dropping by unannounced for an evening meal seemed in keeping with the other awkward run-ins with her recently.

“Indeed, she’d be thrilled. She’s the most generous and warm person I know,” Dwight boasted.

“You’ve known her long, haven’t you?”

“It’s curious,” Dwight mused. “If you add up the dates, it’s over a decade that we’ve been friends, but the actual days spent together? Not that many.”

“Like you and me?” Ross laughed and followed him up the gravel path.

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“Demelza, I’ve brought a visitor,” Dwight called as he and Ross both stooped under the low threshold of the cottage door.

“Oh, you’re just in time if you’re hungry. I’m making omelets, nothing special, but I found these amazing penny bun mushrooms today,” Demelza said casually then turned to see the guest was Ross Poldark. She smiled at once and then felt her face grow flushed. “Hello Ross, nice to see you again,” she said softly.

“Don’t worry, Ross, she knows her mushrooms as well as she knows her birds. She won’t poison us,” Dwight said with a laugh.

“No, Dwight, I got them at the _market_,” she corrected. “But I did meet a woman who told me where to forage for them around here-- she said in the woods behind Tehidy Stable? I’d love to pick some myself but that’s an autumn thing.”

“Maybe we’ll be here that long, Demelza, and you’ll get your wish,” Dwight said.

_Would staying trouble her?_ Ross wondered. _Or is she eager to move on?_

“Tehidy Stable? I keep my horse, Seamus, there,” Ross said aloud.

“Seamus, eh? That’s a good Irish name,” Demelza noted.
“I named him after Seamus Heaney, the poet,” Ross replied. “You’ve been riding at Tehidy?”

“Yes, Caroline Penvenen invited me to go with her just yesterday. Really, this has been like a holiday so far. Any word, Dwight, when we can finally get to work?”

“No, I had thought we’d hear something definitive today but instead we just were served with another brief and request for more documents.”

“Are you better off going back to Bristol and waiting until all is clear? It must be costing a tremendous amount of money and we haven’t even been able to start our real work,” she said.

“No, it’s better you stay here and remind George in person that you are a force he has to reckon with. And don’t worry about the money. George, like the rest of us, is legally obligated to to pay for this impact assessment,” Ross said firmly.

“That’s reassuring, Ross,” Demelza said. “We must hope for the best then.”

“Please, you really must stay for some supper, Ross.” Dwight invited him again.”Demelza is the best at preparing wonderful meals out of the slenderest of rations and in the most modest of field kitchens.”

“That’s a polite way of saying I’m good at cooking eggs,” she laughed.“And Dwight, we couldn’t possibly call this kitchen modest!” Demelza said then turned to Ross. “Your cousin Verity is one of the the most generous and warm people I’ve ever met,” she said, then quickly added, “But of course you must know that.”

“That's how Dwight just described you, Demelza,” he said, his dark eyes fixed on her.

“I can't imagine why,” she turned quickly back to the bowl in front of her.

Right then Ross could see why Dwight was so fond of her. She was as beautiful in character as she was on the outside. She seemed to be determined to make the most of any situation, unburdened of obstacles beyond her control. And he sensed she was real somehow-- not just a pretty face or an attractive body.

And yet it was her long, lissome body that Ross was noticing again despite his attempts to disguise his interest. Tonight she was barefoot, clad only in grey leggings and a pink strappy vest, and seemed better suited for a session of hot yoga than a damp Cornwall evening.

Ross watched the two of them move together in their shared space, a choreography they had clearly rehearsed over years. Dwight bent over to open a drawer and she stretched high above him to reach a glass off the hanging rack. When he came up again he paused for just a second and looked her in the face; she bit her lip in a smile before she turned back to the sink. They knew each other well, yet somehow Ross got the distinct impression they were not together as a couple. At least not now.

You fool, Ross chided himself. How is this any concern of yours?

But it was a concern. If Demelza and Dwight were involved, then Ross would most certainly feel guilty about having thought about her these past few days. Her light laugh, the smell of jasmine and salt water in her hair, how soft it was to the touch, the curve of her body under his hand as they danced.

And if she was not with Dwight, well, then perhaps…

No. Ross’s friendship with Dwight had already caused a delay on the environmental assessment. He
could not afford to worsen things by becoming romantically involved with one of the contracted assessors.

Ross realised he had been looking at her over his wine glass and quickly looked away in embarrassment.

“Is it hot in here?” Ross asked.

“Yes, it is,” Demelza answered, happy for the diversion. She had seen him watching her and although she couldn’t be sure what it meant, she felt as uneasy and off kilter as when she’d accidently stroked his face at Trenwith.

“We’ve turned it down a hundred times but can’t quite seem to get the thermostat right.” She forced a breezy air, moving about the kitchen avoiding both his eyes and Dwight’s in her discomfort.

“Let me look--they can be tricky at times. I live in one of these restored old stone homes too, you know. May I?” Ross offered.

“By all means,” Dwight invited.

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Demelza was startled awake shortly before midnight. A freezing wind off the sea was slamming mercilessly against the window, and with every rattle of the pane, her body shivered violently. She reached for a heavy pair of socks on the floor by her bed but soon after she put them on, she knew they would not be enough. Her charming room with a view was now bitterly cold. She rose and duvet wrapped around her, walked silently down the hall.

Dwight’s door was open so she peered in before heading down the stairs. He was curled tightly in a ball under his plaid blanket, his pillow over his head as an extra layer of warmth.

Poor Dwight, he’s cold too and needs more covers, she thought. I’d better find him another blanket.

Once downstairs, she headed straight for the hearth and without turning on any lights, set about making a fire. After several failed attempts, she managed to conjure a weak flicker from a match; she blew on it then poked at the kindling until flames finally began to lick at the thick birch log on the grate.

Right away white steamy smoke began to billow out into the room. Trying not to cough, Demelza let out a laugh at her apparent ineptitude. This plan was not working.

“You never were good at building fires, were you?” Dwight said from behind her.

She hadn't heard him come down the stairs. She chuckled again when she saw he had his blanket wrapped around him just as she had the duvet around her.

“Nonsense. I’m quite skilled at it. Only this wood isn’t seasoned.”

“Or the flue isn’t opened properly. Here let me try,” he said, this time gently and without any teasing. He jiggled the lever and the flue that had been stuck gave way to allow air to be sucked up the chimney.

“I’m sorry I thought I had…” she began.

“It’s okay. Easy error.”
“I think I’d better go take a look at the thermostat again,” she said shivering. “Whatever Ross Poldark did, I’d venture to say it’s too cold now.”

She padded over to the thermostat near the stairs and saw that in fact the temperature in the cottage was now a frigid 10 degrees. She pushed the upwards arrows until a red light came on, followed by a convincing beep, but there was no way of knowing whether it was actually registering her request.

“Success?” Dwight asked as she came back to the fire.

“Who the hell knows,” she said rather despondently. She pulled the blanket over her head and flopped back against the sofa.

“Demelza, you’re not going to like this but I think we need to open a window and maybe even the door to let out some smoke. Just for a while anyway.”

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Ten minutes later they were able to seal the cottage up again but not before the temperature had dropped even further. They sat huddled on the floor to be closer to the fire until finally Demelza remembered something and leapt to her feet.

“Try this to warm you,” she said and handed Dwight a glass of the single malt Verity had left in the cabinet for engine house guests.

“You should know better than to drink alcohol to keep warm,” Dwight admonished.

“It’s only really a danger if you’re hypothermic. Come on, Dwight, cold damp nights by the sea like this one are precisely why whisky was invented in the first place. You’ll like this-- it’s got a sweet finish and you’ve always had such a sweet tooth,” she cooed. “Who knows, maybe I’ll grow to like the peatier ones once I’m older,” she mused.

“Do you often think about that, Demelza... getting older? Or the future?” he asked suddenly growing serious.

“I do sometimes but still as a sort of abstraction, not as... real. Well, maybe more often since I’ve hit thirty.”

“I forget sometimes how young you are,” he laughed. “Lately I’ve been feeling more pressure to make long term plans and actually follow through. But I’m done with academia, I’m no longer content to just flit about from one post to the next.”

“Like I do, you mean.”

“No, that’s not at all what I mean. I’ve always admired your flexibility, Demelza, but it was harder for me. I wonder if maybe that’s why the set back of this job has hit me so hard. I was trying to make a change.” He stared into the fire and grew quiet.

“I’m sorry you’re so disappointed, Dwight,” she said finally breaking the silence and reaching her hand out from under the covers to rub his back.

“No, don’t feel sorry for me. You’ve been such a comfort, you know.” He looked into his glass and laughed lightly. “And, you’re right, of course. This is a really nice single malt.”

“Verity Poldark has again served us well. It’s an eight year old Talisker,” she said.
“Well I admit that doesn’t mean anything to me…”

“Me neither, Dwight, but I like it. And the eight years must be significant --and makes it good,” she replied.

“Eight years, that’s not how long I’ve known you? Surely it’s been longer than that…”

“No, but eight years ago was the first time we…” she stopped but raised her eyebrows with a smile. He knew what she meant.

“It was ten years ago we first had a real conversation,” she said quickly.

“That day in March when you came into my office was one of the best of my professional career,” Dwight said sincerely.

Demelza could tell the whisky was now hitting him; Dwight always grew overly earnest when drinking.

“It was February,” she corrected.

“No, I had a grant proposal due in March. I remember I was working on a deadline…”

“No, Dwight,” she laughed, “it was February.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Dwight, it was Valentine’s Day! I remember that on top of my family woes, I was feeling sorry for myself because I didn’t have a bloke at the time. And then after I visited you I wondered if maybe you too didn’t have a valentine.”

“Did I seem so lonely?” he asked.

“Well…” she teased.

“I didn’t have one-- a valentine-- as it turned out,” he said. “I was rather alone in Sheffield.”

“Then instead of tea we should have had a drink together.”

“That might have been a bit inappropriate at the time,” he said, then added, “but it would have been fun.”

“Dwight, I say we stay down here and sleep in front of this fire. I can’t bear the idea of going back up to that freezing room. Are you ready for another?” Without waiting for his answer she uncorked the bottle and refreshed both their glasses.

“Yes, I’ll have another and I’m thinking I need to find a hat. You know, to conserve body heat from my head.”

“Conserve body heat? Really?” She flashed a devilish smile that dissolved into a giggle, then she bit her lip trying to silence herself. She took a long gulp from her drink then put the glass down. Whatever idea had got hold of her was not letting go, despite her valiant struggle.

“What? What is it?” he implored, resting his weight on his elbow now.

“Oh come on Dwight! Say we were stranded in the tundra and had to bivouac. What would we
“Demelza,” he shook his head and laughed, apparently not taking her suggestion seriously.

She began to lift up her top then stopped, her arms criss-crossed over her chest. She cocked her head and looked at him-- at his eyes that immediately had gone to her exposed belly, at his parted lips that he’d just licked anxiously without realising it. Slowly she pulled the shirt the rest of the way over her head and after a notable shiver, began to tug down her leggings.

“She meant that bare skin against bare skin would keep them warmer than if they huddled under layers of clothing. She was serious.

She sat up at once and continued to stare him down.

“Demelza,” he shook his head and laughed, apparently not taking her suggestion seriously.

She began to lift up her top then stopped, her arms criss-crossed over her chest. She cocked her head and looked at him-- at his eyes that immediately had gone to her exposed belly, at his parted lips that he’d just licked anxiously without realising it. Slowly she pulled the shirt the rest of the way over her head and after a notable shiver, began to tug down her leggings.

“In the chill of the room he quickly removed his own clothes and joined her naked body under the duvet.

She had been right--nothing felt as warming as skin on skin. The heat was instant and alarming.

She wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his chest, clutching him tightly to her.

“What’s this going to be? Just a practical move to keep us warm?” he wondered.

With only the glowing fire to illuminate the room, their faces remained largely in shadow, their bodies hidden from view under the covers.

But Dwight knew what was there--what he couldn’t see-- and he reached out in the dark. Her pale round nipples, the birthmark on her inner right thigh, her soft russet mound. Immediately he found himself responding to her body, unseen but very much felt.

She sensed his hard length too and pressed herself closer still. There was no space between them now.

“Dwight,” she whispered, her breath visible in the cold air surrounding their exposed heads. Her hand moved up, and with one gentle finger, she traced his closed eyelids and open lips.

He wove both hands through the loose tangle of her hair and pulled her to him. He kissed her over and over with a hungry mouth that knew what it wanted and where to find it.

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Demelza woke several hours later to find the fire had gone out but only her head had grown cold; the heat under the blankets had not diminished as they slept. She snuggled against Dwight’s warm body and gave him a soft kiss on the chest.
She always found making love to Dwight was like swimming in a calm ocean. Warm but still exhilarating, relaxing, pleasurable, so much to explore. Yes, it had to be the sea because she always felt a little buoyant during and afterwards. Tonight her body had responded no differently to Dwight’s touch than any time in the past. And awake for only a few minutes, already her desire was again stoked. But she didn’t dare rouse him.

In his sleep he looked so peaceful, so beautiful. She had loved to watch the tension wash from his face as he found his release with her. He was so strong, so disciplined; he carried his burdens inside and didn’t always like to share them with her. She was glad to have helped him in whatever way she could.

She rolled over and pressed her backside along Dwight’s solid frame. Without waking, he responded to her shifting and flopped his arm across her, pulling her close.

*I’m lucky to have him in my life*, she thought as she fell back asleep.

When she awoke again she was alone in the pile of blankets next to the hearth, feeling a bit stiff from sleeping on the hard floor but no longer cold. A grey morning light flooded in through the steamy windows of the cottage. The heat had apparently come back on and the rooms were once again overly warm.

She reached for her clothes and rose to find Dwight in the kitchen.

“Just what are you up to?” she said softly.

“Making you breakfast,” he said proudly.

She put her arms around his waist and kissed his neck. It was a soft peck, nothing passionate but welcomed all the same.

“Or trying to. Don’t distract me,” he said leaning back into her embrace.

“You smell like woodsmoke,” she said resting her cheek on his bare back.

“Thanks to you,” he laughed.

“Yes well, thanks to me everything smells like woodsmoke.”

“Look, this egg has two yolks,” he said pointing into the bowl. “You know, there’s a special symbolism with double yolks,” he said. “They can signify that you— or your female partner— will fall pregnant with twins. Or, if you subscribe to Norse mythology, it means someone in your family is going to die.”

“Neither one sounds very appealing to me, thank you,” she replied and reached around him for a piece of toast. “I’ll stick to the theory is that they are forged when ovulation occurs too rapidly or when one yolk catches up with another slow-moving yolk in a hen’s oviduct.”

“Yes, of course, Dr. Carne,” that’s what I meant to say,” Dwight laughed. “Do you want to have children, Demelza?” he suddenly asked her.

She was not expecting that from Dwight now. But as an unattached professional woman in her early thirties, she was accustomed to being asked such a personal question by prying strangers and acquaintances who meant well, so she had her answer pat.

“Oh someday probably,” she answered quickly. She kissed him again, this time on his shoulder.
“Damn! See you’re beguiling me with your kisses and I got some egg shell in the bowl.”

“Just a bit, no worries. Here, take this half shell and use like this to…” She carefully scooped out the fleck of shell and handed the mess over to Dwight. “See?”

“I’m forever impressed with how practical you are, Demelza.”

“No, we are both practical. We both seem to bring the practical out in each other, which is why we work so well together,” she said.

*And play well,* she thought.

“Well you are clearly the brains behind this whole operation.”

She leaned against the cupboard and looked at him.

“Okay, I’m going to ask, Dwight, what exactly is this operation?” she asked with a smile. “What are we now? What about... *us*?”

“We’ll figure that out, we always do,” he said confidently.

“No, Dwight. What we always do is find ourselves in bed together, have a thoroughly wonderful time, and then one of us leaves. And that’s always been our understanding. No strings or drama when one of us needs to move on. But if we’re not moving?”

“Not moving? Does that mean you’re staying on with the firm? Well, then we’ll see what comes our way. Demelza, above all you’re my best friend...”

“I thought that was Ross Poldark.”

“He’s my oldest friend but you are infinitely more enjoyable to be around,” he said.

“He seems nice enough to me,” she said.

“You’ve yet to see him in a temper.”

“I did in fact. He came storming out of the meeting with Warleggan last week, and nearly knocked me over.”

“Well there is no arguing you are far prettier.”

“Even when I’m in a temper?” she asked playfully.

“Always,” he said and kissed her gently, ignoring the eggs now burning in the pan.
Dwight poured himself another cup of coffee, then sat down again at the kitchen table. All morning he had been trying desperately to stay alert while reviewing tedious figures on the laptop screen in front of him. It wasn’t quite working. He hadn’t slept properly in a over a week and instead of focusing on the task at hand, he found his mind wandering.

He thought back to the first time he and Demelza ever slept together. Had it really been eight years ago?

He was living in Leeds at the time, and she, no longer his student and not yet his professional colleague, was simply his friend, visiting over the summer holidays.

That all changed one warm August night when she had stepped between Dwight and a huge bloke in what had unexpectedly developed into a bar fight. In fact had she not impulsively intervened, it most assuredly would have been a routing, for Dwight’s sudden drink-fueled anger was no match for the other guy’s brute force.

Oblivious, or maybe just resistant to the real danger before her, Demelza slipped between the two men, then turned to stare Dwight down.

“Don’t be an arsehole, Dwight!” She practically spat the words at him, her hands gripping him with more strength than he would ever have imagined her capable of summoning. “Walk away from this man….Now!”

Dwight stood flabbergasted for a moment then saw the wisdom in heeding her.

“Yeah, fancy boy. Walk out of my local and don’t come back unless you’ll be wanting a proper beating….…” the other man started but he was cut off as Demelza whirled around to face him down, her teeth snarling like a vicious dog.

Like a loyal dog, Dwight thought.

The angry stranger towered over her but was so caught off guard by her fierce determination, that despite the threat he’d just issued Dwight, he raised his arms at once in surrender.

“Oh I’ll take him home but just back off, will you? Does this place, your local, mean nothin’ to you at all that you’d wreck it to fight with a perfect stranger? And over what?!” Her voice was not her own.

The barman nodded at her logic then turned back to the pint he was pouring. Something in her tone had inspired his confidence that she’d sort it and he need not bother getting involved.

And so without further words exchanged, Demelza turned Dwight around and marched him out the door in the hot summer night.

Back at his flat she sat him solemnly on the sofa then poured them each a vodka from the bottle she’d tucked in Dwight’s freezer hours before. She had intended to save it for brunch Bloody Marys but felt they both needed it more now than they would later.

Dwight drank his fast then poured another. In less than thirty minutes his whole world suddenly had shifted and it was as though he was seeing Demelza for the very first time.

He had always had thought her pretty before but tonight, that moment in the pub--her strength, her
bravery, her wisdom—charged his attraction in a new way. Now back in his flat, he watched her as she folded her long bare legs under her on the sofa and threw her head back in exhaustion. If he’d been sober he would have read her face and seen that she was about to admonish him again for picking a fight with a man twice his size. Instead, drunkenly, foolishly, he spoke.

“Demelza, thank you. I don't know what I’d have done. And...well...my god, you’re so...beautiful,” he smiled a wobbly smile and looked at her through squinted eyes.

“Dwight?” she asked incredulously.

“Melz...” he stammered.

“Dwight, what are you trying to tell me?” she laughed. “What do you want?”

She knew exactly what he wanted but was playing with him now. He’d have to come out and say it.

“You,” he whispered. “I want you.” He picked up her left hand almost upending the vodka she was holding. Awkwardly he reached for the other hand instead.

Demelza threw her drink back quickly then spoke.

“No, Dwight,” she said. “We are not sleeping together tonight, not if you are drunk... and not if you are feeling sorry for yourself.” Her voice was steady, dispassionate, as if she had just told him they were out of milk and there would be no tea. She was still smiling and didn’t pull her hand away, but her tone was a wake up call to Dwight.

“Demelza...good god... I’m so sorry, I don't know what got into me,” he stammered. He shook his head as though coming out of a trance.

“Oh, Dwight! That’s why you need to go to sleep now. To see if it’s still in you later,” she laughed again and patted him warmly on the back.

“Please, take my bed tonight. I’ll camp out here on the sofa,” he said his head hung low.

“I’m not going to argue, for surely I get the better end of that deal. But tell me, are you going to be ok, Dwight?” she softened just a bit.

“Yes.” What else could he say now?

“Do you want a glass of water? Or some Alka Seltzer? I’m just thinking about you in the morning.”

*I'm glad someone is*, he thought.

But the next morning, after a rather uncomfortable sleep on the cramped sofa, he was up before she was, which along with the absence of any headache on his part, was quite surprising to him.

Dwight got to his feet and resolved to make her a cup of tea, knowing it was a rather weak act of contrition in light of his boorish behaviour the previous night. But what else could he do?

He shuffled about in the quiet kitchen, and cringed as recalled in more detail just what an arse he had been. Maybe she wouldn’t remember. After all, she’d had a few vodkas with him once they got back to the flat. No, he knew that was unlikely. Demelza had always been an accomplished drinker and no matter how slight she was or how much she put away, she never forgot a thing.

“An offering?” she asked, looking up sleepily as he stood in the doorway.
“A sorry one, I know. Maybe meant to appease the Goddess with the hope I can stay in her good graces?” he smiled weakly, waiting to be invited further into the bedroom.

“That depends,” she laughed. “Goddess, you say? Hmm…not a bad start, Dwight.” she smiled her most radiant smile and Dwight found himself exhaling a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding.

He took that as a summons to cross the threshold and moved closer to the bed. When she sat up, he saw her shoulders were bare -- underneath the duvet she was naked. He felt a bit off balance at once and instead tried to look at her eyes. But there was a bit of the devil sparkling in them that he’d never seen before.

“I’m surprised you’re awake,” she added, taking the tea from him.

“I’m surprised you weren’t,” he said.

“And if you had awoken next to me?” she asked, staring him down. Her eyes were serpentine, hypnotic.

Of course, she hadn’t forgotten.

“What would you be feeling now? Regret?” Her voice was soft, low, almost breathy.

“No, Demelza. Most certainly not regret.” He was talking to her shoulders again, and this time he caught himself licking his lips.

I’m thoroughly pathetic, he told himself.

Demelza took one long sip from the cup, then held it close to her as she weighed her next move, a smile twitching in the corner of her mouth.

“Well then, Dwight. Assuming you’re neither drunk nor feeling sorry for yourself now, perhaps we might pick up where we left off last night?” she said. “That is, if it’s still in you?”

Without shifting her eyes from Dwight she set the cup down and threw back the covers to expose her bare, waiting body.

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The engine house door opened and Demelza came from the rain.

“How was your run?” Dwight asked.

“Same as always. Wet but beautiful,” she said with a smile, shaking out her dripping hair and removing her sodden trainers.

“Demelza?” Dwight asked. “What was it that had me so riled up in that one night in that pub?”

“You mean in Leeds? What made you think of that?” she laughed and walked over to join him at the table. “I have no idea, I never did know. If I recall, I came back from the ladies’ to find you rolling up your sleeves ready to brawl with that ox of a man. But you were in a dark mood all week. You’d just broken up with Keren.”

“Good god, was that the same summer?”

“Yes, I was your rebound.”
“Oh hardly. You were like…”

“Yes?” she waited.

“Like finding my way home. You saved me,” he said smiling.

“And then I left a week later, Dwight,” Demelza reminded him. “And we didn’t see each other again for what? Ten months? Almost a year. Don’t embellish the past.”

“Don’t underestimate your powers,” he said and kissed her on the top of her head.

But Demelza had always been protective of their relationship where she saw Dwight remained naive. When they became lovers again and again after long absences apart, it was always carefully considered— at least on her part. There had to be an escape plan, the next journey that one of them was about to embark upon. And as young academics always searching jobs, research positions, fellowships, they were always heading in separate directions. Yes, they got on so well, never quarreled, and never were jealous of one another’s current love lives when they reconnected. But it wasn’t magic— it was caution and realism.

They had few friends in common so their sex life became a sort of secret between them. They almost never spoke of it themselves but when they did seek each other’s comfort it was always special, always welcome, even if it was understood it was fleeting.

But was it by nature ephemeral? Perhaps not, since they had come back to each other's arms and beds over many years and under many different circumstances.

Was now, here in Cornwall, really any different?

Yes, yes it was. She couldn’t quite pinpoint exactly how but this time seemed different. Something had shifted in their relationship and she felt the stakes of what they had to lose were far greater than ever before.
An Invitation

Taking advantage of a brief window of tolerable weather, Demelza chose to go inland for her afternoon run, through a wood near Trenwith. She missed the freshness of the sea air but found the shady canopy overhead and the soft path underfoot soothing.

She was also struck by the solitude; there were no screaming gulls, no crashing waves, no wide open sky above. Nothing was to be heard but the steady thump of her own feet on the cool, dark trail. Having lived alone in cities and abroad for so many years, Demelza was usually cautious about jogging in secluded areas. Most likely any threat here would not be from wildlife but a stranger, if one came upon her. Except for the Warleggans, everyone she’d met in Cornwall so far had been quite friendly but she knew random assault could happen in the countryside too. Still, somehow she felt her usual defenses could be suspended for a short while.

She’d been in Cornwall just two weeks, and was beginning to feel used to her surroundings, not really “at home” but definitely growing comfortably familiar. She knew exactly where to find the thick matts of purple saxifrage along the cliffs, where to stand to best see the magnificent coral sunset. She knew when in the evening a barn owl could be heard calling out west of the engine house and when the raging tides rushed the rocky shore.

She looked forward to these things. And it looked as though she’d remain here for a while though just how long, she couldn’t guess.

Besides a constant awareness of her surroundings, there was another habit of self-preservation Demelza had acquired over the years. Whenever things got complicated in her love life or she found herself embroiled in even the slightest interpersonal conflict, she usually found a way to exit quickly and graciously. There was always a new job, a new flat, a new program to lure her away. Sometimes she proudly thought herself a master at avoiding discord, other times she felt she was a coward. Fundamentally there was nothing meek or mild about her; deep down she knew she was a fighter, and if her back was to the wall, she’d no doubt come out swinging. But it had been a long time since she’d had to really face any deep emotions. It was better this way.

Yet here she was, complicating her love life by opening a new chapter with Dwight, and at odds professionally with George Warleggan. How long would she continue to feel contented where she was before she’d itch to move on? If she could throw herself into her work --her passion-- it might be different. She hated feeling thwarted and once again found her thoughts returning to George Warleggan’s motives.

George Warleggan had somehow been alerted to Dwight’s friendship with Ross Poldark. Based on what Dwight had said about the long standing animosity between Ross Poldark and George, she felt certain Ross was key in all this. If Dwight had previously known Tonkin or one of the other members of the consortium, would George have kicked up such a fuss? Maybe, if his aim really was to stall the impact assessment. But she couldn’t shake the feeling that it had to do specifically with Ross.

She was enjoying this puzzle and felt a part of her brain churning that had been growing restless.

Of course! Elizabeth, George’s wife--and Ross’s ex-wife--was the answer. Dwight had said he was present at Ross’s wedding years ago. If George had spoken to Elizabeth about the firm he’d hired, she would not doubt recognise the name and make the connection.

Demelza felt a spark of excitement shoot through her at having worked out what seemed like a
logical solution. There wasn’t really anything she could do with this intelligence--she doubted it would help Dwight in any way whatsoever--but it at least helped her to understand the backstory behind this dispute.

She ran on, wondering what Ross Poldark looked like when he was younger. Did he always have a beard or was he clean shaven when he married Elizabeth? How long ago would that have been? Dwight, it seemed to her, had hardly changed at all in the almost ten years she’d known him. Could he say the same about her?

Feeling a sudden ache in her long legs, Demelza paused to stretch.

See, Carne? You’re the one that’s getting old, she thought.

She inhaled the rich scent of the ancient wood and realised, to her dismay, that in her musings she’d almost entirely missed the carpets of newly unfolding bluebells on either side of the path. Their beauty was breathtaking and she suspected they’d only grow even more glorious as the spring wore on.

I’ll have to bring Dwight to see them, she thought, and with a renewed energy turned back towards the engine house.

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“Oh, Dwight, are you sure you can’t come? It won’t be nearly as much fun without you,” Demelza said, as she slipped into a shoe and fastened her earring.

“Believe me, Demelza, I wish it were different. An evening with friends would most certainly soothe me. But not as much as an evening home with you.” He kissed her on the lips, a warm lingering kiss, and then looking into her eyes, tucked a stray red tendril back behind her ear.

Demelza smiled and leaned her head on his shoulder; she could feel the tension in his upper body.

This setback was taking a toll on Dwight that he wasn’t prepared for. Theirs was not really a field in which they met much adversity and Dwight was such an even tempered man that he rarely had personal differences with others, and certainly never professional ones. He was a bit out of his depths.

She wished she knew more about the legal end of the business so she could be of use pushing back against Warleggan’s stall tactics. Then again she might end up saying something they’d all regret if she saw him again, so it was probably just as well she stayed away.

“I’m to see Nat Pearce, our solicitor, in Truro this evening in advance of the meeting with the mining consortium in the morning,” he explained.

“Our solicitor? You mean yours, Dwight,” she said.

“I mean the firm’s.”

“You are the firm, Dwight!” she laughed.

“I do wish you’d seriously consider joining me, officially in partnership,” he said. “I mean professionally,” he added quickly. “Promise me you’ll consider it?”

Demelza hadn’t yet told him about the job offer from Chicago. She wasn’t sure why she was reluctant to mention it. Perhaps it was because she didn't really want to think about the future but
instead just enjoy the present moment in Cornwall. Yet the present moment was feeling on hold, uncertain.

“Of course I will. But please tell me what else can I do to help? Should I come too and speak to this Pearce fellow? I’m like a pampered housewife here, twiddling my toes, Dwight! Yesterday I woke up late, soaked in the tub with a book for an hour, then went to the market and bought a piece of fish for your dinner…”

“And it was a really nice one you selected,” he teased.

“Then today my big excursion is going out to dine with the ladies of the neighbourhood. Well, I suppose Ross Poldark will be there too. But my point is, it’s just too much leisure--and much more socialising than I’m used to.”

“Well, you were always too serious when you were young and now you get a second chance,” he offered. “Oh come on, Demelza. First of all, you deserve some relaxation so enjoy it while you can. Secondly, I know you have been busy. You’ve started reviewing the surveys, which will save us time later, and you’ve been essential pulling together all the reports I need. And securing allies among the locals here is helpful as well. Verity Poldark, with her work promoting historical preservation might prove a promising connection. But tell me…is Ross Poldark really cooking dinner?”

“No, that’s all Verity. She wants to show off his home--Nampara is it called?-- and the restoration design her architectural firm has done on it as well. Caroline Penvenen will be there too, didn't I tell you? If you came, you could argue class politics with her.”

“Yet another reason I am sorry to miss it,” he said with a slightly sarcastic smile.

“Oh, Dwight, stop pretending. You like her well enough. You like her well enough. At least you seemed to have a pleasant time dancing with her at Trenwith.”

“Well, I suppose it wasn’t unpleasant … Come, I’ll drive you whenever you’re ready. You are sure you can get back on your own? I’ll be in Truro until quite late, I’m afraid.”

“Verity said she’ll take me home but I don’t see what’s the fuss. I could walk…” she began.

“Not in the dark, Demelza. There are steep drop offs…”

“You think I’m going to go tumbling off a cliff in the dark?”

“Well, accidents can happen. Someone doesn’t see you in the dark on the road…” he said.

“I’ll avoid the roads. And the old mine shafts.”

“Don’t even joke about those. Tell me you haven’t been exploring the tunnels on your own?” He gripped her arm a little tighter and looked her in the eye again.

“First, you forget I scaled the Cliffs of Moher to count guillemots back when I was in school and since then I’ve grown even more experienced at exploring new terrains and traveling rough. And secondly, did I not promise you and Ross Poldark I wouldn’t go nosing about the sea cliffs on my own?”

They looked at each other solemnly for a moment and then both smiled. Dwight thought Demelza was being dismissive of the real dangers around her and she felt he was being patronising. But if that was promising to be a real disagreement, it ended before it got at all heated. Their arguments-- if one
could call them that—were always very civil and never lasted long. Logical points were laid out orderly, both set aside their own personal assumptions, and then a dollop of humour would be injected to lighten the mood.

“Besides do you really think I’m that deceptive or impulsive?” she asked coyly.

“No, of course not. You are neither. By the way you look stunning,” he said, eyeing her up and down approvingly.

“And you are a very inept liar but very sweet all the same, Dr. Enys.”

She was not aiming for stunning and in fact had no idea what to aim for at all. In jeans and a somewhat alluring, wide necked knit top, she was sure she’d be underdressed or overdressed, depending on whose eyes she was seen through. Traveling to Cornwall, she had mostly packed clothes for the field—jeans, fleece jacket, down gilet, quick-dry athletic pants, wellies, and trainers. She had slipped one pair of not-too-battered leopard print ballet pumps into her case at the last minute and it was those she was wearing now. She’d also pinned her red tresses up tonight, and while that served to show off her long neck and expose her creamy-smooth shoulders, she mostly did it for convenience sake as she hadn’t shampooed her hair that day.

“I should bring something!” she suddenly remembered in a panic.

“Take a bottle from the wine rack here in the kitchen,” he proposed.

“Dwight, no! It was Verity who stocked the engine house for us as guests. It wouldn’t be right. And don’t you think she’d know if I brought her a bottle she’d purchased herself?”

“She’d think you had excellent taste,” he laughed. He couldn’t see why this mattered to her.

Just then she bit her lip as a troublesome thought came to her.

“Dwight, Verity Poldark, relative of Ross Poldark, is letting us this house for the duration of the job, and at a favourable rate...” she began.

“Yes?”

“Well, might it not seem...?”

He saw where she was going.

“As though there is more alleged collusion? I suppose Warleggan could make that claim but he’d have to do some digging first. It is still the off-season so what Verity is charging us is well enough within market range. Plus I found her and this property independent of my relationship with Ross. It had everything we needed—space, location, an outbuilding for our lab work, which no other airbnbs or inns did. Besides I suspect everyone around here is related to one another if you look hard enough.”

She gave his hand a reassuring squeeze and hoped he was correct. She couldn’t stand to see Dwight face yet another setback but also loved the engine house and didn’t want to have to relocate.

“Here, take this one,” he said, eyeing a bottle of 2011 Rioja encouragingly. It was nothing too special but perfectly respectable—exactly the kind of wine everyone would drink but no one would notice.

“Oh! I’ve an idea!” she exclaimed and dropped his hand. She hastily grabbed a pair of shears from...
the kitchen drawer and bolted towards the door.

“Demelza?”

“Give me ten minutes!” She called back and was gone.

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“Why, such a loving welcome into your home from such a dark and handsome fellow!” Demelza laughed.

A large curly haired hound had bounded towards Demelza as she stepped over the threshold of Nampara, first pinning her against the wall, then licking her face. She knew she should discourage him but found his unrelenting affection charming.

It certainly eased any apprehension she had about coming to Ross Poldark’s house without Dwight. It wasn’t that she lacked confidence to hold up an intelligent conversation or was ill at ease with the other company; on the contrary, she felt a genuine warmth for Caroline and Verity, though she’d known them just a little over a week. No, there was something about Ross that had her on guard, something she was not ready to honestly face.

“These are perfectly lovely, my dear,” Verity said, taking the wild flowers from Demelza before the dog upset them. Demelza had tied the offering with some kitchen twine and placed them in a rustic mug she’d found in the engine house. It made a simple yet elegant arrangement.

“I believe these are Alexanders, those are sea pinks of course, oxeye daisies, and bird’s foot trefoils,” Demelza explained. “There’s no shortage on the slopes by the sea, even this early in the spring. I can only imagine what summer is like!”

“My gran used to call the yellow ‘uns ‘eggs and bacon’,” said a rather stout, raspy woman who appeared in the hallway. She was dressed in work clothes-- a blue smock and baggy blue jeans-- which led Demelza to believe she must be a housekeeper of sorts.

“Garrick, you leave our guest be. I’ll take that,” the woman said, and took the bottle from Demelza’s hand with a wink. Demelza was somewhat relieved that neither Caroline nor Verity had inspected the label closely before it was carried off to be decanted in the kitchen.

“Garrick, down now!” Ross entered the hallway and bellowed, but the dog paid him no heed and continued nuzzling Demelza’s hand. “Garrick usually ignores guests. I don’t know what’s got into him,” he grumbled.

“He’s right to be wary of me, isn’t he? A stranger in his home? What have I come to steal?” she said, ruffling his ears. “It’s okay, I like dogs and seldom have the chance to commune with one as sweet as he is. Garrick you say his name is?”

“Are you familiar with the poet and dramatist David Garrick?” Caroline asked.

“I can’t say I am,” Demelza replied.

“Neither was I until I met this creature,” Caroline said and followed Verity back into the house.

Finding they were now alone in the dark hallway, Ross took her by the elbow and led her aside, away from the dog and out of ear shot from the others who had moved on to the dining room.

“Tell me, any news? Of George?” he asked, changing the subject quietly.
“Warleggan? Well, I can’t say much, I’m sure you understand, but Dwight remains optimistic,” she
said, lowering her voice. “He’s meeting tonight with a solicitor in Truro. Nat Pearce?”

“I know Pearce,” Ross said, nodding.

“Please tell me he doesn’t work for you too,” she said, trying to hide the exasperation in her voice.

“No, no he doesn’t,” Ross laughed lightly and flashed what he had hoped would be a reassuring
smile that instead betrayed his lingering concern.

He was moved by her care for Dwight, a care not just for Dwight’s enterprise but for his personal
feelings as well.

*That must be a comfort to him*, Ross thought. *To have such a friend. Or was it more than that?*

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On the inside, Ross Poldark’s house had an aesthetic similar to the engine house--whitewashed stone
walls, exposed ceiling beams, floors of flagstone and wide oak planks. In the dining room, a heavy
oak table, which looked to be several hundred years old and matched the ancient charm of the place,
was laid beautifully, with Demelza’s flower arrangement now in the center.

Dinner was simple-- rocket salad followed by roasted new lamb, asparagus, and potatoes. Verity
prepared what seemed to be a rustic country meal though there was clearly more that had happened
behind the scenes. Everything was fresh and carefully selected, executed perfectly, and the resulting
flavours were surprising complex.

“Verity, is there no end to your talents? This dinner is simply wonderful!” Demelza gushed.

“She always has been an impressive cook,” Ross said proudly. “Even when we were teenagers.”

“Ross would eat anything when he was a boy so I’d hardly put too much stock in such a
compliment,” Verity laughed. It was clear the cousins had a fondness for one another.

“Verity has a way with menus and I’ve learn to trust her implicitly,” Caroline added. “It was her idea
to serve wild boar at the fundraiser. I thought it might be too heavy but it was just the right historical
touch.”

“Well, if we were aiming for historical accuracy we’d need to serve more than just boar but many,
many more courses. Fish, soup, racks of meat, oysters, pheasant, swan-- all at once and on one table.
You’d need hours to eat it all,” Verity replied.

“And somehow I think serving swan might not have gone over well with our guests,” Caroline
mused.

“Swan is growing in popularity in the States,” Demelza chimed in. “Conservation groups even
approve of it. As a way to control the swelling populations--they’re seen as pests there.”

“I’m not sure I could ever bring myself to try swan! They’re such stunning and romantic creatures!”
Verity said.

“And they mate for life so you’d need to eat two,” Caroline teased.

“Actually…” Demelza began, then stopped herself in embarrassment.

“Yes?” Ross smiled. “Please, Demelza, go on…”
“Well, I don’t want to take all the poetry out of it, only the pairing for life is not romantic per se, just an evolutionary trait. As they build nests and breed together, they learn from their mistakes. Then they share that knowledge with each other to ensure survival of the maximum number of cygnets each subsequent year. It’s very practical—they don’t have to make the same mistakes over and over with someone new each time.”

“Sharing knowledge still sounds romantic to me,” Verity laughed.

“I suppose that’s to be valued—learning together? But swans can also be fiercely territorial and aggressive,” Demelza added.

“Sounds like many women I know,” Caroline laughed.

“Perhaps you’ve been unlucky in your friendships Caroline?” Ross asked.

“Clearly I’m not referring to present company.” She waved away his comment. “You know I adore Verity and Demelza as much as you do, Ross,” she winked.

“It’s the pairs together who fight the fiercest—maybe that can be seen as romantic too?” Demelza added. She didn't want to be seen as the dull scientist at the table and moved to change the subject.

“Anyway, these potatoes, Verity, are simply amazing. How were they prepared? They can’t be just roasted?”

“It is a secret from the Trenwith kitchens.” Verity blushed just a bit.

“Top secret, in fact. I know it—but if I told you, I’d have to kill you,” Ross teased, putting another lusty forkful to his mouth.

“Would you?” Demelza sparked in return.“In that case, since I value my life, I think I can live with the mystery.”

“Fair enough but we’ll have to appeal to Verity to make them again for us sometime,” Ross said. He was looking across the table at Demelza with his dark eyes that so far tonight had been soft and playful.

Caroline watched this exchange with interest. She bit her lip to contain her growing amusement, then took a sip of wine. Inspired, she smiled slyly.

“Yes, Ross, hopefully you’ll have many more opportunities to get to know your new neighbour,” she replied.

“Sorry to interrupt, sir.” Prudie entered abruptly. She was wearing her raincoat and looked as though she was getting ready to leave. “Miss Verity, your Aunt Agatha has rung, on the landline. She says she must speak to you now-- says it’s urgent.”

“Goodness!” Verity said and got up at once. She scurried out of the dining room but first shot Ross a worried look.

“And I’ll be going then, Mr. Poldark?” Prudie said, tapping her foot anxiously.

“Yes, yes, that’s fine, Prudie,” Ross said, not hiding that he was more than a little annoyed by her lack of service.

Verity returned in just a few moments, her own coat in hand. Whatever the emergency was, it was calling her to Trenwith.
“Listen now, you enjoy yourselves without me. I’ve put the berry tart in the oven. It should only take about fifteen minutes to reheat, then serve it with the cream-- that’s in your refrigerator, Ross.”

“Oh Verity!” Demelza cried. “Do you really have to go so soon?’”

“I’m afraid my aunt is...unwell and needs my assistance,” she said grimly.

“Should I join you?” Ross was concerned. He followed Verity into the hallway and helped her on with her coat.

“Ross, you and I both know what Aunt Agatha is up to but still I must go to her,” Verity said when they were alone by the front door. She kissed him on the cheek then gripped his arm affectionately. “Dear cousin, I wish to give you some advice, but I don’t know where to start.”

“Advice?” he asked.

“Ross, watching you tonight--it’s lovely to see your eyes so alight again, to see you smile. You simply must make that a priority in your life. To seek company, laughter, and... love,” she said softly.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said gruffly, looking to his feet.

“I think you do,” she said before she walked out the door.

---

“Tell me Ross,” Demelza asked when he returned to the table. “Are you as skilled in the kitchen as your cousin?”

“Hardly. But Demelza, what about you? I’ve had your cooking,” he said. He meant it and felt ashamed that he hadn’t better expressed himself the other night when he had blundered into her home uninvited.

“Me?” Demelza almost choked on her asparagus. “Ross, I made you an omelet!” she laughed.

“And it was very good. Dwight says you are a genius in the kitchen.”

“No, he says I’m ‘creative’ which could mean just about anything. I’d hardly put myself in Verity’s culinary category.”

“Isn’t Demelza’s modesty charming, Ross? I’m sure she has so very many other talents we’ve yet to see,” Caroline said, her devilish smile returned. She wasn’t mocking Demelza but calling Ross’s attention to her.

If she weren’t so far across the table, Demelza might have kicked her.

“Look she’s blushing,” Caroline added.

Ross flashed Demelza a sympathetic look to let her know he saw Caroline’s game. He had been finding their conversation so easy tonight and resented Caroline calling attention to it.

“I’ll get more wine,” he started to say but before he rose, Caroline was on her feet.

“Allow me, please, Ross,” she said with a wink, leaving the two of them alone at the table.

They said nothing for what seemed like a long time until Caroline returned with an opened bottle. She also held Demelza’s buzzing mobile, which had been set on the sideboard earlier.
“Someone seems desperate to reach you,” Caroline said and handed her the phone.

It was Dwight. He’d rung at least three times and was trying once again.

“Oh, Dwight,” Demelza said gently when she picked up. “I’m sorry I had my mobile on vibrate and I...What? A tire? But you’re ok? And you’re stuck in Truro? Can you hold on and I’ll find us a mechanic? I know it’s late…”

Ross and Caroline heard enough of Demelza’s side of the conversation to make out the trouble Dwight was in. They also read the worry and care that washed over Demelza as she tried to help him from afar.

“Give me your mobile,” Caroline said to her and with only the slightest hesitation, Demelza handed it over.

“Dwight, this is Caroline. Where did you say you were? Okay, I’ll phone my garage and have your vehicle looked after straightaway. I have an excellent man, he’ll be there in minutes.” She left the room with Demelza’s mobile and continued her conversation with Dwight.

If Caroline was trying to assuage Demelza’s anxiety, it worked. Demelza quickly went from being distressed to amused. She could only guess the indignation Dwight would feel at being told what to do so emphatically by a person he barely knew. Demelza understood Caroline’s motives were friendly but was fearful Dwight would not see it that way. She tried her best to contain a laugh and instead gave an inelegant snort.

She looked up to see Ross containing a similar smile; the same thoughts had occurred to him. Realising they were co-conspirators alone at the table they could contain it no more, and both burst out in laughter breaking the silence.

“I can just imagine the look on Dwight’s face,” he said, clearly entertained by the situation.

“I’ll have to explain to him that she means well,” she said, grinning brightly.

Moments later Caroline glided back in and handed Demelza her mobile. The call had ended; Dwight had rung off before Demelza could ask him any more questions.

“Well that’s settled. He’s also staying over at my townhouse so don’t expect him home tonight. I’ve a place in Truro, you know, it’s empty so it’s no trouble at all. There’s no use dragging himself back here late only to have to get up early for his meeting,” Caroline explained.

“That’s terribly kind of you, Caroline. Did he say what had happened to the tire?” Demelza asked.

“No, he didn’t. Listen darlings, I need to be leaving now too. I hope you don’t find me rude. I’ve a terribly busy day tomorrow.” She moved to get her smart Burberry trench coat and matching umbrella from the hallway.

“Oh, Caroline!” Demelza couldn’t believe she was leaving too. Was her company so tedious that she’d driven away all the guests?

“I’ll see you out,” Ross began.

“No please, don’t bother. I’m well acquainted with the door. Good night my dears,” she said.

Ross and Demelza sat silently for a moment, listening to the gentle purr of Caroline’s car engine warming up before it hastily peeled out of the gravel drive.
A Night at Nampara

“I’m afraid our dinner party has been decimated. You must be regretting your choice to come,” Ross said, leaning back in his chair.

“Oh must I?” she said wryly. She wasn’t sure what he was fishing for with such a remark. Was she supposed to now protest and praise his company or was he genuinely feeling sorry for himself? Either way she wasn’t having it. “We should probably clear the table before Garrick does it for us. It will take no time at all if we do it together,” she said and rose from the table.

Even though he was hesitant to allow a guest to do any tidying up, Ross followed her into the kitchen without voicing any objection. He didn't know what to make of her mood now that they were alone.

Is she pitying me? Does she think I’m a helpless recluse who can’t take care of himself? he wondered.

“Is it usual for your Prudie to…” Demelza began then realised she was prying.

“To walk out while I’m hosting a dinner party and leave my guests to clear up? No. But it is Wednesday and every Wednesday without fail, she visits the casino in Newquay.”

“The casino? Does she win?” Demelza asked as she stacked the dishes in the sink. She saw Ross had a dishwasher but wasn't sure if it would be too presumptuous to begin to load it for him.

“That’s fine, leave them there,” he said, reading her hesitation. “Oh, I suppose she wins a few quid--enough to keep her going back year after year. I used to play cards in my youth but the risk holds no allure for me anymore.”

“I’ve never gambled. Not even the once,” she said. “Maybe when I was growing up I saw too many poor folks ruined by it. I suppose when you have nothing, you can decide either to hold on to every precious crumb or else you feel like you are owed more. So you take risks like you’ve nothing to lose, not thinking of your loved ones or your dignity,” she said, turning on the tap.

“I’ve seen that too. It can be destructive even when one has means, though of course the consequences not felt the same,” he was quick to add. “My late cousin Francis had a gambling addiction,” Ross said sadly. “Thankfully it was one vice my own father never had. Lust, gluttony, sloth-- those were his,” he added with a smile.

“Put him together with my father and we’d have the perfect sinner,” she laughed. “Let’s see...Tom Carne favoured pride, envy and greed--though he’d practically nothing, whatever he did have he sure wasn’t about to share! Oh, yes and of course, his favourite was wrath.”

Yes, pride and wrath, those sound familiar, Ross thought. I'm hardly a billboard for virtue.

“I can see how having Prudie would be a great help to you, she said, changing the subject. She was rinsing out the wine glasses now and carefully placing them on the drain board.

“Prudie?” he laughed softly. He had grabbed a towel and reached over to take a glass. “Yes, I suppose we have come to an agreement, she and I. Prudie is the only living connection I have to my father. Different than my Trenwith relations, Prudie lived with him. She knew how he was really and still…” He held the half-dry glass in his hand and paused.
“And still…?”

“Loved him? Admired him? Well, probably not. But at least she respected him.”

Demelza nodded. She thought she understood even though respect was not something she had ever felt about her own father.

“Isn’t it hard?” she asked. “To know someone was flawed and yet still have some sort of obligatory love for them? Obligatory, but still there, real in its own way whether you like it or not...and there’s no escaping.”

This was the third time she had mentioned her own father in his presence; Ross sensed a sadness and also a bit of a hard edge, a wall she had erected years ago maybe to insulate herself from any pain. From her father’s wrath? Ross looked at her quietly as she placed the last glass carefully aside and turned off the tap.

They smelled it before they saw it.

Both had forgotten the dessert Verity had put in the oven some time before, and now acrid smoke crept from the oven as the juices and beyond-caramelized sugar bubbled over from the pan and scorched on the hot oven floor.

“Oh no,” Demelza laughed. “What a mess!” she said, opening the oven door, then closing it quickly when she was met with a waft of smoke in her face.

“Allow me,” Ross said, heroically donning a neoprene oven mitt.

Verity’s poor tart was removed out the back door and left in the rainy yard. Ross came back in quickly, his dark hair a little wet, and opened a few windows while Demelza fanned the air around by waving a dish towel.

“I don’t know if my eyes are tearing from laughing or from the smoke!” she said, wiping them with the towel.

He was glad she found it humorous.

“Come, there’s a fire in the parlour. I can’t offer you dessert but perhaps you like whisky? I’ve just picked up a twelve year old Cardhu that I’m eager to try,” he said.

“In truth I know very little about whisky but I’ve mostly liked what I’ve had in the past. And I’ll try anything once,” she said, still laughing from their mishap in the kitchen.

She followed him into the dark and cozy parlour and settled herself into one of the deep leather chairs by the hearth. Garrick seemed to be considering climbing into her lap but his master quickly cleared his throat to disabuse him of such a whim. Instead the dog settled with a sigh at her feet.

“This one is very delicate. No peat flavour,” Ross said and poured her a small glass to try.

“Do you like the peaty ones?” she asked.

“I do usually favour the Islay whiskies,” he said, then added with a smile, “but there are few single malts I don’t like. To your health, Demelza.”

She raised her glass and saw his smile return.

He was, she had already determined, a man of many moods. He seemed much more relaxed than he
had been earlier in the night when more company had been present— but was it that he liked solitude or was it the whisky? She felt more and more curious about this enigmatic man who lived alone in an historic stone house by the sea.

“You’ve lived here long?” she asked.

“Yes, my whole life. The house was in my father’s family for generations. Though why my mother agreed to move in when she married him was always a mystery to me. It was badly neglected and rather run down for years.”

“You’d never know it now.”

“I have Verity to thank for that. She’s exceptional, all the women in my family are— or were.”

“Your mother was an engineer, you said?”

“Yes....soil mechanics. Coastline erosion was her main area of expertise. She was far from soulless.” He smiled a wicked sort of smile at her that turned into a laugh when he saw her renewed embarrassment.

“Oh Ross, I wish you could forget that I said that!” she muttered and half hid her face in her hand.

“Ready for more?” He asked, still smiling but more gently this time. As much fun as it was, he wasn’t going to continue to tease her, and instead poured more into her glass as a peace offering. He passed her the carafe of water.

She noticed he had been drinking his neat.

“And you?” she asked.

“No, I like this one without the water. It’s so smooth that…”

“I mean, what sort of engineering do you...?”

“I’m a geological engineer. Minerals— I’m afraid it’s terribly pragmatic and there’s nothing poetic about it.”

Of course, he told you that already at Trenwith, she thought. You’re repeating yourself now, Carne.

“And your father? What did he do?”

“Oh, he owned Grace Quarry before me, I inherited it from him. But other than that, he didn't do much that was productive— unless it involved chasing women, and that was to the chagrin of many husbands in the county.”

“And your mother? How’d she feel about that?” she asked cautiously.

“He had the good sense to wait until she’d died before he took up that behaviour.”

“She must have been very special to inspire such devotion— if it was a part of his nature.”

“She was. To him. I don’t remember her much. She was tall and dark and lovely. I’m said to take after her. The tall and dark part,” he added quickly.

She bit her lip to contain a laugh. He was certainly lovely but she didn’t think he needed to told that. At least not by her. Not now.
“And your father? What did you inherit from him besides the quarry?”

“My temper, my impulsivity, an uncanny ability to make enemies…”

“And make friends,” she interrupted. She wasn’t having any of his self pity.

“…this worthless farmland…” he went on.

“Really? Nothing else?” she said with a raised brow.

“My father loved the sea. Up until the week he died, he took frequent swims, even in the bracing cold. It made Prudie furious but he said it kept him in health despite all his other bad habits. I’m like him in that respect.”

“He sounds like a character.” She sensed Ross’s conflicting feelings for his father and wished she any fond memories of her own.

“To Old Joshua Poldark!” Ross held up his empty glass in salute.

She laughed again and took a drink--then her face fell in a panic.

“Oh! Ross! How stupid of me! I hadn't thought of it before-- Verity was supposed to drive me home. And now Dwight won’t be back tonight so I can’t count on him.” She didn't say it but it was clear that Ross was not in a fit state to drive and she couldn’t ask it of him. “It might be raining but it’s warm enough tonight, if you lend me an umbrella I can walk.”

“You most certainly will not. It may be straightforward in daylight but in the dark it is out of the question.”

“You sound like Dwight. I suppose I’d better call taxi.”

“It might take a while for one to come out here this late,” he replied, then cautiously offered a solution. “Listen, Demelza, this is a big house and I have a guest room, more than one in fact. Why don’t you stay tonight here and I’ll have Prudie run you home in the morning?”

“That's very kind but I wouldn't want to inconvenience you…”

“Nonsense. You’d be doing me a favour by keeping me company. Especially if you have another?” He reached for the bottle and poured more of the pale Speyside into her glass. “That is, if it’s not too much for you?”

“Oh no. Is it too much for you?” she challenged with a coy smile.

He laughed at her playful banter, relieved that she was accepting the offer to stay. It meant they could relax just a little more.

Instantly he was inspired.

“Demelza, may I ask…no…” He stopped, his tongue devilishly darting of out of his lips.

“Yes?”

“You once were Dwight’s student… how much older is he than you?”

“Are you asking me where was I when this whisky was casked?”
“Is that rude to ask?” To a stranger it would be, but he felt as though he was growing closer to her. It was reasonable to want to know this of a friend.

“Is that a worry for you, Ross? That you’d be seen as rude?” Her eyes were laughing.

Ross thought she was enjoying the light sparring. He knew he was.

“I turned thirty this year,” she said. “What, you don’t believe me? Want to see my passport?”

“No, you just seem...mature?”

“Thirty is mature in my opinion. Or did you mean boring and matronly?”

“No, not that,” he laughed and tried not to look at her lips as she licked them after taking another sip from her glass. Or at her exposed neck when she ran her finger along her delicate collarbone.

She’s ten years younger than you. No doubt she’d outrun you, Poldark, he thought to himself. But there was more about her he needed to know. He plunged on.

“So you and Dwight are...close?” he asked, staring into his tumbler.

The mention of Dwight’s name seemed to instantly change the atmosphere in the room.

“Yes, we’ve been friends for a long time,” she said stiffly.

“Friends? Surely it’s more than friends?” he asked skeptically.

“He’s very dear to me…”

“Dear? He’s dear to you? You sound like Aunt Agatha. No doubt there’s more between you…”

“You claim I’m not matronly but then you compare me to your great aunt. Just what are you asking me, Ross?” she asked with a quick sting in her tone. “Yes, I’ve slept with Dwight-- if that’s what you want to know. Many times over many years. But somehow I think you already know that…”

Are you sleeping with him now? was what he wanted to ask but was afraid of the answer.

“Do you love him?” he asked instead.

She wasn’t prepared for that question.

He saw her pause and fumble for words that just a moment earlier were coming quickly, sharply.

“Yes,” she finally said, this time softly. “Yes, I do love him. And I think…” she stopped, looking into the fire, searching for the words she wanted-- or perhaps the courage to speak them. “I think... there are many ways to love a person.” She paused again, then turned back to Ross, her blue eyes aflame. “And if you believe there is only one way, you’ll be sorely disappointed your whole life. The trick is to find the right way for the right person at the right time. I love Dwight, I will always want the best for him, and I’d never deliberately hurt him.”

“As would I,” he said firmly.

“Good,” she nodded.

“But he’s not your soul mate?” He knew he was being provocative. What was he doing just now? He wasn’t sure-- but he was curious to know her response.
“I don’t believe in soul mates,” she said. The sharpness was back.

“Neither do I.”

They both sat quietly, only the gentle crackle of the flames licking the log could be heard in the hushed room. Whatever flared between them a moment before quickly faded. She watched the delicate sparkles bumble up the chimney like fireflies. He stared into the darkness that was slowly surrounding them, then finally turned back to her and smiled again.

“You never told me...how did you come to settle on birds?” he asked, changing the subject as a gesture of goodwill.

“That’s the same question Caroline asked me the other day.”

“What did you tell her?”

“Well I didn’t tell her the whole story. Don’t laugh, but it was sort of spiritual thing.”

“Really?”

“Well, I was quite fascinated by birds when I was a girl. I used to go to the library and take out all the big books with gorgeous engravings. You know Audubon and Bewick-- I’d stuff them in my school bag and drag home these massive things, they must have weighed five kilos each! And I’d study all the birds and memorize the taxonomies and draw them in sketchbooks. So I was already really into birds. But then when I was still quite young--eleven or so--our choir went on a school trip to London.”

“Were you good?”

“In choir? Heavens no,” she laughed.

“I doubt that.”

“Well, we were sightseeing and were right outside the Bank of England. And it was a cold and dismal winter day so it was already dark at like four in the afternoon and we’re trooping through the streets and that's when I saw it…”

She stopped, and biting her lip, cocked her head slightly. After such rambling she wanted to gauge his interest and be sure he was still listening before she went further. The fire was fading, perhaps she should just stop talking and call it a night. But to her surprise, he was following along, brows knit, and hanging on her every word.

“It?” he asked encouragingly. He was fascinated by how stirred emotionally she got when she spoke about her work.

“Yes, a bird with beautiful mottled brown plumage and an amazing long, curved beak. On the pavement, trying to find some shelter under an eave but not flying away to a safer ledge, just sitting and watching the action of the street unfold around him.

“It was a curlew, though smaller than a full grown one and totally quiet, which was odd--curlews are known for their really mournful cries. I knew right away this thing was out of place and I stopped in my tracks absolutely transfixed by this marvelous thing, straight off the pages of Audubon. And then before I knew it, I was kneeling on the cold wet pavement and talking to him.

“And it had just started to snow. You know how on those grey winter days a blanket of fresh snow
makes everything feel extra magic?"

“Especially in London,” he said. “Don’t tell me he spoke back to you,” he teased.

“No, he did not,” she laughed. “I stayed talking to him--I didn't dare touch him of course. He wasn't at all scared--just trying to make sense of his surroundings.”

“And by this time your classmates had gone on?” he offered.

“Oh, you're good. That’s exactly what happened. They marched on like good pupils listening to teacher while naughty Demelza day dreamed and broke another rule. Anyway that’s what they told my father later.”

“Was it? A day dream?”

“No, Ross, it was real,” she said earnestly. “The bird and I were just sitting there, watching each other. But the next thing I knew I was alone, lost in London, and strangers and a policeman were trying to help me, getting me to my feet and I was sobbing unlike any tears I’d ever cried in public. Not because I was lost--I knew someone would find me--but because when I had turned to speak to the policeman, the bird left. He’d flown or hopped off-- I never knew. But he was gone.

“And it wasn't anything I could explain. No one would understand and no one would certainly believe me.

“I got in trouble with the teacher and then caught it again when I got home. But as soon as I was back at the hostel I immediately sketched it in my notebook, over and over. I didn't want to forget a single detail. I can still see the clean white feathers under his bottom, the shining eye cocked ever so slightly at me...I think he was trusting me. And so it was a very defining moment.”

“Spiritual...” Ross repeated. He saw this was important to her and was serious now.

“Yes. I knew then that no matter where I was, I could find something profound, something beautiful. Something clearly there if you know to look for it, even on the grim dirty streets.”

“Birds are like that?”

“Yes, they are. They’re almost like...well, like studying god,” she said solemnly, hoping she didn't sound too ridiculous. “The deeper you dive, the more you find it’s unknowable, mystifying really.”

“Tell me,” he said, looking into her eyes again.

“Well, birds are... so mysterious. They outnumber humans like fifty to one, and have this incredible ability to access information, both from the phenomena around them and what’s been passed on from their ancestors. They have beauty and grace but also are capable of malice and rage.

“And they don’t resist transition, do they?” she went on. “They herald it--they leave every year, then show up again when the seasons change. They sing when they mate and call out when they die. They don’t hide from life or from each other. That cacophony of birdsong in the spring mornings, when there are seven or eight different kinds of birds calling out? They’re all telling us--fearlessly--they want to love and to live. Of course we can learn something from them....” She was almost breathless now, then checked her excitement.

“But like I said, no one would have believed me if I had told the I saw a curlew on Princes Street in the middle of winter in London.”
“I believe you,” he said.

“You do?”

“I do. I too think there’s so much right in front of our very faces that we’re often too blind to see, Demelza. Either we are looking elsewhere or wishing for something out of sight altogether.”

He was certain he was no longer making much sense; his head was swimming but not entirely from drink. The fire, not properly tended, had been allowed to fade but Ross felt the room was still aglow from Demelza’s radiance. He could sit there all night watching her, listening to her talk.

*What had she just said about wanting to love and to live?* He recalled her words and felt himself moved.

But she’d also said she loved Dwight.

A warning signal pulsed in his gut, one he knew better than to ignore despite wanting desperately to shut it out.

She was Dwight’s woman. She’d just about said as much.

Demelza watched him in the dimming light, unaware of the struggle raging within him. He seemed to be looking at her now with those dark and attentive eyes and she felt in that moment there was nothing he might ask her to do that she wouldn’t have obliged.

She imagined the back of her fingers running over his sleek beard, as they had done when they danced together at Trenwith. She closed her eyes and smelled the scent of his neck again—wood smoke, saddle wax, citrus.

It wouldn’t be wrong or out of place to go over to him in his chair, to touch him now, would it?

Yes, he was in front of her face. And what had he just said? She felt certain she was neither too blind to see him nor wishing for something else.

She looked down at her shoes and almost giggled seeing first her toes flex and then the balls of her feet roll upward, as they imperceptibly began to rise from the floor. She marveled at her body’s drive and determination—seemingly disconnected to her brain right now—responding just to the look in his eyes.

And then he spoke and she froze without moving any further.

“We should retire now.” Cold and stern, his voice was not his own. He had broken his stare away from her and once again looked to the hearth. He was hating himself and every word that was coming out of his mouth. Since when did he become so honourable and righteous?

“Oh.” She blew out a long breath and threw her head back in the chair.

He had meant sleep separately of course. She could only assume he was bored, done with their drunken conversation, with her self-indulgent babble and oversharing.

“Yes, I suppose so. After all the fire is fading and the bottle is almost empty.” She tried to smile then sighed, looking away from him too.

“I can lend you something to sleep in, if you’d like.” He rose to his feet.

“Yes, that would be nice, thank you,” she said politely, trying not to sound too deflated.
It was around three in the morning when Demelza woke, desperately needing to pee. She blinked in the semi-dark room, at first not aware of her surroundings. Then she looked up and saw that the exposed ceiling rafters overhead ran a different way than her room at the engine house. She remembered where she was: the guest room at Nampara—Ross Poldark’s house.

She got up and to her surprise found herself wobbly on her feet. Ross’s dog Garrick had been on her bed asleep and leapt up to follow her. To protect her from danger or to keep an eye on her so she didn’t make off with the family silver? She couldn’t detect the intention behind his watchful stance.

As she softly padded down the dark hallway, she came to another bedroom, its door open just a crack. Garrick nosed it open further and looked at her with beckoning eyes, tail wagging. Barely taking any step forward, she peered in and could just see Ross asleep on his side in the center of a dark mahogany bed that looked to be another impressive antique. He was shirtless, a pillow clutched to his bare torso, and although the room was dark, there was just enough moonlight coming in through the windows to illuminate his face, his hairy chest, and the white sheets wrapped around his muscular frame.

Demelza wasn’t sure how long she had stood there, motionless, lost in her own wonder, until finally Garrick whined and pawed her leg.

“No, Garrick, let’s leave your master be, boy,” she whispered and ruffled his ears.

She left the door ajar and reluctantly turned away. All night Demelza had found herself so charmed by Garrick and now wondered whether she should bite the bullet and get a dog herself sometime soon.

*Maybe if I take the job in Chicago,* she thought. *Long days in an artificially lit, windowless lab, I’ll need something cheering when I get home. We could run along the lake together.*

But then, dogs were at least a ten year commitment, probably more. She’d be tethered to one place; sure she could still travel—she knew plenty of dog owners who did—but not without prior planning and not for any length of time. Certainly not whenever the fancy struck.

“Well maybe not just yet,” she said. She gave Garrick another quick rub and continued on towards the bathroom.

What she really needed now was some paracetamol. Ross had sent her to bed with a bottle of water, a kind gesture from an experienced drinker, but she was finding it had not been quite enough to keep the headache at bay. She easily found what she was seeking in a cabinet above the sink.

The dull throb made her think through the evening again. She felt sure she had held her own with Ross, in drink, in conversation, but was she remembering everything? Had she let something out she should regret? She couldn’t recall and hoped nothing dreadful would come back to her later.

She stepped back into the dark hallway trying to walk away from the uncomfortable feeling and found herself outside the open door again.

*It would be so easy to go to him now,* Demelza thought.

She envisioned herself taking a few soft steps. What would it be four? Five to reach his bed? She
would pull the tee shirt over her head in one fluid motion and drop it to the floor next to his own discarded clothes, before gently slipping in next to him.

She’d press her bare skin to his back, and reach around to strum his dark chest with her long fingers. She’d wrap her leg through his, so he’d be fully enveloped in her warmth. She’d put her lips to his shoulder, maybe graze his skin with her teeth, and he would wake feeling her hungry mouth on him.

He’d turn and without pausing, tenderly take her face in his hands. His kiss would be full and deep, his open mouth claiming hers while he pressed his weight into her. She’d be under him now and his hand would reach behind her, clutching her body to him.

Closer and closer they’d both push on until they melded together into one. And they’d stay that way, diving still deeper into the mysterious pool of desire that the dark night had conjured just for them.

This time she was shaken from her reverie not by Garrick but by the man in the bed himself. His rhythmic, raspy exhalations became low snarls, from somewhere deep in his throat. She let out a soft giggle then tiptoed back to the guest room at the end of the hall. Somehow she had found this new development endearing--it made him more real to her.

Ross Poldark was snoring.
Demelza woke at the sound of heavy feet stomping up stairs. She yawned, forgetting again where she was, then was reminded as her door was pushed open by Prudie Paynter, the housekeeper she'd met the night before. She was carrying a tray with what smelled like fresh coffee.

“Mornin’--Dr. Carne. Mister Ross told me to serve you up here but I was lookin’ for you down the hall, didn’t expect you to be in the guest bed,” Prudie said with a smirk and a wink.

Somehow Prudie seemed disappointed, let down, but by whom Demelza couldn’t say. She sat up against the pillows, glad she was fully covered by the large tee shirt Ross had lent her the night before.

“Is Ross…” Demelza began, not sure of what her question was.

“He left early this mornin’. He has business in Truro. How do you take it?” Prudie asked. She’d poured the coffee into a large mug and was now waving a teaspoon and sugar bowl at her.

“The meeting with Dwight and the mining consortium, of course. I shouldn’t have kept him up so late,” Demelza mumbled, then realised how it might be misconstrued. “Er...just a bit of milk please, if you have any. Really you don’t have to…”

“Well I’ve only just got the coffee done. Still working on a proper breakfast but take your time in bed, miss...er...doctor, I mean.”

“Please call me Demelza. This is quite lovely…”

“How’s your head?” Prudie asked. Her hands were on the curtains but then seemed to think twice about opening them further. “Oh, don’t look surprised. I saw the empty bottles downstairs.”

*Bottles?* Demelza thought. Oh yes, before the whisky there had been wine with dinner. And when Verity and Caroline left, she and Ross had finished that themselves.

“Just like his father, Mister Ross likes his drink and he’s getting older so now he feels it the next day. He was in a right sour mood when he left. Come down when you’ve had a warm shower and I’ll fix you something to set you straight.”

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After a shower Demelza did feel a bit better but was still surprisingly shaky on her feet. She found she had to sit down on the toilet to regain her composure and catch her breath. It was then she spotted the discarded shaver in the rubbish bin; it was pink and clearly had belonged to a woman.

*Well, I obviously won’t ask about it. It’s in the bin. And if Ross wants to tell me who she is...or was...he will. But could it be Caroline’s?*

Of course not. Caroline no doubt got everything waxed at the finest salons and wouldn’t use a disposable shaver. Still, was that just a twinge of jealousy she was feeling? She tried to laugh it away but it had stuck her like a barb.
She dressed quickly then went to see if she could be of help in the kitchen, recalling with some regret the dishes they’d left undone the night before.

“Feel better?” Prudie said with a knowing smile. “I’m just startin’ some scones.”

“Can I help?” Demelza asked.

Prudie was always happy to lighten her own workload and didn’t object. She set off to find a spare apron while Demelza began measuring ingredients into the large mixing bowl. She was happily dicing the butter she’d found in the refrigerator when Prudie returned.

“Don’t even need a recipe, eh? You’re a good Cornish maid afterall. Where’d you learn to make scones like that? Your mum?”

“No, I don’t really remember her--she died when I was quite young,” Demelza said.

“Mister Ross grew up without his mother too,” Prudie said and patted her flour covered hand on Demelza’s arm. “I sorta became the stand in, you see. Looked after him and his father. Sure, he don’t need me as much now that Old Joshua is gone, but he’s kind to keep me on. And I try my best to do right by him.”

Demelza thought about what Ross had said the night before about his connection to this woman. She detected Prudie was getting a little teary and thought she could use a distraction.

“They taught us to make scones in primary school actually, back in Illogan. Part of our Cornish heritage,” she laughed, rubbing the butter into the flour with her fingertips.

“Ilogan? But that’s just down the road? You been back home then?”

“No,” she said simply.

There was nothing to draw her back there now. Only one of her brothers, Luke, remained. Her father had died the previous September and her other brothers were working on one of those massive international fishing boats, the kind she liked to point out were responsible for overfishing and general environmental destruction.

“But now yer back in Cornwall, here to settle down, eh? You and Dr. Enys goin’ to get married anytime soon?”

“Married?” Demelza laughed then scoffed at the idea. “Why is everyone in such a rush to get folks married off? No, we’re not…”

“No, no, yer right. Why rush? It don’t always work, do it? In fact I don’t know many for whom it has. Not fer me and my mister, and not for Mister Ross anyway.”

“Oh.” She didn’t know what else to say. Asking prying questions into the breakup of Ross Poldark’s marriage didn’t seem appropriate and she wasn’t really sure she’d want to hear it in any case.

“Was quite a while ago,” Prudie went on. “‘Course now he’s too busy to think seriously about any woman.”

“I thought he was seeing Caroline Penvenen?” Demelza posed tentatively.

“Nae, that’s only every once in a blue moon. They’re just friends, you see.”

How close? Dwight and I are friends and look where we are now?
“Prudie, can I ask you something that I have rather no business asking?” Demelza wasn’t sure why she was pressing this.


“This morning I saw...well, in the bin upstairs there’s a women’s shaver and I wondered who...if maybe...was it Caroline’s?”

“Hers? Not with those black and curlies!” Prudie laughed heartily.

Demelza saw her mistake and instantly flushed with embarrassment, at once regretting having asked. It would be another woman’s for sure. Of course, why would a man that attractive--devastatingly attractive as Caroline had called him--be unattached? Or it could be Prudie’s, which would add yet another layer of awkwardness to this whole exchange.

*And why do you care, Carne?* she admonished herself and bit her lip in distress.

“Nae! It’s Garrick’s!” Prudie howled.

“Garrick?” Demelza sputtered with relief.

“He gets such nasty tangles and brambles caught behind his ears and along his rump. I have to take a blade to him every now and then but, boy, he don’t like it. Wild thing that he is. But we love him don’t we?”

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Demelza stayed until just after the scones came out of the oven, then finally took her leave of Nampara. Prudie wanted to drive her back but Demelza was still feeling the effects of the whisky from the night before and thought a walk in the crisp air would do her good. When Demelza explained this, Prudie smiled knowingly and gave her a warm pat on the arm.

“You know yer way then?” Prudie asked her. “Pretty straight forward, less than a mile that way.” She pointed north along the cliffs.

“Prudie,” Demelza asked suddenly. “How far is Callow’s Ladder from here?”

*Kellow’s Ladder? That’s about a mile in the other direction, going toward Trenwith, along the high cliffs. Why you ask?” Prudie raised an eyebrow probingly.

“Ross had mentioned there were nests in some of the mining shafts left there,” Demelza said, casually. “He said he might take me someday,” she quickly added, lest she get another lecture on the perils of the place.

“Jinny Carter runs a climbing school from that spot in the summer. Even the littlest tackers, they just scramble right up that cliff like wild monkeys--they ain’t scared at all--’course they use ropes and harnesses and all that. But they come by boat and start at the bottom. There’s a pretty little sheltered beach when the tide is out,” Prudie explained.

“So it’s visited by many people?” Demelza asked, worrying that would upset any nest building.

“No, not many. It’s a well kept secret, you know, and it isn’t really safe. Oh, Mister Ross sure caught it from his father first time he went explorin’ down that ladder when he were a boy. Pretty tempin’ you know, but the ladder’s all rotted and the drop off is steep. ‘Course we suspected he went back many times but was smarter than to tell us about it,” Prudie laughed. “Here, I’ve packed some
of these scones for you. I’ll take Garrick inside now or he’ll follow you all the way home. Bye now, Doctor Demelza.”

“Thank you, Prudie,” Demelza smiled and took the packet of still-warm scones. She waited until Prudie had gone back into the house then turned south in the opposite direction of the engine house.

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Even in her current physical state, Demelza would have preferred a run along the dramatic cliff tops and regretted she had on the wrong shoes and attire. Still, the walk was refreshing and the cool wind blowing on her face helped her queasiness and throbbing head.

It wasn’t just her stomach and head that were off; she was feeling generally unsettled. And what she really needed more than anything was to push all thoughts of Ross Poldark from her mind.

She remembered how good it felt the day before to solve a professional puzzle so she allowed her brain to return to the assessment project. What documents could she be reviewing now regardless of their official status on the job? Did they have access to the detailed distribution maps of Barn Owl activity or was that something they’d need to request from the Barn Owl Trust?

*I’ll need to check that when I get back later,* she thought.

She looked up and wondered how far she was from Trenwith and if the Warleggans were there now or in Truro. And was Elizabeth Warleggan as eager to stall Dwight’s work as her husband had been?

Demelza then ran through her memory of what she had overheard Elizabeth say to George the night of the party at Trenwith. Elizabeth had asked George if he was the one who engaged CEA and George explained that Dwight had come highly recommended.

"*But now it seems all very suspect. The whole thing reeks of conspiracy,*" he’d added.

Now that Demelza replayed this whole exchange in her head and recalled George’s frustrated tone and Elizabeth’s indifference, it seemed as though perhaps that was the first time Elizabeth and George had even spoken of CEA or Dwight.

*Damn! There goes my theory!* Demelza thought. Her riddle remained unanswered after all. If it wasn’t Elizabeth who spoke of Ross’s connection to Dwight then who did? And why?

She’d have to take another tack if she was going to help Dwight. Who else might know George’s real motives and whether he really had something to hide?

*Of course, the ecologist who had done both of the conflicting reports! I’ll start there,* she thought. *But should I mention this to Dwight? Maybe not yet.*

She almost missed the narrow path that emerged to her left. It ran diagonally across the face of the cliff and was covered in thrift and heather and other rougher growth--sharp seagrass and gorse bushes. Carefully she picked her way down, watching her delicate shoes first grow damp then dusty. Just before she reached an outcropping of boulders, she stopped. She could see the old stone platforms and bits of ruined walls below--Ross had said this was a mine at one time. Beyond this, down further still, was a V shaped cleft in the face that led to what must be the opening and the ladder.

Demelza stood still and listened carefully. Below she could hear the sea, rushing the beach but taking a break from its angry pounding of the rocks. Overhead, gulls called to her. She wanted so desperately to move on, to stealthily check out this amazing secret but feared she didn’t belong there.
Perhaps she was not yet properly initiated to this rugged Cornish countryside.

Still she knelt for a minute, leaning forward to get a better view of what was below. Suddenly she was breathless, dizzy, and losing her balance. Quickly she reached back to steady herself with her hands, nearly crushing the packet of scones she'd been clutching. She’d never experienced vertigo like this before. Was this a new development or was it the hangover?

*Good god, how much did I drink last night?*

She took three long inhalations of the cool, salty air. Even with her eyes closed, her head spun and she felt herself tipping forward.

*Steady, Carne!*

Catching herself, she summoned any strength in her stomach and legs, then scooted backwards a few feet. She stayed low to the ground until the danger had passed, then reluctantly turned to clamber back up the grassy hill.

Now she felt in a hurry to get back to the engine house and wished she’d accepted the ride from Prudie after all. Her top was dirty and her shoes were scuffed, her hands had gotten scraped from the rocks and her bum was soggy from the damp ground. She could only hope she’d make it home without getting caught in any rain.

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By the time Demelza got back to the engine house it was almost noon. Her hangover was finally starting to fade but she still didn't feel quite right. She’d really longed for a bracing dip in the sea when she’d been out earlier but suspected the water temperature would still be too shockingly cold. Maybe it would be alright for a quick plunge but she could hardly have done so in her clothes.

Overheated and very groggy, she sat down in one of the large chairs in the cottage sitting room and fell asleep at once.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter borrows a bit from Winston Graham's glorious *The Loving Cup*, pp 861-862. Graham wrote it years ago but it's still a bad idea to go near the cliffs with a hangover.
Cry of the Curlew

Dwight sat alone in the empty cafe in Truro and thought about how frustrating and disappointing the last eighteen hours had been. A bacon sandwich sat cold and untouched on his plate; he knew he should eat something, but preferred to wait until he got back. Demelza’s cheering smile might coax his appetite. Of course before he could get home, he’d have to first swing round Caroline Penvenen’s garage and retrieve the Defender.

So many damned obstacles!

Just then his mobile buzzed to tell him he received a new email to add to the thirty or more that sat unopened in his inbox. But this one appeared to be from the mechanic who’d performed the tow and repair the night before-- the bill no doubt. Knowing it wouldn’t be any easier to face it later, Dwight braced himself, then found himself staring at the screen in bewilderment.

It was an invoice marked Paid in Full.

What the devil is this? It had to be a mistake.

He rang the garage at once. Far be it from him to look for additional expenses but he didn't want any surprises later.

“No, it was paid for, sir. By Miss Caroline Penvenen,” the man on the other end assured him.

“And you are sure those were her wishes and not a misunderstanding?” Dwight asked.

“It was clear, sir,” he said. “And your car is ready whenever you want to pick it up. Or we can bring it to you if you’d like, no extra charge.”

What? Caroline Penvenen has paid our car repair bill? Who is this woman and why is she so insistent on inserting herself into our lives? Dwight felt on edge.

He thought back to the brief dance he’d shared with her at Trenwith. Caroline had approached him and while he had begun to feel tired by that point in the evening, he didn't feel as though he could refuse one of the hostesses of the party. Especially not one who was responsible for their transportation, their attire, and their very presence that night.

Caroline had led him to the very middle of the dance floor, as though she was worried he’d try to make an escape if they remained closer to edges. Her hand felt cool and soft in his.

Dwight had been struck at once by how nice she smelled. It was clearly an expensive scent but not cloying, and almost intoxicating.

As they moved together, Caroline proceeded to talk about the people in the room, none of whom were of any interest to Dwight. He soon found he was not listening and instead grew lost in his own thoughts.

“I see I’ve nearly put you to sleep, Dr. Enys. My goodness, am I as boring as that? Forgive me and my rudeness,” she said, making it clear it was not really her rudeness that was at issue.

“Pardon me, Miss Penvenen. I’m afraid I don’t know these people you speak of and…” he began.

“And you don’t really care for them.”
“I didn't say that,” he said with a little more defensiveness in his tone than he’d meant.

“You needn’t have spoken the words, your feelings were clear,” she said, looking him directly in the eye. “Tell me Dr Enys, are there any polite topics of conversation you prefer, or should we go straight for religion and politics?”

At this he laughed.

“See, now I have finally taken your mind off your unpleasant business with George Warleggan,” she smiled.

“Oh well...I’m afraid…” he stammered, not sure how to proceed. “Has... Demelza spoken to you about it?”

“No, no worries there, Dr. Enys. She’s a good little soldier and hasn’t said a peep. But I talk to Ross and Ross talks to Verity, who also talks to me. Yet I assure you it is a closed circle. You can trust us.”

“Please call me Dwight. And can I? Trust you? Did you not invite George Warleggan to this event?”

“Oh Dwight, you sound like Ross now. George lives here--sometimes anyway-- and he has deep pockets. I take great pleasure in occasionally blackmailing him--social blackmail that is, so it’s perfectly legal, mind you-- to use his influence and wealth for the good of Cornwall. He and his wife realise they must submit in these circumstances and it’s terribly fun to watch.”

“I don't know if I should be admire that statement or be terrified at its cold ruthlessness?”

“If you find me cold perhaps your hand is simply in the wrong place?” she replied with a raised brow and the slightest twist of a smile.

Yes, Caroline Penvenen was beautiful, there was no denying it. Hers was a kind of exceptional beauty one does not often meet in real life, a beauty that must be recognised as its own entity. It would be easy to find oneself powerless around such a creature, if not on guard.

But then Dwight was not unacquainted with beautiful women; over the years he’d dated his fair share. And then there was Demelza, of course.

Demelza was lovely, but her beauty was different--it wasn't her primary identity. Hers was a sort of slow-build, emanating from the inside with subtle, often unexpected, facets. And when coupled with her charm, her allure could take deep root and prove dangerous. Foolishly he had told her this once.

“You make me sound like Himalayan balsam,” Demelza had laughed. “You’d have to call in the professionals to get rid of an invasive plant species like me.”

Whereas Caroline Penvenen’s very livelihood seemed to be based on appearances.

*Good god? Why am I comparing the two?* Dwight caught himself, mortified.

But these many days later the question remained with Dwight: could Caroline be trusted? She had shown what seemed to be friendship and generosity towards Demelza. Could it last? Demelza did have a habit of inspiring loyal friendships, but he’d hate to see her feelings hurt if Caroline decided they were no longer worthy recipients of Penvenen time and money.

And yet Caroline did seem to have both Verity’s and Ross’s trust. That must mean something. He resolved to ask Ross about her when they spoke next.
Dwight also had to decide if he was going to tell Demelza that apparently the Defender’s tire had not merely suffered an ordinary leak--it had been punctured deliberately.

“Looks like someone slashed it, sir, with a good knife too,” the mechanic had reported to Dwight the night before.

“What? Why would this happen?” Dwight had asked, not expecting the mechanic to have any real answers.

“Surely just vandalism, youths looking for some mischief?” he answered Dwight earnestly.

Or was it more?

It would do no good to plant these suspicions in Demelza’s mind and cause her to worry. No, as long as he felt sure the danger had only been directed at property and not a person, he wouldn't tell her.

Thinking about Demelza now made Dwight realise he was anxious to see her again. He could only hope she'd had a pleasant evening while he was away.

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When Dwight got back to the engine house, he was surprised to see Demelza dozing in one of the chairs by the hearth instead of bustling about.

You didn't ask her here to prepare your meals, you idiot, he thought.

He tried to remove his boots without waking her but despite his best efforts to remain hushed, her eyes opened and she sat up in start.

“Dwight,” she said. “You’re finally back.”

“Did you miss me?” He asked and bent to kiss her cheek.

“Of course I did. How were your meetings?” she asked cheerfully. “Any progress?”

“None whatsoever. Well, at least Pearce thinks we are in good stead, our documents are in order and we’ve nothing to hide nor fear. But the other meeting was worthless, a complete waste of time.”

“But how?”

“Last time Warleggan sent Tankard, his number two, to speak on his behalf and this time it was his uncle, Cary Warleggan. So we ended up taking more than half the allotted time catching him up to speed. I’d be willing to bet next time George will himself show up, then renege on anything Tankard or Uncle Cary has agreed to. It’s such an obvious diversionary tactic just meant to further stall us,” Dwight explained.

“Oh,” she said somewhat crestfallen. She had so hoped they’d have word of when they could dig into their work. ‘Then we’re still nowhere.”

Reading the disappointment in her eyes, he sat down on the footstool next to her and took her hand in his.

“Well, even if I wanted to give up, Ross would never let me.”

“And the others in the consortium? Do they have a say?”
“They defer to Ross. It’s curious, he’s much younger than they are but he carries tremendous respect among his professional peers. He’s their leader without a doubt. No wonder-- he’s rather charismatic.”

“Yes…” she said absently.

“But you know, Demelza, just because I’m bound to stick this out doesn't mean you have to. If you’d prefer to move on…” he began.

“What?” she asked suddenly, unsure if he giving her an exit from the project or from their recent entanglement. “Leave... you, Dwight?” she asked tentatively.

“Not me, but leave Cornwall and go back to the other irons you have in the fire. Of course, I’d miss you terribly,” he said. “It’s just I feel you bristling against this idleness and I fear I’m holding you back.”

Demelza’s mind raced. Was he already tired of her as a lover? Would he tell her if he was? No, that didn't matter, did it? Her loyalty to him was stronger than ever and leaving him in the middle of this professional setback was out of the question.

“Dwight, I can’t leave you alone now, I owe you more than that. You’ve always come to my rescue whenever I needed help and you’ve given me so much over all the years we’ve known each other. It’s time I returned it. Besides, I sense that I’m giving you something more than just professional support. And that you need that now too,” she added gently.

“Yes, you are and yes, yes I do.” He closed his eyes and leaned his head against her. “As bad as things have been, you make a big difference, you know. And with you next to me, I’ve been sleeping better at least.”

“Despite my efforts to keep you awake?” she teased.

“It’s counter intuitive, isn’t it? But yes.”

Since they’d reconnected in Cornwall as lovers, Demelza had been driven by an overwhelming urge to offer Dwight comfort in his distress and help him forget his cares. And though she’d found herself more than satisfied when they made love, she found greater pleasure attending to him with her caresses.

But today was the first she felt it: she needed him too.

All day--for a few days really-- she’d been feeling uneasy, and now she knew where she might seek relief. She needed Dwight’s arms, his touch, his kisses to soothe her.

“Dwight,” she said softly, then gasped breathlessly. “Oh, Dwight!” She wrapped her arms around his broad back and kissed his ready lips eagerly. Instantly she lost herself in his warmth, just as she’d wanted.

“Melz, are you okay?” he asked. He sensed the desperation in her voice.

“Oh Dwight, I’m fine. I just need you ...please don’t ask me to leave,” she said.

“No never, Demelza.”

“Dwight? Can we go…”
“Upstairs? Of course.” He held her hand fast in his own and helped her to her feet.

In no time at all, they were in the big bed in his room at the top of the stairs, their clothes hastily discarded, their bare bodies clutched to one another. Her muscles pulsed as her strong legs gripped him; she arched her back, then bent to kiss his neck. He grabbed great handfuls of her hair and pulled her down closer to him. His mouth found her pale nipples and she eagerly pressed herself to him.

“Oh! Dwight!” This time it was pleasure--not desperation--that rang out when she called his name.

Her needs now had shifted--she didn't need soothing but was aroused with desire. She needed more of him--his skin next to hers, his mouth on hers, his love inside her. She couldn’t get enough. They soon found a steady rhythm together until at last, they both cried out their release.

“Mmm, Melz. That was...louder than usual,” he said holding her close to him, gently kissing the top of her head. “Good thing we don’t have neighbours.”

“No, that one time in Scotland you were definitely louder. It was just hard to hear you over all that thunder,” she teased, referring to a rainy camping holiday they’d had the previous September.

“Dwight, I’m hungry. Are you?” she asked suddenly.

“No, I’m exhausted,” he smiled.

“Really? I’m...innervated. Good god, that’s just what I needed!” She let out an exaggerated sigh then a girlish giggle. “But you close your eyes, Dwight. I won’t pester you.”

A moment later she couldn't help herself and continued talking.

“Dwight, next time take me with you to your meetings. I want a chance to argue my piece in front of Warleggan on behalf of CEA. I promise I’ll be diplomatic or charismatic, whichever you prefer.

“Well, I’ve always found you persuasive,” he said and raised her hand to his lips for a kiss without opening his eyes. “That sounds like a plan.”

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All day Demelza had felt drowsy but now after making love to Dwight, she felt renewed and wide awake. Once she was certain he’d drifted off, she kissed his lips softly one last time, then left him dozing in their shared bed.

She was resolved to find a way to help Dwight and thought the best place to start was to go back to the loads of original documents she’d uploaded to her laptop weeks before. She slipped out of the cottage quietly and went up the path to the laboratory. The late afternoon sun flooded through the west window and warmed her as she settled at her workbench.

First, she pulled up the Warleggan report from October. It took her almost no time to find what she was looking for: *Ecological Impact Assessment (EcIA) for Warleggan Industries*, prepared by Stephen Carrington, Senior Ecologist/Project Manager, CPE Environmental Group, Cornwall.

_*Stephen Carrington._

Now she had the name of the ecologist who’d done both of the original assessments. Next she’d just have to track down the man himself and that would not be so easy. Dwight had mentioned no one had been able to reach him. On a whim she tried a quick google search of just the name alone. She laughed--as she might have expected, there were over seven million results for ‘Stephen Carrington’.
She was about to try again adding ‘ecologist’ and ‘Cornwall’ to her search, when she was alerted to a new email from an unfamiliar sender – rvp@gracequarry.com.uk

Temporarily abandoning her search, she opened it.

_He Reproves the Curlew_ by William Butler Yeats

_O curlew, cry no more in the air,_

_Or only to the water in the West;_

_Because your crying brings to my mind_

_passion-dimmed eyes and long heavy hair_

_That was shaken out over my breast:_

_There is enough evil in the crying of wind._

There was no greeting, no signature, no quick note to help her interpret this gesture. She didn't know what the “V” stood for but could think of one “RP” from Grace Quarry who might send her a poem about a curlew.

It was from Ross.
Demelza took her cup of coffee and stepped over the threshold to breathe in the misty morning air. A red billed chough beckoned her with its cheerful ‘kwee-ow’ to come out for a walk or run along the cliffs, but that could wait. She didn't want to stray far until Dwight had risen. She had left him tangled in their bed sheets, his eyes closed, his breathing soft and steady.

“Oh, Dwight! What can I do to help you?” she said aloud to the breeze as it whipped her hair around her head. She had learned long before that she could rely on Dwight and wanted him to be able to say the same about her.

She sat on the stone step of the engine house, staring into the distance and thinking back to a decisive moment, about seven years earlier, when she had turned to Dwight. It was one of the rare times she’d ever accepted help from anyone --and when she first became aware of what a loyal friend Dwight really was.

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“Fucking Hell!” Demelza exclaimed.

Despite a pretty consistent rainfall, she had been trying to make the most out of a brief hiking holiday in Snowdonia. But after four nights solo in her sodden tent, she’d finally relented to stay in a hostel before heading back to Liverpool. She felt disappointed in herself for giving up the experience of going rough. As though seeking a roof over her head and mattress under her back had somehow meant she’d failed.

Now, as she stood alone in her shared hostel room, staring at the gaping locker and broken padlock in front of her, she felt as though the floor had fallen out from beneath her.

Her new sleeping bag, her expensive Exped rucksack, her wallet, and her mobile were all gone. She was thankful that at least she was fully clothed when she discovered the theft and wasn’t on her way back from the communal shower in only a towel.

Yes, Carne, you have so much to be grateful for, she sneered to herself.

The lock had been cleanly cut so she had a moment of hope thinking it could have been the hostel staff who was responsible. Perhaps they’d mistakenly believed a departed guest had left luggage behind.

But no such luck. The staff were mortified a theft had occurred on their premises and could only help her to ring the police to file a report.

It was several hours before the local police arrived and while they were pleasant and appropriately sympathetic, they didn’t inspire her to maintain any fantasy that her belongings would be recovered. Finally one of the officers, a ruddy young man with ginger hair and a toothy grin, asked her if there was someone she could reach out to for help since she was stranded.

Stranded.

Yes, she was all alone. Demelza was used to being alone--she’d just spent four days hiking by
herself and had really spent her whole life alone-- but it had been an awfully long time since she’d felt so utterly helpless.

With just a flicker of hesitation, she used the hostel landline to ring the only number she knew by heart. The rest of her contacts were in her mobile but this would have been the number she’d have sought anyway.

After just two rings, Dwight picked up and she apologetically explained her predicament.

“Are you hurt? Are you safe?” he asked at once. “Have you a place to stay for the night?”

“Yes, I’m fine and they’re letting me stay on at the hostel tonight-- they feel rather sorry for me. I’ve struck a bargain in exchange for some work. I told them I’d clean up and make some scones for them. Don’t laugh, I’ve been known to do both those things, you know,” she joked.

He did not laugh in return and through the line she could sense the seriousness in his long exhalation. Is he concerned or is he annoyed? she wondered nervously.

“Stay put. I’ll be there as soon as I can.” And with that he rang off.

Demelza was dumbfounded. It would be a little over four hours to North Wales from Bristol where Dwight lived now, and she certainly wasn’t suggesting he jump in the car to come to her aid. But that’s exactly what he was doing. She felt tremendously guilty but also relieved and found herself smiling for the first time in several cheerless hours.

As might be expected that night, she did not sleep well in her shared room while waiting for him and at a little around midnight, she leapt to her feet when she heard a faint motor in the distance. Using only torchlight she struggled to find her trainers, then ran outside to meet the car slowly pulling up to the hostel.

“Dwight, I can’t believe you’re here!” she called happily.

He immediately pulled her into a tight embrace.

“You’re ok?” he asked, not letting her go. Apparently he had been rather worried about her physical safety despite her assurances over the phone.

“Yes, I’m grand. Let’s get you inside!” she said, squeezing back.

They sat in the empty common room for another hour going over the events of the day and catching up.

“And there were no witnesses? No one saw anything?” Dwight asked her carefully.

“No, the two Italians in my room had just arrived so they were clueless. I think it might have been the American girl who left that morning--she kept giving me strange looks. But who knows? Anyway, it serves me right. I was probably an easy mark with all that expensive gear. That’s the last time I ever splurge on anything.”

“I’m so sorry this had to happen to you, Demelza. Was the trip enjoyable at all?”

“You mean notwithstanding the theft and the rain? Yes, it was actually marvelous. And I saw loads of black grouse!”

“Were you safe? Hiking alone?”
“That was the point of this holiday. I wanted to be alone. But yes, Dwight, I was safe and didn't take any unnecessary risks. I’m experienced in these things-- I checked in with rangers, I stayed on the paths, I didn't talk to strangers, I didn't try to summit any peaks. I even had a flare gun assuming my mobile signal would be nonexistent to weak at best.” She patted his arm. “Oh, and I had a pocket knife too. You know, in case I had to amputate my own leg,” she said with a wink.

He laughed and seemed to accept her precautions as having been sufficient.

“Besides it turned out the danger came once I was with others back in civilization,” she added then sighed. “I suppose now I need to replace my pocket knife.”

In Dwight’s presence she at once found a welcome, familiar feeling--her tense muscles were loosening, her blood pressure lowering. But finally, after several undisguised yawns, she sent him off to a bunk of his own.

They left the still-quiet hostel around eight the next morning after some bad instant coffee and a few of the scones she’d made the day before to help pay off her debt. The sun was a soft pink and the mist that rose from the lush green hills around them was as delicate as fine lace. Of course now that she was leaving, the day looked to be welcoming and mild.

Despite not having seen each other or really spoken much in months-- and the odd circumstances of the reunion--conversation between them continued effortlessly in the car. Or maybe it was precisely because so much time had elapsed since they'd been together that they still had plenty to chat about before they felt caught up.

“So tell me, how are the gannets of Liverpool treating you?” Dwight asked her as he headed them east from Caernarfon.

“Liverpool is wonderful. And the gannets are too--I mean they’re amber listed so things are not really wonderful for them, are they? But TAG is such a great project. I’m so lucky to be working with Dr. Green and I have you to thank for it,” she answered.

“No, you have your own merits to thank. My recommendation was nothing. TAG?”

“Track a Gannet! Did I tell you he’s asked me to present a paper with him?” she exclaimed.

“That’s splendid, but I’m not surprised. We want the A55, right?”

“Yes, the merge is just up there. Are you sure you don’t want me to drive? It will be at least two hours-- if there’s no traffic or roadworks -- and you drove all last night.”

“I’m fine really. I had about three flasks of black coffee last night and am still wide awake. But I suspect I’ll crash hard on your sofa when we get to your flat.”

“You can have my bed, silly, for as long as you need it,” she said then suddenly was overcome with the need to sneeze. She sneezed three times in rapid succession.

This seemed to alarm Dwight.

“Are you catching cold, Demelza?” he asked, the worry returning to his voice.

“Relax, Dwight. It’s just the merest snifflie. After days and days in the rain it’s to be expected. But really, I feel fine.”

The morning offered more promising sunshine as they drove on and the landscape out the window
was no less charming now that they were on the the dual carriageway along the coast. In spite of the pretty scenery, Demelza would have liked to doze but didn’t think it was fair to Dwight who was driving. After a few quiet minutes she resumed her side of the conversation.

“So tell me, Dwight, you don’t miss Leeds? You find you are liking Bristol well enough?”

“You know I was reluctant to make the move but now I admit, I do like it a lot. It has a youthful energy.”

“Bristol is getting closer and closer to Cornwall,” she teased. “Watch out, you may find yourself back there yet!”

“Unlikely. Besides I’m hoping to stay put for a while,” he said, a sheepish smile spreading unwittingly on his face.

“Oh! You’ve got a girlfriend, haven’t you? Haven’t you?” she squealed. “That's brilliant, Dwight. Tell us all about her,” she said and settled back into her seat with a grin.

“Her name is Rosina. She’s an oncology nurse.”

“That sounds intense,” she observed.

“Intense is a good way to describe her,” he said.

“Well, I can't wait to meet her when I come to visit you!”

“I haven't exactly told her about you, Demelza,” he said hesitantly.

“Oh? Are you ashamed to have me as a friend now?” she laughed. “Although I wouldn't want to be my friend if it meant midnight jaunts to North Wales.”

“I’m certainly not ashamed to call you my friend,” he said sincerely, then after some consideration added, “It’s just she’s very jealous.”

“Jealous? Of what? We’re just friends!”

“Yes, but if I tell her about you, she’ll immediately ask if we've slept together, which she does anytime I mention a female friend--or even a female acquaintance. And when I say yes, she’ll most likely not understand.”

“It was only a few times!” Demelza brushed the idea away dismissively. The last time had been only three months earlier at a conference in Amsterdam but that already seemed a lifetime ago to her. “And you could always lie and not tell her...well, no you couldn't, could you? You’re the pathetically honest sort.”

“You too, you know. There’s not a deceptive bone in your body,” he replied. “I think even if you wanted to lie, you wouldn’t be able to. Now your turn...what about your love life, Miss Carne?”

“Well, I do have a fellow, or maybe had one, I’m not sure where we stand now. I went on this trip to try to shake him loose, let’s see if that works,” Demelza began.

“You did what?” Dwight laughed incredulously.

“Well, I told him I wanted to go camping, really rough wilderness stuff to see if that put him off me. Hugh’s not exactly the outdoors type. He’s more the Gucci, Burberry, very-much-indoors-unless-he’s-in-his-Jaguar-type.”
“Demelza, that doesn't really sound like your type at all. He’s called Hugh? Really?” His mock-sneer turned into a hearty laugh.

“Yes. And promise not to laugh more-- he’s an investment banker.”

“What?”

“Keep your eyes on the road, Dwight, and you promised not to laugh.”

“I did no such thing.”

“Look, I thought I’d give it a go. It would be wildly convenient to be in love with an investment banker. All sorts of problems fall away when you have money. And he worked so much I didn't really have to spend much time with him. But alas despite my best efforts…”

“You tried to will yourself to love him?”

“Well, it sounds ridiculous when you put it like that…” she admitted. “But I do like to be rational about all my life decisions.”

“Oh, Demelza, that's funny,” he said. “Can you really be rational and decide to love? Come on, there's a difference, isn’t there between friendship and love? I think you can will friendship--in fact, it’s almost always a matter of choice. You have things in common, you choose to spend time together, you can explain it. Friendship is reasonable--it’s cerebral-- whereas love is different.”

“Sounds like someone has been thinking a lot about love recently,” she teased.

“Yes, well…” he blushed, then continued. “Even if you have little in common with the person you love, it makes no difference. Love is something that grows in your heart and in your stomach,” he said.

And lower down, he thought but did not say aloud.

“And if you love, whether you like it or not, you’ll find you’re in deep water, struggling, trying not to drown….there’s no reason, no choice in that,” he went on.

“You think love has to be a struggle? Why would you even want that?” Demelza asked.

“Well, maybe sometimes love can be easier-- never entirely friction-free, but still, it’s a current that sweeps you away.”

“What about friendships that have just as much lodged in the heart as in the brain?” she asked.

“It’s still a choice. Whereas love…” he stopped, not really sure where this was going for him. He was not really painting a picture of a healthy relationship between him and Rosina. “I digress...tell me more about Hugh,” he said gently.

“My failed love experiment, as you have just pointed out?” she smiled. “Anyway... he had an excuse for not wanting to camp with me --he couldn't leave work just now. So he suggested instead I put off my trip and then later, we’d go somewhere lovely together, like Tuscany. His mate has a villa apparently,” she said, unenthused.

“You turned down a sunny villa in Tuscany for a wet tent in Snowdonia?” he asked, then quickly added with a laugh, “Of course you did. So then?”

“So then...I went without him,” she said matter of factly.
“And when you told Hugh you were going anyway, how’d he take that?”

“I sent him a text once I was on the train to Bangor.”

“A text? Demelza!”

“Oh, but he doesn’t even hate me for that. He’s in fact texted a few times since and claims he misses me. Of course now I no longer have my mobile so I can’t be blamed for not responding.”

“Good god, what was I just saying about your sincerity? Don’t you think you need to let him know how you feel—or don’t feel, as the case may be?”

“Well he’s awfully thick if he hasn’t figured it out by now!”

“I suppose that explains why you rang me and not him. It would certainly be harder to be rid of him once he’d driven out to Wales to rescue you.”

This alarmed her and she turned her whole body towards him to try to explain.

“Dwight, I swear. I didn’t expect you’d come up! I thought you’d...maybe...send money--which of course I’d pay back. I never assumed or expected you to drop everything…”

She didn’t mention his was the only number she knew by heart. Or that she trusted him above any other friend or relation. Instead she smiled weakly at him, hoping he was not now regretting his impulsive drive north.

“It just so happens, Melz, that I have more time than money right now. And I don’t mind the driving. It can be somewhat relaxing. And I get to see you again, which is always welcome, ” he said with warm reassurance, sensing her waning confidence.

“Well, I am forever in your debt, Dwight. And in future if you ever need saving, call on me,” she sighed with relief. She believed him that he wasn’t resentful. He wouldn’t lie to her.

After a pause she continued.

“I should have rung you last week, Dwight— if you claim you had free time— then you and I could have gone backpacking together. Why didn’t I think of that? You love the outdoors and we’d have had a blast.”

“We should do that someday. There are some places in the Highlands along Loch Leven I went when I was an undergrad that I’d like to revisit. I remember there were many sea eagles. You’d love that,” he said.

“You are right about Hugh, you know,” she finally admitted. “I do need to be honest with him. I have to tell him I don’t see a future with him—nor a present for that matter. Besides, I’m leaving for Cambridge in September.”

“Are you excited about that?”

“About starting my PhD? I am,” she said.

“You’re ready,” he said assuredly.

“Yes, I feel ready. I mean, I’d rather go back to Tanzania but I’d need to find someone to pay for that. Now you see why a banker sounded appealing?”
They did hit roadworks and traffic so the drive to Liverpool took almost three hours, including the seemingly-endless circling around Demelza's flat until Dwight finally found a spot to park the car.

Once inside, Dwight crawled into her bed straight away while she eagerly sought out a warm shower and a hot cup of tea.

His eyes were closed and his breathing steady when she came in to join him thirty minutes later. She carefully pressed herself against the wall and gave him a wide berth, maintaining a measurable distance between them.

Dwight had been right earlier when he spoke of her honest nature. She would never make moves on another woman's boyfriend, nor would she sleep with Dwight while she was still technically attached to someone else. But more important to her than her consideration of Rosina or Hugh, was her respect for Dwight. Even though she and Dwight had explored a physical relationship in the past, she was determined to prove their friendship was solid enough to remain happily platonic. Maybe it was only that way for now or maybe they’d never sleep together again--she was just happy to have him in her life. She settled on her pillow and looked warmly at him sleeping beside her.

Just then he popped one eye open and returned her gaze.

“You look warm and dry,” he said sleepily.

“I am,” she said. It was August but she felt a lingering chill in her bones after days in the wet outdoors so she had sought her warmest flannel night clothes. There was no chance of inadvertently seducing him with any exposed flesh today.

“You know I’m proud of you, Melz,” he said softly. “I’m not joking, I really am. You’re still passionate and disciplined about your work. You’re making a life for yourself that makes you happy, just like you always said you wanted.”

“Well, give me birds over blokes any day,” she smiled, proud of her pun, then closed her eyes.

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“Demelza?” Dwight called her name then appeared behind her in the doorway of the engine house. He was barefoot and shirtless, clad only in his pajama bottoms.

“You didn’t wake me. What have you been doing?” he asked sleepily. “I was worried you left.” He settled beside her with a slight shiver. His thick hair stood a bit on end and revealed he’d only just awakened.

“I didn’t go anywhere, Dwight,” she said softly. “I’m just enjoying the fine Cornwall morning. And you’re cold!” she said, giving him a quick kiss on the lips. “Come inside and let’s get you some coffee.”

Yes, Dwight had come to her rescue whenever she needed help, surely now it was time for Demelza to return the favour.

Chapter End Notes
This chapter has a wee bit borrowed--in the name of love-- from The Loving Cup by the glorious Winston Graham (pp. 588-589).
Foxes & Friends

The engine house bedroom at the top of the stairs always got the first and brightest rays of daylight. It had been Dwight’s room but Demelza was sleeping there every night now and had left her imprint on the space. The clothes she’d worn the previous evening were in an untidy heap on the floor, a half-drunk cup of tea sat cold on the bedside table, a few stray red hairs could be found on both pillows.

This morning the sun seemed particularly luminous; golden streams poured through the salt-stained panes dazzling the bed and its sheet-wrapped occupants. It was the first morning in weeks that didn’t begin with a cloudy gloom.

“Well, hello there. What are you up to?” Demelza said, opening her eyes and looking into Dwight’s pensive face.

“Mmm, I was watching you sleep. Does that bother you?” Dwight asked, his eyes fixed on her.

“Of course not, but you should have woken me up,” she answered, still drowsy.

“You were dreaming,” he said softly. “I could tell by the way you smiled and your face twitched.”

“Yes, I was,” she said. “It was curious. I dreamt I was holding a fox. And it was so soft and sweet. I wouldn’t have expected that from a fox.”

“A fox? That’s bound to be an auspicious symbol. Wonder what that means?”

“Despite your carefully guarded reputation as a rational scientist, Dwight Enys, you always have flirted with superstition!”

“Maybe. There’s loads about me, Demelza, that you’ve yet to discover,” he said, kissing her forehead.

“What it means, Dwight, is that I was holding my lover close to me and even in my not-yet-conscious state, I still enjoyed what I found,” she said, dancing her fingers through the silky golden brown hair on his chest.

“Well, that’s one interpretation,” he said. “I still think it must be a sign. Hopefully of good fortune.”

“Well I won't object to good fortune,” she sighed. “We look good together, don’t you think?” She wrapped her long bare leg around him.

“You mean in bed?” he laughed. “Yes, I never really considered that. We’re a nice fit, in many ways.”

Dwight leaned back on his pillow and smiling, closed his eyes for a moment. He loved Demelza in this warm and sleepy state but he knew she would soon pop out of bed and begin to bustle about. He loved that Demelza too. Then as he held her close to him, he had another thought and without hesitation spoke.

“Melz, I love you,” he said quietly.

He didn't wait for her reply but kissed her soft, open lips.
“Are you coming with me to Truro today?” Dwight asked.

He had made them a breakfast of French toast and while Demelza refused to let him to serve her in bed as he had wanted, she did allow him to wait on her while she sat at the table leisurely reading the newspaper.

“Today? Oh Dwight, I’ve made plans to see the gardens at Trenwith with Verity. But I can cancel them, no worries,” she said. “I told you I want to be more involved in negotiations--and the legal end of things.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Demelza. I won’t hear of it. It’s an actual sunny day—not just a slightly grey, overcast one. You may not get another chance anytime soon. Take advantage of it while you can. And next time you’ll come,” he replied.

Dwight would have enjoyed her company but was equally concerned that she remain contented and busy. He liked Verity Poldark and thought the friendship that was blossoming between her and Demelza was a good thing for them all.

“Are you sure?” she said, coming over to where he stood by the cooker and wrapping her arms around his waist.

“Yes, I’m sure there will be a next time,” he joked. “Listen I’ll ride in with Ross and you can have the Defender all day for whatever you fancy,” he said, then added, “Demelza, why don’t we go out to dinner tonight? We can go somewhere local by the sea or to one of the places in Truro I’ve had recommended to me.”

“A proper dinner out? No more secret affair under the cloak of darkness?” she teased. “I’d like that very much, Dwight.”

He kissed first her forehead and then her lips.

There’s something to look forward to at the end of this day then and I have her to thank for that, he thought to himself.

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When she arrived at Trenwith, Demelza was met with a much warmer welcome than the first time she’d visited. A polite man in a navy blue nylon jacket -- grounds staff of some sort—met her in the drive and offered to park her car for her, while Verity stood waiting at the opened front door, beckoning her to come in.

“I’m gate crashing your garden tour, Demelza, I hope you don’t mind.” Caroline’s voice came from around the corner in the dark hallway.

“Caroline! Oh, what a lovely surprise to see you again too.” Demelza was delighted to be in what was becoming some of her favourite company in Cornwall. She felt a twinge of guilt that Dwight was in a tedious meeting in Truro at the moment and wished he could find more time for leisure as well.

“Come, you must meet my aunt then we’ll go have our walk around the grounds,” Verity said. “That is unless you would like a coffee or some tea?”

“You’re always taking care of us, Verity!” Demelza smiled. “I’m fine and it’s better to get a move on while the sun is out.” She was anxious to see the gardens but she was also curious to meet this great aunt that both Ross and Verity had spoken of. In her nineties, steel-nerved and sharp-tongued, Aunt
Agatha was said to be quite the character.

Agatha Poldark sat at a small card table by a burning fire, dressed head to toe in black—a polo neck sweater, black trousers, shiny black loafers. She wore eye glasses with thick black frames and a necklace of square jet stones just visible under the cashmere wrap draped dramatically around her. Demelza couldn’t make out if she meant to be stylish or if she had gone into mourning years ago and forgot to change. Her grey-blue hair was worn pinned up in a structurally impressive French twist, reinforced by layers of hair spray that glistened in the late morning sunlight. She was stooped over her game but even without saying a word, she still gave off an air of power and importance.

Another imperious Poldark.

“Are you feeling at all well, Miss Poldark?” Caroline asked politely as they entered the room.

“Fiddlesticks, never better.” The old woman waved her concern away.

“Oh well, it’s just you called Verity away from Nampara the other night …” Caroline continued carefully.

“I was left all alone and needed the company,” Aunt Agatha said simply. She was apparently not at all apologetic for having ruined Verity’s evening when they’d all met at Ross’s house.

“Next time you must join us then, Aunt,” Verity said, patting her arm. She bent to kiss her cheek but Agatha ducked away, feigning annoyance at being disturbed.

“Humpf,” Aunt Agatha replied and turned her focus back to the cards laid out on the table in front of her.

“Aunt Agatha, Dr. Carne is here to see the gardens. It was raining last time she came,” Verity explained, introducing Demelza.

“No, last time you came, you were dancing with my nephew Ross,” Aunt Agatha replied. She was speaking directly to Demelza now but didn’t look up.

“Oh yes, at the gala. It was so very lovely, wasn’t it?” Demelza gushed.

The evening, though not that long ago, was starting to seem like a dream to Demelza now. She hadn’t recalled seeing Agatha there but of course she would have been. No doubt she’d want to be in the middle of such a party if only to complain about it afterwards.

“And successful …for the historic trust, I mean,” Caroline added with a wink.

“T’was nice to have all the chibbies in one place again. All the Poldarks that is. Francis is looking so grown these days,” Aunt Agatha said.

“You mean Geoffrey Charles, Aunt…” Verity said gently. She flashed Demelza and Caroline a look that conveyed a worried apology for her aunt’s confusion.

“‘Course I do. He looks like his father, t’is all,” Aunt Agatha huffed, resenting the correction. “And I’ll tell you Francis would never have worn such a gaudy suit as that upstart Warleggan did. Shiny blue? He looked like a beetle.”

“I agree with you, Miss Poldark,” Caroline nodded.

“And I don’t know why they insisted on bringing their young Valentine. An elegant party is no place
for a child, especially that unruly Warleggan rascal!” Aunt Agatha snapped.

So the menacing boy that caused Demelza to bump into Ross was the Warleggan child? Somehow she was not shocked to learn this.

“Still a good day for the Poldarks?” Verity asked, turning her attention to the cards laid out on the table. “Aunt Agatha reads tarot cards,” she explained to Demelza and Caroline.

“Do you read palms too?” Caroline asked.

“Phish, that’s a lot of hocus-pocus nonsense. No science there,” Aunt Agatha replied.

Demelza laughed. She found this woman’s wit amusing-- that was, as long as she could avoid finding herself on the wrong side of it.

“She also interprets dreams,” Verity said with a smile. “Don’t you, Aunt?”

“Yes, yes...tell me, Little Verity, what was it you dreamed of last?”

“You know I never recall my dreams,” Verity said a bit sadly.

“I dreamt a handsome man rode up on a horse to sweep me away,” Caroline proclaimed.

“A horse, you say? What color was it?” Agatha asked earnestly.

“White.” Caroline winked at Demelza now. She was obviously making this all up to humour the old woman.

“White, yes…the color of purity...” Agatha mused.

At this Caroline stifled a snicker.

“A good omen,” Agatha continued. “A white horse means ambition to succeed, based on good intentions. Unless...tell me was it a lean horse? For that would be a warning--such a dream--about an unfaithful and jealous friend!”

“Sounds loathsome,” Caroline replied. “I shall need to be careful.”

“Unless you are the unfaithful one,” Agatha added with a wicked smile. “And you?” she said, turning suddenly to Demelza.

“Me?” Demelza laughed. “Well, I suppose, just this morning I dreamt of a fox...”

“A fox, eh? Yes, that can mean lots of things. Let me see....” She closed her eyes and thought hard, trying to recall the common interpretations. “False friends around you!” she cried, excited to remember this. “Someone who is being untruthful to you and telling you lies. Or...could mean you’re alone and want to keep your true feelings to yourself. You may need to start concealing some of your emotions and be more discreet in certain situations. Or... you have a secret admirer!”

“That’s a lot of different scenarios,” Verity laughed.

“And a lot of dishonesty, dear Demelza,” Caroline said.

“Tell me, were you chasing the fox or playing with it?” Aunt Agatha asked.

“Petting it, sort of, not really playing,” Demelza said. Just then she recalled Dwight’s bare body
wrapped around hers. She hoped she wasn’t blushing.

“Have a care, little bud!” Aunt Agatha cried out. “You could be in danger!”

“Danger? Oh no, I certainly hope not,” Demelza smiled. “But I do appreciate the warning.” She wasn’t sure if she’d just been referred to affectionately or disparagingly.

“Come, let’s get to the gardens while we still have some sunshine,” Verity said, linking her arms with both Demelza and Caroline to lure them away.

“Is she ever correct? Your aunt?” Demelza asked her as they stepped back into the hallway.

“Occasionally, but even a broken clock is correct twice a day,” Verity replied.

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“Thanks for driving me in this morning, Ross,” Dwight said.

It was early afternoon and Dwight and Ross had met up again at a pub on Kenwyn Street in Truro before they were to head back home. The skies were still clear so they considered sitting in the garden but decided that being together in a public place could be problematic enough. They needn’t advertise their friendship further by sitting outdoors in plain view for any passerby--or Warleggan--to observe.

“Thanks for agreeing to have a drink after your meeting, Dwight. I’m glad to see you can still count me as a friend despite what it seems to be costing you professionally,” Ross replied. “Though it has been a while since we’ve sat together in a pub, hasn’t it? Pint?”

“I suppose just the one won’t do me harm,” Dwight conceded.

“There was a time we didn’t stop to count them,” Ross joked. “We must be getting old.”

“Have we? Gotten old that is,” Dwight mused when Ross returned to their table with two pints of Tribute IPA.

“Depends if lives of bachelorhood keep us young or age us faster,” Ross laughed.

“Statistically married men live longer, so it would seem to be our death knell. Having tasted both, which do you prefer, Ross?” Dwight asked.

Living with Demelza the past few weeks had changed Dwight’s mind about the benefits of domestic companionship. She was hardly just a flatmate nor a friend anymore; each passing day revealed new complexities of their arrangement and today he had pushed it further still. What would come next for them? He had no idea but it was the one area of his life about which he felt most hopeful.

“Most days I’m too busy at Grace that I don’t think about the fact that I live alone--it’s been so many years, I’ve grown used to it. And Elizabeth and I were not well suited. I can see that now. I have no regrets,” Ross answered.

Ross felt he could speak plainly with Dwight about that particular troubled period in his past. A true mate, Dwight had always been unconditionally supportive of the many bad decisions Ross made over the years and usually helped to clear up the mess afterwards as well. It had been Dwight’s sofa that Ross had slept on for months after he left Elizabeth. Of course Elizabeth would have claimed she threw him out but Ross recalled heading for the door willingly.
Other friends and family had openly voiced their objections before Ross and Elizabeth married, predicting--accurately--that their union wouldn’t last. Whatever misgivings Dwight may have had at the time, he didn’t say a word about them to Ross. But that was his nature. Dwight never seemed to think it his place to comment on anyone else’s choice of partners and had been tight lipped about his own affairs too.

And now? How long will he keep his relationship with Demelza a secret? Ross wondered.

“You know my grandparents were together fifty years. Sometimes I wonder if that was truly by choice or merely by convention. Of course with my own parents gone I couldn’t say about them,” Dwight reflected.

“I don’t have many memories of my parents together before my mother died. I only know they were happy from what others have told me. They at least had Prudie fooled,” Ross chuckled. “Maybe I’d have been a better husband if I hadn’t grown up with only my father. I mean I could hardly look to him as any sort of example,” he added.

“Demelza grew up without a mother as well. And despite your flawed fathers you both seem to have turned out fine,” Dwight observed. “But didn’t you say your father was quite the ladies’ man? He must have known something to keep them interested.”

“Yes he was, until the end, really. Where he got the stamina, I can’t imagine…” Ross laughed lightly but his father’s reputation was not something he was proud of. “And old Joshua seemed to prefer his women attached.”

“I wonder why?” Dwight asked.

“Oh I can think of a few reasons why that might have been--he liked the challenge of conquering the unconquerable or maybe the thrill of besting another man? But I suspect it was also to keep any woman at arm’s length, so there was no real danger she’d upset his solitude,” Ross replied.

“And if your mother had lived?”

Demelza asked me that same question, Ross thought.

“I believe he would have stayed in line. She was special. Had she lived, in all likelihood she’d have saved all of Cornwall by now.”

“Sounds like you Ross!” Dwight teased.

“Actually Verity is lot like her. Everyone likes Verity,” Ross said with a smile.

“Demelza too! She can really win over even the most difficult people in a sly manner that is remarkable to witness…”

It was the second time Dwight had inserted Demelza’s name into the conversation, Ross noted. Of course, Demelza had hinted at what they meant to each other. If she loved Dwight then no doubt--no doubt--Dwight loved her as well.

“You like working with Dr. Carne?” Ross surprised himself by asking. Was he purposely digging for more proof now?

“Demelza? That’s an understatement. I’m very fortunate to have her...in the firm,” Dwight added quickly.
“I remember you talking about her long ago, when she was your student,” Ross said, wishing he could recall more details about what Dwight had said all those years before. Knowing Dwight, he would have spoken of her mind not her beauty—even if he had admired it. But did he also mention her spirit?

“Are you sad to have given up academia, Dwight? You always were a good teacher,” Ross asked.

“It’s funny you ask. I thought a long time about this and yes, it was a struggle. We’ll never solve our current environmental problems nor be ready to face the even greater ones to come—ones that will surely threaten all our livelihoods—if we don’t change people’s mindsets. And that comes through education. Our very future depends on it.” He took another drink and sighed. The sincere passion Dwight had for conservation was evident now.

“But teaching is a long term investment and you can’t know if what you are doing is effective until, well, until it is too late. Yes, sometimes you know right away that you’ve reached someone…” Dwight paused, thinking of students who had been exceptions, specifically Demelza. “But will it matter to the countless others who sat before you? And when would you know? So I came to the conclusion I wanted to do something now. Do something real, the results of which I could see in real time.”

“And there’s the rub, Dwight—you’re doing nothing now and it’s my fault,” Ross said gravely. Dwight sat quietly for a moment, holding his pint midair while he contemplated his next words carefully.

“Ross, tell me, do you think George Warleggan would ever break the law?” he asked finally.

“Why do you ask?” Ross looked across the table at Dwight, trying to puzzle him out.

“Just something I’ve been pondering. How ruthless is he?”

Dwight had pulled his lips thin and his eyes had turned a dark grey; he looked troubled.

“It’s funny but I don’t think he would. He’d believe he is above that. George is cruel by nature but much of it is not considering others at all. Yes, he’s morally stunted but to actually—deliberately, knowingly—break the law would be a kind of action I don’t imagine him capable of…does that make any sense?” Ross replied.

“So he’s just mean spirited but can’t be bothered to do anything actually illegal?” Dwight asked.

“Perhaps,” Ross responded. “Maybe I’m wrong. But I can say he’d happily use the law to destroy anyone else.”

“Sounds as though you’ve given a lot of thought to George,” Dwight observed.

“I try not to. But what is this, Dwight? Has something happened?” Ross pressed him.

“It’s most likely nothing but… my damaged tire the other night. The mechanic said it looked as if it were deliberately punctured. Now I know it could have just been a random act…” Dwight was still hesitant to really commit to his suspicions.

“Or a targeted one,” Ross offered.

“Well, you can see why one might think that,” Dwight said.
“What does Demelza think?” Ross asked without looking up from his pint glass. He wasn’t sure why he had mentioned her. What did he really want to know?

“I haven’t told her. I don’t want to sound paranoid,” Dwight explained.

“I can see why you’d find it troubling,” Ross admitted then saw Dwight needed reassurance. “But as long as nothing else happens, let’s just assume there was nothing personal against you in the attack on your tire.”

“Right,” Dwight said. It was clearly what he wanted to hear.

At that moment it had unexpectedly started to rain. Even though they were tucked in the back of the pub, the downpour could be heard splattering the windows and drumming on the pavement outside; the patrons who had been seated in the garden came rushing in, already drenched but laughing, holding their glasses close. They were a younger crowd, all drinking trendy cocktails. There wasn’t a single pint glass to be found among them, Ross lamented.

“So much for our reprieve from the spring rain,” Dwight said. He hoped it was still clear at Trenwith and Demelza’s garden excursion wouldn’t be ruined.

“No, it’s coming down with such ferocity, I suspect it will be over quickly. It’s most likely one of those typical April storms.” Ross shook his head.

“I’m surprised at you, Ross. When did you become such an optimist?” Dwight asked.

“I’m neither an optimist nor a pessimist. Just a realist,” Ross replied.

Dwight looked at his watch then swallowed what remained in his glass. Ross could only imagine he was eager to get back to the engine house. And Demelza.

“If you’re ready, I can take you home now,” Ross said, finishing his pint too.

Ross had been lying earlier when he said he never thought about being alone. The past few days it had been very much on his mind. It was as though, after sitting in his parlour with Demelza the other night and watching her animated presence, he had suddenly grown aware of its usual empty state. And now he had to face going back to his bleak and silent Nampara. Alone.

“Thank you again but, Ross, not a word to Demelza about the tire,” Dwight said, rising from his stool.

“Of course.” Ross didn't mention that, from what he knew of Demelza and her genuine care for Dwight, she’d want to know, to at least help ease his worries. Or to be on guard.

And when will I even see her again? Ross wondered, just as he’d wondered since he regretfully left her in his guest room a few nights before.

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“Demelza, tell me what has put such a sparkle in your eye and a smile on your face? Is it what I think it is?” Caroline asked as they stepped onto the paved terrace after taking leave of Aunt Agatha.

The sun, still visible above them, hadn’t dipped behind clouds as had been its habit these past few weeks. The April air was almost warm and they welcomed the light breeze on their faces.
“Oh? And what would that be?” Verity asked innocently, walking into Caroline’s trap.

Demelza looked at Caroline then almost choked with embarrassment as she realised what Caroline meant.

“So it’s not just sex but good sex perhaps?” Caroline gave her a sidewise glance with raised brow.

“Caroline!” Verity said, trying to admonish her but she was laughing too.

“Judging by the deep scarlet Demelza is flushing I’d say I got it right.”

“Caroline!” Demelza laughed, then tried to explain. “It’s complicated. Dwight and I... we’ve been close for years and...” she stammered.

“Dr. Enys?” Caroline stopped abruptly in her tracks. Clearly that was not the name she was expecting Demelza to say. “Oh, I had thought it might be someone else.”

Demelza never spoke of her and Dwight’s sometimes-sexual relationship to anyone, except to her NHS doctor and once to a pharmacist in Glasgow, and now more than ever, especially since Dwight’s declaration that very morning, she felt as though their ties were complex and not easily described.

“There’s nothing to explain, Demelza,” Verity said reassuringly.

“Of course not,” Caroline began. “Two attractive but lonely people cooped up in a remote romantic setting in a wind-swept cottage by the sea, with nothing to keep them occupied except...”

“Oh, we’ve been occupied by some exceptional bottles of wine and single-malt whisky, thanks to Verity,” Demelza joked, trying to change the subject. “Really Verity, it’s been just lovely...”

“Then the paps would have called it ‘a booze fueled sex romp’,” Caroline continued.

“Caroline! Let’s leave Demelza alone. We all have our own intimate affairs of one sort or another that we’d like to keep private,” Verity said, patting Demelza on the arm but looking down at her feet to contain her own smile.

They walked on down the path and turned left, away from the house.

“Oh Verity!” Demelza gasped. Now it was her turn to stop in her tracks, astounded by the beautiful gardens that lay in front of them. “This is all... yours? It’s just so lovely.”

“Well, it isn't mine but the estate’s--and in ten years it will belong to my nephew. And I do have my wise ancestors to thank for the design--it has features that were fashionable at different historical periods. So here, where we have our public events, we see the manicured lawns, topiaries and neatly laid walks but further up is where the more rambling wild paths can be found. I prefer those I must admit.”

They walked past the whimsical, geometrically shaped topiaries and found themselves under a pergola dripping with wisteria that was just now coming into bloom. Beyond that more plots of garden spread out in front of them. Twisted brick paths were lined with herbaceous borders of what looked to Demelza like clary sage, valerian and maybe centranthus.

Again she stopped to take in the splendour of the plantings.

Lavender was also just starting to bloom in great fragrant patches. Demelza imagined generations of
Poldark women tucking sprigs of lavender into lace edged pillowcases or deep into storage chests, preserving their precious linens against the ever-present threat of moth and mold and decay.

There had been no one in Demelza’s childhood to have ever taught her such a lovely and practical business -- nor did anyone ever impart a confidence that the wearing effects of time could be challenged. It was an alien notion to the broken people she grew up with, who seemed to have given up and let things fall apart around them. Yet somehow like everything else beautiful in the world, Demelza had come to discover the scent of lavender on her own, and throughout the years had acquired a few dainty sachets to put in her drawers or suitcases when she traveled. Now when she smelled dried lavender she felt she was part of a larger, collective past, having finally left behind the coarse sensibilities of her father’s narrow and ugly world.

“It’s lovely, isn’t it?” Verity asked, squeezing her arm as though she could read Demelza’s thoughts.

*And beautiful people, like Verity and Dwight, how fortunate am I to have discovered them?* she thought.

Still further on ahead Demelza spied bleeding hearts, star jasmine, and other flowers in shades from green to cream to pink that she couldn't name.

“That’s helleborus,” Verity offered. “But, you know Demelza, you’re rather good at naming flora.”

“I can recognise a few,” Caroline laughed. “That’s anemone and that’s aquilegia vulgaris and that’s granny’s bonnet,” she said proudly.

In each bed there were small stakes bearing the names of the flowers but Caroline carefully positioned herself at the edge of the path, using her booted legs to obscure them, so no one would see her cheating.

Verity, catching Caroline’s ruse, let out a peel of good humoured laughter.

“Oh Caroline, *aquilegia vulgaris* is granny’s bonnet,” she said.

“Yes, yes of course,” Caroline smirked. She shook her head dismissively then furtively looked back at the tag to be sure.

“I’m surprised with all the rain that anything has opened at all,” Demelza said.

“Oh, we were lucky to be spared any hard frosts this spring. That’s the difference. And I’m grateful to the gardeners of old who chose plantings so something would always be in bloom regardless of the season. The daffodils and narcissi are just finishing but the tulips in that bed to the east over there are now opening. They’ll be all white--so gorgeous against the surrounding greenery. I wish you could stay to see the peonies and roses later.”

“I’d like to see those,” Demelza admitted. “Maybe we’ll still be here…”

“You know, there's a climbing rose to the north of the engine house that will open in June. It smells simply amazing. See, Demelza?” Verity giggled. “I’m trying to entice you stay on as my tenant indefinitely!”

“What’s over there?” Demelza asked, clutching Verity’s arm affectionately.

“The most amazing field of wildflowers-- or it will be in a few weeks,” Verity replied.

“Perfect at dusk for a stolen kiss from a secret lover,” Caroline smiled.
“Has that been your experience, Caroline?” Verity was amused. “No wonder you are such a fan of the Trenwith gardens!”

“I keep telling her she needs to put in a cafe,” Caroline explained to Demelza, “and serve delights from the Trenwith Kitchens. See? I’m always thinking of your brand, Verity.”

“As of now I am the Trenwith Kitchens and don’t really need to add full time catering to my responsibilities here,” Verity replied. “I seem to recall there was a time I could actually call myself an architect?”

“Have you been spending much time here?” Demelza asked. She had detected a hint of concern in Verity’s voice; it wasn’t resentment but might have been worry.

Verity thought for a moment as they strolled on.

“As you saw the other night, my aunt has whims. But also real needs. She doesn’t mean harm, she just gets lonely. Geoffrey Charles is off at school--that's George’s doing--the boy’s too young if you ask me. Of course Ross comes when he can, but it’s largely just...me. I’ve been here more than I’ve been back in Falmouth these past few weeks.”

“But aren’t the Warleggans ever here?” Demelza asked.

“Elizabeth is careful to give Aunt Agatha the care she needs but not the stimulation. No one talks to her so it’s hard for her to keep the present and the past clear when she spends so much time alone in her mind,” Verity said. “You saw how she got confused when speaking about Geoffrey Charles. She refers to him as Francis most days. In fact I’m not always sure she remembers Francis is gone.”

“Poor Verity,” Caroline said, “taking on everything inside the Trenwith House and outside it too, with no help from the Warleggans. And with so little time for her own pursuits.” She was sincere now, not teasing.

“Yes, Verity, how do you manage these gardens now? I imagine there must have been scores of gardeners here centuries ago,” Demelza asked.

“We charge admission to the public, which I wish we needn’t do but it does help us with the upkeep. And so Trenwith still maintains some grounds staff but we greatly rely on volunteers,” Verity explained. “We’re very fortunate to have a whole cadre of locals, mostly retirees, who come twice a week, as a sort of social outlet. They come, take care of the garden, then have their tea and cakes together. It’s a very symbiotic relationship with them and the estate.”

“Sounds like fun. I have so much extra time on my hands these days, maybe I should join them?” Demelza laughed.

“We could use someone with a good head and a green thumb. My lead volunteer just moved to Spain quite suddenly and we're feeling her absence,” Verity replied.

“Isn’t George Warleggan an extremely wealthy man? Doesn’t he contribute anything towards the grounds? I mean, he lives here sometimes, doesn't he?” Demelza asked.

“No, if given the choice, he'd pave it over for a car park for his luxury automobiles,” Caroline sneered.

“You know the entire estate actually extends far beyond what we keep up now. There are some really ancient paths at the northeast gate, overgrown and terribly picturesque. By far some of my favourite walks--so moody and Gothic, especially on a misty day,” Verity said with delight.
They walked on together and grew silent in their admiration of the vistas around them. No one spoke of George Warleggan or the burdens of the old estate—or the sky that was beginning to dim above them. They had each felt the first cool drops on their skin but no one said a word. They seemed to all share the same hope—that if they ignored the raindrops they might just stop. But despite their wishes, what started out as a just a few drops became more, then unmistakably many, and soon their leisurely stroll, and the fair weather, came to a sudden end.

They raced back to the pergola, which offered some partial protection, and although they weren’t eager to go back out in the downpour, they knew they’d have to make a dash back to the house eventually. They were steeling themselves to make a move, when Demelza’s mobile rang.

“Why hello, Dwight, enjoying this Cornish sunshine?’ she laughed, picking up the call.

“Demelza, where are you?” Dwight asked, tersely.

“I’m at Trenwith with Verity--and Caroline, I told you I was…”

“You’re still there? How long have you been away?

“A few hours...since late morning. Dwight, what is it?” She was worried now. His tone was frantic.

“So you haven’t been here at all? Thank god you’re okay,” he muttered.

“Dwight! What on earth are you going on about? Tell me, what’s the matter?” she cried.

“I think you’d better come home,” he said.
As Demelza got closer to the engine house she saw the distinct yellow and blue of a police car parked crookedly in the drive. She stopped the Defender abruptly next to it and almost forgetting to take the key out of the ignition, jumped out to meet Dwight on the path between the cottage and the laboratory.

“Good god, Dwight! What happened?” she cried.

He immediately took her in his arms then led he away from the laboratory so the police could continue their work.

“Someone broke into the laboratory--not the engine house, just the lab,” he said grimly. “I rang the police and they’re checking it out now.”

“What? How? Did they take anything?” She was straining against his arms, wanting to see the scene for herself.

“A window was broken but the door also seems to have been yanked from its hinges so I’m not sure how they actually got in. Shelves are knocked over and all our samples are smashed, but none of the equipment seems damaged. We’re lucky there,” he said. “Both microscopes and the spectrophotometer were untouched. My laptop was broken though. It looks like someone took a cricket bat to it--it’s a mess.”

“Oh Dwight!” she cried and turned to look into his eyes.

“And Demelza,” he paused, not wanting to further distress her but knowing he must, “your laptop looks to be gone altogether…”

“No, no. Mine’s in the house, upstairs in my old room,” she assured him with a weak smile.

She had been using it to read some of Stephen Carrington’s previously published studies, most recently *The Ecology & Management of Mourning Dove Populations in Cornwall and Wales*. She hadn’t quite expected Carrington to be a dove man, but then again, what had she expected?

She still had many questions about him. Had he ever been a decent scientist or was he always incompetent? Had he just been recently compromised by someone who paid him off? Were his other findings falsified too? She hadn’t gotten very far in this line of inquiry and still hadn’t mentioned anything to Dwight.

“Dwight, I don’t understand?” she said softly, still gripping his arms.

“Neither do I. This time it was deliberate, not random vandalism, we were purposely targeted..” Dispirited, he shook his head.

“This time?” she asked.

“Demelza, I didn't mention it but...it looked like someone had been going through the rubbish bins. I thought it had just been foxes,” he explained.

“When?”

“Last week.”
“And you didn't mention it? Why?!” she asked in disbelief.

“I didn't want to worry you.” He kissed her head, a transparently conciliatory gesture, then looked her in the eye again. “Listen that’s not all. The tire of the car...it was purposely slashed as well.”

“Dwight! Someone's trying to harm you?!’’ she cried.

“Shhh!” he said and steered her further from the lab. “Or warn me.”

“Warleggan?” she whispered and looked around as though she expected the man himself to come out of a shrub.

“No, I somehow don’t think he’d resort to illegal tactics. He’s duplicitous but not violent. And Ross agrees.”

“Can you be sure?” Then she shook her head in confusion. “Wait--Ross knows about this?”

“About the tire. I just told him today.”

“But you didn’t tell me? Dwight, if I’m your partner in all this,” she waved her arms around, “then this is precisely what you need to share with me. We have to figure what is going on. If it’s not Warleggan then who? I’m not as convinced of George’s sainthood as you and Ross are.”

She hadn’t meant to scoff so when she mentioned Ross’s name but she was resentful that Dwight had taken him--and not her-- into his confidence.

“You are right, Demelza. I was wrong to keep this from you. No more secrets,” he said. He kissed her worried brow again then took her hand in his. “Let’s see go see what the constable has to say.”

PC Daniels seemed as baffled by the crime as they were. He called back to the station for assistance with fingerprints but even after the team searched, they found none. And there was no other physical evidence to help them. There were no signs of tire tracks or footprints, and if there ever had been any, they would have been compromised by the afternoon’s rain. There was no CCTV around them as there would be in the town centres, nor were there any traffic cameras nearby that could give any clue of who had even driven that way. They had no close neighbours that could be potential witnesses. It seemed as though there were no leads, whatsoever.

“This is depressing,” Dwight said as they stood peering into the disordered lab after the police had finally left them alone.

It would take some time to sweep up the glass, to put things right-- and to start over. Neither one of them had the strength to begin that now.

“Is the lock broken? Not that it really matters anymore,” she muttered.

“Well we don’t want any real foxes in there,” he sighed. “I’ve a padlock we can use for tonight.”

“Then come back inside the engine house. I’ll make us some dinner,” she said. “We can clean the rest up tomorrow.”

“I’d better inform Verity,” Dwight remembered. “It’s her property after all.”

“Later, Dwight. Come inside,” she said gently and reached for his hand.

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Dwight sat solemnly in one of the stuffed chairs and drank the glass of Lagavulin Demelza had forced on him; the hearth in the sitting room was cold but the intense single malt warmed him. He tried his best to let the peaty Islay mellow his mood but now felt guilty that Demelza was bustling about the kitchen on her own while he drank and sulked. And yet losing herself in the mundanity of household tasks did seem somehow to ease her worries. He closed his eyes yet was determined to stay awake. But after a few minutes, he abandoned the futile struggle and slipped into a troubled sleep.

Later that evening, they were halfway through the spiced aubergine ragout Demelza had prepared when Dwight set down his fork with a sudden grunt of exasperation.

“Demelza! I’m so sorry!” He brought his palm to his face in shame. “I had promised to take you out for dinner. For a proper date. With the break in, it slipped my mind.”

“Oh Dwight, this isn’t the night for that. How could we have possibly enjoyed ourselves? It would be weighing heavy on us both and we’d only be worried and wondering if anyone had come back here. It’s alright. We’ll find another time,” she replied. She meant it—she wasn’t disappointed and after the shock of the afternoon much preferred the comfort of being alone with Dwight in their own space.

“Still, to let you down…” he said.

“Listen,” she said, trying to change the subject. She didn’t want Dwight to feel sorry for himself.


“That’s precisely the point. No wind rattling the window panes, no soft drumming on the roof. It’s not raining! Finish up and then let’s go for a walk. I think we’d both find we like that better than a fancy dinner out anyway,” she said brightly.

They cleared up quickly and stepped out into the mild evening. Now the air was almost balmy, with no chill whatsoever; and even though it had rained earlier, the sea in the distance sounded calm. Dwight headed for the cliff path but Demelza had another idea and took his hand in hers.

“No, let’s go this way.” Recalling the bluebells she spotted the other day, she led him east of the engine house, toward the wood.

It was cool and still on the dusky path that would only grow dimmer as the evening wore on.

“Do you hear that, Demelza? A turtle dove!” Dwight said softly. He stopped and found himself smiling for the first time in several hours.

“That’s not a turtledove. Maybe it’s an owl. They can sound alike,” she said.

“No, listen,” he insisted.

“It’s a bit early for a turtle dove to be here--by a few weeks really,” she replied patiently.

“Maybe he needs a map,” he teased.

She was pleased that his mood had shifted, his spirit seemed lighter.

_He needs to be outdoors to be truly content_, she thought.

“It is!” Dwight knew he was needling her now, but he enjoyed watching her grow animated.

“It’s not a turtle dove!” she repeated. “Next you’ll be claiming you hear a nightingale when clearly
“It’s a lark,” she laughed.

“So I’m Juliet in this scenario?” he quipped. “I could think of worse literary characters to be compared to, I suppose.”

“Juliet? For real? Oh Dwight, she’s the worst! Convincing herself she’s seen a meteor and not the daybreak? She’s so delusional. But I’ve always said you were a hopeless romantic.”

He ignored this and knew it was an act. Demelza had her romantic side too.

“Listen,” he said softly again. “He’s alone. Where’s his mate?”

Demelza did listen and though she wasn’t eager to admit it, heard the turtle dove’s distinctive coo, a sort of gentle purr. She felt her heart skip a beat.

“Oh… he’s calling to her,” she reluctantly agreed. “She’ll come. We just have to be patient.”

“And hopeful—he is.” Dwight stopped and taking both her hands in his, turned to look at her. “Demelza,” he said. “Why are we pretending?”

“Dwight?”

“About us I mean. Not facing what this really is.”

“Oh…”

Well, it was time we spoke of it, she thought.

“We say it’s just casual, that above all, no matter what, we’re just friends. But Demelza, year after year, we keep coming back to each other. Back to something real and warm and tangible. That means something.”

“Oh?”

“Why not celebrate it and nurture it, instead of running from it?” he said then took a long exhale as though he’d just relieved himself of a heavy burden.

“Is that what you want?” she asked trying to read his face. Was he saying this just for her sake?

“Yes, I think it’s… right for us, now is the time,” he said in a low but gentle voice.

“Oh Dwight,” she said, and pressed herself into his arms.

Overcome at such an unexpected and intense turn, she felt an unfamiliar sensation ripple through her, from her chest to her gut. Her heart raced. She was burning, shivering, drowning, unable to speak, unable to breathe— all at the same time. She buried her face into his shoulder, trying to steady herself.

He clutched her with strong and sure arms, surprised at her loss for words.

“Melz?” he said softly into her hair.

“Dwight, you’re the greatest warmth I’ve ever known.” she said, muffled into his shirt, then bravely lifted her head to look at him. “You’re right— we’re lucky to have each other, Dwight. What we have is beyond special, there’s nothing but love in our friendship—we bring out the best in each other, don’t we?”
“Demelza, you’re such an open and loving soul. Do you know that?” He kissed her lips then held her to his chest again, resting his chin on her head.

Am I? Open? loving? Is he the only one to see this in me? she wondered.

In the distance the turtle dove continued its cry. A moment before it had sounded hopeful to Demelza. Now he just sounded lost. She remembered the lines Ross had recited to her that night at Trenwith.

‘Seated on the ruined battlements crying Kou, kou, kou--Where? Where?’
Decisions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was a cool and clear morning when Demelza left the engine house alone. The past few days the north coast had enjoyed a reprieve from the rain, but it caused Dwight and Demelza to regret all the more that they couldn’t take advantage of this fair weather to begin any real work in the field.

Dwight had ridden in to Truro with Tonkin earlier while Demelza was to take the Defender and meet him later for one final meeting with the solicitor. The Ethics Review Board was setting a date to review George’s claim and Dwight wanted to be sure all the supporting documents were in order.

This morning Demelza was using the SATNAV and not her mobile for directions, and was surprised when it took her on a back road she’d never traveled before. Since she’d allowed plenty of time for her travels, she decided to take in the scenery and not reroute herself back to the major roads.

The road had been following an old stone wall, and when the wall finally met a huge gate, almost fully obscured by thick ivy, her curiosity got the better of her. She swung the car around and parked, then got out for a better view. Peering through the old gated entranceway—which she noticed was not locked—she marveled at the ancient dignified trees and rambling growth.

In front of her, an avenue of baronial yews stretched out until the path was swallowed in shadow. It was all quite overgrown but must have been magnificent at some time. To her right, Demelza could see a rusted shed, a broken wheelbarrow, a stack of cut timbers—greying, forgotten.

Verity’s secret walk!

This was the other side of Trenwith land, the abandoned and neglected spots. Verity had mentioned they only kept up a small percentage of the estate; this would have been far removed from the elegant garden open to tourists once a week.

To her left were more old trees—ash, linden, holly, and beech—relics of another time. Three veteran Spanish chestnuts grew closer to the gate. They’d been coppiced a number of times; she thought she could tell by the way their boughs twisted and reached low to the ground. Weren’t they also known as sweet chestnuts? Had this been an orchard at one time? She knew they’d been popular in Tudor times—surely they were not original to the estate?

Demelza thought it looked magical, inhabited not just by birds and wildlife, but by the ancient spirits of nature. What was that line from Gerard? “The serpent dare not be so bolde as to touch the morning and evening shadowes of the ash tree.”

She heard it before she saw it—a lone cuckoo, apparently stopping to rest on its journey back north. About the size of a collared dove, it was a soft blue-grey, its back and head striped a darker grey. If it weren’t for the long tail it might easily be confused with a sparrow hawk. She watched through the gate for a moment, then quickly tip-toed back to the Defender to retrieve her camera with its zoom lens.

Standing as still as she could, Demelza observed the cuckoo through the lens now. And as if it were aware of its admiring audience and of its own beauty, he tucked its beak under its wing and began to preen.

She paid no mind to what was happening around her and didn't notice the sleek Range Rover
Evoque that suddenly emerged from an overgrown side lane to the right of the yews. It stopped abruptly near the gate’s entrance in front of her and the cuckoo, unsettled by the disturbance, disappeared from her view.

“Oh bloody hell,” she muttered, then noticed there had been a security camera trained on the gate.

“This is private land-- you must leave at once!” A voice cried out loudly as the driver's side door swung open.

It was George Warleggan.

The car was a metallic red, pristine and gleaming--it had clearly never been used for any off-roading on real country terrain, unless this wild lane counted. No doubt it got a gentle wipedown every night from one of Warleggan’s personal staff.

*The man won’t pay for upkeep of the gardens but will for this conspicuous petrol-guzzling, luxury car,* she thought, then caught herself. Their borrowed Defender, though not fancy, was hardly fuel efficient. They’d have been better off hiring a Prius or even a Focus if that had been their aim.

“And you can hand over your camera!” George wasn’t listening to her but seemed quite bothered by the idea that she was photographing the grounds. He held his hand outstretched as if he truly expected her to give him the camera. This one was not the old Nikon she usually travelled with but a new one Dwight had gotten for CEA, a Canon EOS 20D, which with its lens, was worth about £2000.

“I most certainly will not!” she laughed.

The cuckoo had not flown away entirely but shifted its legs nervously as it perched higher in the gnarled chestnut. Demelza was hoping George would just go away and leave her alone with it, but he was not to be deterred.

She then heard the sound of another vehicle on the road behind her. It came to a sudden stop close to the gate, spraying fine gravel around it. She turned to see Ross Poldark emerging from a dark grey Peugeot saloon.

“What seems to be the trouble?” Ross called.

Demelza didn’t know if he was addressing her or George. There was no warmth in his voice, no recognition that they even knew one another.

“And you, Ross! You too have no business here. You can turn around and leave my property at once!” George snapped; his voice had grown shrill.

Ross ignored this order and instead closed his car door and took a few paces towards George and Demelza, his eyes narrowed.

“I had thought you’d be in Truro, George. Believe me I have no wish to take tea with you or any other Warleggan but merely am here to visit my aunt,” Ross said coolly. “Would Elizabeth be pleased to hear of your interference in Agatha’s happiness? I thought we had come to an agreement on that score long ago? Would you like me ring her?” He reached into his pocket for his mobile.
It as the first time Demelza had heard Ross speak of Elizabeth and there was something about it—the words, the tone—that suggested they still had a connection, an alliance of sorts. She felt uneasy.

“You always think you can do whatever you please, Ross, and damn the consequences!” George barked, then he turned back to Demelza. “You see Miss Carne, what your association with Ross Poldark brings you? Haven't you realised?” George sputtered, speckles of spit foaming at the corner of his mouth.

It was not just Ross’s presence but his poise that seemed to further infuriate George. Ross was calm yet still threatening; he had the air of a dangerous animal that will undoubtedly pounce for the kill, but only after playing with its prey for some time.

Demelza felt she could bear this no more.

“I seem to recall there are eight other men named as part of the consortium,” she said, “so CEA is not just working with Ross Poldark. And I believe we’re trying to work with Warleggan Industries as well,” she laughed. “But I assure you, I hadn't been out here officially, merely observing that stunning cuckoo. Or are you going to threaten it for being on your property as well? Migratory birds aren't very good at recognising land rights, are they?”

Especially not the cuckoo, a brood parasite, that laid its eggs in the nests of other birds. Then when the cuckoo chick hatched, it pushed out the other babies, yet the fooled foster parents—cuckolded—would continue to feed the interloper.

*Kind of like George living in Trenwith,* Demelza thought. *He has no business there and has ejected Geoffrey Charles Poldark from his own nest.*

“And no doubt now you’ll tell me it's vulnerable…” George sneered.

“Very good, Mr. Warleggan. It is a red listed, priority bird which is why you should be honoured—and fascinated—to see it on on your land,” she answered breezily then added, “And...you should take caution.” She was staring George down and resented that Ross was continuing to move towards her.

“I'm surprised to see you in the field at all, Miss Carne. I thought you were just acting as your boyfriend's secretary. That's what I was told anyway,” George said.

At this Ross stepped forward, in front of Demelza and faced George, his eyes sparking with rage. Demelza saw his hands clenched into balls.

“Doctor Carne is a partner in CEA,” Ross said.

*Good god!* she thought. This was too much.

Demelza hoped she hadn't just rolled her eyes in frustration that Ross had spoken on her behalf. Surely explaining her own professional credentials was something she was quite capable of and besides, Ross had not exactly been accurate.

“Partner? No, no, Ross, I believe you are mistaken. Surely if that were the case, I’d know it. For I make it a point of vetting anyone who works for me-- or against me. Just ask your friend, Dwight Enys,” George scoffed.

Demelza had had enough. She wasn’t sure how this had intensified so quickly but she wasn’t going to stand around while she and Dwight were used as pawns in some Poldark-Warleggan personal rivalry.
“Give my best to Miss Agatha Poldark, will you not, Mr. Warleggan?” she said and put the lens cap back on her camera. “Oh, and tell her I think I’ve found the fox who wanted to play and I’ll certainly be on guard in future. Now if you’ll both excuse me, I’m to meet our solicitor in Truro.” She tucked the Canon back into the bag slung over her shoulder and smiled her biggest--and fakest --of grins.

Without saying a word to him, she shot Ross a quick glance--a warning not to escalate things further with George. Reluctantly he seemed to heed her and gave a jerking nod of his head before he looked away from them both.

“Oh yes, Nat Pearce, that doddering old fool. Good luck, Doctor Carne,” George called as she walked back to her car.

She sat for a moment before starting the ignition. In her rearview mirror she saw the shiny red of George’s car heading north, having apparently driven off in a huff. She tried not to look out her window but couldn’t help noticing Ross had returned to his vehicle and was now slowly rolling through the ancient gates to make his appointment with his aunt.

Demelza was shaking with fury. She knew George had been trying to rile her but how had he known she and Dwight were together? She was also angry at Ross, for although his words seemed to be in her defense, she sensed his quarrel with George was old and ugly and any perceived slight against Demelza was just a convenient excuse. It was almost as though she were not there at all.

Where were the kind eyes she'd seen before? The last time they talked, she'd seen a softer, deeper side of Ross. Or had it just been the effect of too much drink? Perhaps he had never been anything but a cold, angry man looking for an excuse to quarrel, to offer violence?

And now she was annoyed that she had allowed herself to get angry at all. She didn't need this sort of emotional distraction and she didn't need defending.

And she didn't need Ross Poldark.

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Later that afternoon, as they drove back to the engine house together, Demelza told Dwight everything that had transpired outside the back gates of Trenwith. By now she was able to see the humour in George’s attempt to insult her.

Dwight was relieved that she hadn’t taken it to heart but hoped this might be enough to convince her to finally take on an official role in CEA. He felt guilty that she would ever be perceived as less valuable in their work than he was.

“Why are you smiling, Dwight? Did you think of some witty jab I could have thrown back at George? I was never good in the moment,” she said.

“L'esprit d'escalier,” Dwight offered.

“Bless you,” she laughed.

“No, it means what you wished you had said,” Dwight explained.

“I need to take lessons from Agatha Poldark. She no doubt has a stockpile of insults for George,” Demelza said.

“Ross’s Aunt Agatha? Yes, she does have a sharp tongue, doesn’t she? I met her many years ago but it sounds as though she hasn’t changed much,” Dwight said. “Actually, Demelza, I was just musing...
that if you do take me up on my offer of partnership, CEA takes on a whole new meaning: *Carne & Enys, Associates.* It has a nice ring, doesn’t it?"

“What about Carbon Emitting Arseholes?” she teased.

“Or Castrated Elderly Aardvarks?” he suggested. “Chaste Edwardian Aubergines?”

She snorted a half-contained laugh and in her amusement reached over to touch his arm affectionately. Dwight knew what a fondness she had for his corny sense of humour; he was pleased to see her smile.

“Don’t forget Demelza, you still have to pick a day to go climbing and nest hunting on the cliffs with Ross. He mentioned it again yesterday. You should text him to set up a time while this nice weather holds,” he reminded her.

“Oh, now I don’t know...his feud with George--what I saw today--it turned my stomach, Dwight,” she said. “It cuts both ways. Ross is just as obsessed--maybe that’s too strong a word-- but he seems drawn into conflict with him like a moth to flame. What can’t he just be...”

“Diplomatic? Have you met Ross Poldark?” Dwight asked sarcastically.

“I have. And I thought I liked him. He can be persuasive and as you said, charismatic. So to deliberately choose such a blunderingly aggressive tack with George...”

“I don’t think he’s choosing it, Demelza. That’s the problem, neither of them are thinking. It is instinct,” Dwight mused.

“I disagree, Dwight. Everything we do--it’s always a choice,” she said solemnly.

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A soft rain was falling outside the engine house as Demelza and Dwight lay together in the dark, holding each other close under the grey duvet. Everything was on track for the meeting of the Ethics Review Board but still Dwight was as uneasy as ever. They said little but the silence wasn’t uncomfortable. Demelza suspected the best way to reassure Dwight was not through words but by her tender touch.

Dwight sighed and looked down at Demelza with his mouth open, contemplating speaking. Then he closed it again in a dramatic manner.

“What is it?” she asked sleepily, planting a kiss on his bare chest. She lingered a bit more than intended and found her lips starting to move downwards towards his waist. He put his hand to her head and stroked her hair absently.

“It’s nothing. Doesn't matter,” he muttered, looking above her towards the wall opposite the bed.

“Well, clearly there is something you want to say.” She smiled and looked up at him. She couldn't decide if she was going to play this game or not, but suspected there might actually be something new troubling him, something, she sensed, about her. She gave his belly a final kiss--a sort of suckle that ended in a nip-- then propped herself up on her elbow.

“I don’t want you to think I’m rushing you or nagging you, Melz. So...no, it will keep. Until you’re ready.”

“Bravo, Dwight, for the perfect set up. Because you know I’ll be curious, so now you can say
whatever you want and if I take it as nagging, it will be my fault for forcing you. Well done!” she laughed. She wasn’t really perturbed by this ploy but wanted him to cut the act and just say what was on his mind.

“Demelza, that’s not what I …” he began.

She tried to read his tone and placed it somewhere on the spectrum between apologetic, defensive, and irritated.

“No seriously, Dwight, what’s on your mind?” she asked him softly, and moved up to nestle against his chest.

He stroked her head again, this time tenderly, and let out a long exhale. She had come to know that hesitation meant he was about to say something that he didn’t think she’d receive well.

*He’s afraid of making me angry,* she thought.

“Dwight, please talk to me,” she pleaded.

“I mean it when I say I don’t want to rush you. And I know you are in place in your career when things are really happening for you…” he began.

“So it’s not just a job, now I have a career? Thanks for the promotion.” Her tone was bright; she was trying to add some levity to an exchange that had suddenly grown heavier.

“Demelza...I’m serious.” Now he sounded hurt.

“I know,” she said, reassuringly. She found his hand and laced her fingers through his, squeezing firmly.

*He’s going to ask me again to be his partner and this time I can’t evade the question,* she thought.

“We’ve never talked about...about getting married. But why not, Melz?” he began. “You know I want...I want to have a family and I’ve come to realise... I want one with you.” He didn’t say more but waited for her to answer.

“Oh,” she said.

She did not expect that, certainly not so soon. She rested her ear on his chest, and listened to his heart beat. Only five beats passed but it seemed like an inordinately long interval before she spoke again.

“Can’t we have one without the other?” she asked.

He dropped her hand and looked down at her with concern.

“You ...you don’t want to have children?” he asked, unable to hide the shock in his voice.

“No, I do, I do. But... why do we have to get married to do that?”

“You don’t want to marry me ?” he asked earnestly.

“No, if I were to marry anyone it would be you, Dwight.” She took his hand again and brought it to her lips. “But ask yourself, why do we have to get married? We’re together, we’ve been together in one way or another for years. We’ve shared everything-- work, now expenses and a household....” she said, kissing his hand over and over. She was trying to soothe his grey mood with extra affection. “How would making it official change that?”
“It wouldn’t,” he admitted.

“So why do it? We don’t have families that care and it’s not like either of us is religious…” In all the time she’d known Dwight he’d only gone to church once and that was for his uncle’s funeral.

“But you’d be ready to…?” he stammered.

“Have a baby? Sure, I think so. Maybe not today but soon...ish. I mean I get nine months to really get ready, don’t I?”

He lifted her up off his chest so he could look her in the eye. A flicker of a smile twitched in the corner of his mouth that he fought to contain.

He still isn’t quite trusting me, she thought.

“What about your career?” he asked.

“Isn’t it a mistake to think you can sort out all the little categories in your life and tick off the boxes when you’ve mastered one before you move on to another? Work will always be demanding and messy. So would being a working parent. It’s an illusion to think there is some magic time when it won’t be. And together we can scrape together enough for us to hire a nanny or whatever. I say bring on the deluge now rather than later. Besides if I wait until I’m older I’ll just be more tired, right? What about you, Dwight?”

“Are you asking me if I’m tired because I’m older than you?” he laughed.

She felt his body relax and knew she had finally reached him. She let her hand travel downward towards the waistband of his boxers again.

“No, are you ready? To be a parent, I mean. A father.”


“No, not that. When did you actually last play football and you most certainly don’t drink too much.”

“Well?”

“You’re fine… really fine, Dwight. You are steady and sweet and giving and patient and playful.”

“Mmm...keep going. I’m starting to like myself.”

“Really, Dwight, you are the perfect man.”

“Well, maybe I drive too fast.”

“You do not, Dwight!”

“Well, maybe sometimes? But I won’t if there’s a baby seat in the back. Deal?”

“Deal.” she said, smiling back at him. His eyes sparkled and she could see she’d made him happy.

He rolled her on her back and began to kiss her neck, then her mouth. She laced her fingers in his hair and pulled him close to her, losing herself in the passion this new plan seemed to inspire in him.
Demelza had always considered herself an honest person and very rarely lied, even when the truth hurt. And this was no exception. In the moment she really believed she was being truthful with Dwight when she said she wanted to have a family with him.

Yet later when she went for her morning run along the cliffs, she realised how impulsive she’d been when answering him the previous night. Had she not just concluded that she wasn’t even ready to have a dog of her own? And was it also not just the week before that she had looked on another man’s naked body with a strange and dark desire that hadn’t stirred in her for years?

She realised then that her sincerity came from wanting to genuinely alleviate Dwight’s anguish, her earnest desire to give him something he wanted. That she felt truthful about. But was it what she wanted? She hoped she’d have a while to truly figure that out. She had bought herself a fair amount of time, hadn’t she? They needed to finish a job they had not even started yet, assess whether there were any legitimate business prospects for them locally, and then of course find a permanent or at least semi-permanent place to live. That would take months. After that she’d have to go off the pill and even then there’d be no guarantee she’d conceive right away.

“Oh, Dwight,” she found herself whispering to the sea as she stopped to stretch. “I do love you.”

And this time, she knew she wasn’t lying.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to https://www.cornwallgardenstrust.org.uk/significant-trees/ for some inspiration for Verity’s secret walk and for the quote from John Gerard (“The serpent dare not be so bolde as to touch the morning and evening shadowes of the ash tree”).
Risks & Rewards

There had once been a time—not that long ago in fact—when Demelza had considered what it would mean to have a child with Dwight. She had never mentioned these musings to him and other significant events had happened soon after that demanded her attention, so any such thoughts were short lived.

It was early September of just the previous autumn, and Dwight and Demelza were finally taking the camping holiday together in the Highlands that they’d talked about for years. Demelza had been working temporarily at the Biodiversity Information Centre in Surrey and could only get away for a few days. She’d been looking forward to this and was desperately hoping they might avoid any bad weather.

But by the time they had picked up their rental car outside of Glasgow, the forecast had shifted to a seventy percent chance of rain.

Demelza looked at her mobile with a scowl while Dwight drove them northwest.

“This isn’t looking good, Dwight,” she said. “The odds are not in our favour. Why does it always rain when I want to camp?”

“Well, do you want to change our plans or take the risk?” he asked. “I do have top rate outdoor gear that will keep us warm and dry. It worked for me in Senja last year, it ought to hold up in Kinlochleven.”

“And again I thank you for lending me a sleeping bag, by the way,” she said. She had never replaced hers after it was stolen in Snowdonia six years before. “Listen...we may not get another chance to do this together... I say let’s take the risk. There’s still a thirty percent chance it won’t rain,” she said optimistically.

“And you’re sure you passed your statistics and probability course back at university?” he laughed.

“Do you really want to talk about Pascal’s Triangle now, Dwight?” she said. “Because say the word and I’m ready…” she jabbed back with a playful grin.

“Well, remind me not to gamble with you anyway,” he smiled. “You'd no doubt take reckless risks with my money.”

It was just around midday when they reached their destination. They gathered their gear and left the car park to begin the hike into the hills a few kilometers away from the caravans on Loch Leven. All afternoon they felt the barometric pressure dropping and the humidity growing steadier, but no rain fell. Still they were ready with their plastic ponchos and quick dry athletic wear should that change.

“Maybe I was wrong and I should take you to the races, Demelza,” Dwight teased. “The odds, though long, might just be in our favour after all today.”

By early evening they had scouted a flat, slightly elevated bit of ground to pitch Dwight’s tent. As usual, they worked well together. Even though it was getting dark and they were tired, they didn’t bicker when the poles got mixed up or when they accidentally undid each other’s work. They laughed and made a game of racing to get it set up.

They’d just secured the rain fly when the shower started. It was slow at first, but before long picked up its pace. Heavy drops hit the leaves above with enough force to shake the tree boughs. A sudden
curtain of rain swept through their campsite, drenching everything in its path and it grew clear this would not be a quick sprinkle.

Dwight hung a tarp over the campstove that Demelza lit just long enough to boil some water. They huddled together in the tent with hot tea and a supper of ramen noodles while the torrent battered the rain fly above them.

It wasn’t long before they heard the rumble of distant thunder.

“Fucking hell! Is that…”

“Yes, thunder. Well, that changes things,” Dwight said.

“Shouldn’t we leave or move or something?” she asked. “This can’t be safe!”

He thought for a moment.

“Listen, let’s think this out. If we left now, it would be hours until we got to a road. We’d be exposed and out in the lightning, which we have yet to see here so it may be a good distance away from us still. There are trees around that are higher than us, so that’s a good thing. And we’re well insulated from the ground with this good pad so we needn’t worry about ground currents,” he began.

“Yes…” she said, considering his arguments.

“I think... we are better off staying here and weathering the storm. We don’t really have any other options. I know it’s a bit unnerving…” he said.

“As long as you’ve weighed the risks, Dr. Enys,” she said. “But expect me to jump every time I hear a rumble. Be warned.”

“Fair enough. And maybe...well, perhaps tomorrow we should abandon this folly and go find a warm inn with a big fireplace.”

“A massive one,” she agreed. “Are we getting old and soft, Dwight?”

“Hardly. I know you'd prefer to be outdoors but even this is too much. I’m sorry to disappoint you,” he said. “You still haven’t seen the sea eagles on Loch Leven.”

“Oh hush. This is perfectly enjoyable,” she replied, seeing he needed some distraction. “Ok, Dwight, would you rather...sleep out in the pouring rain, fully clothed but with no shelter, or sleep naked at Glasgow Central Station?”

“What? I’d surely be arrested at the train station, Demelza,” he scoffed.

"Then your final answer is outdoors in the rain? Okay, would you rather canoe down a raging river rapid or…” she thought for a moment. “Or find yourself on a runaway horse?”

“A canoe? Am I alone or do I have a partner? Are you with me?”

“No, you’re alone. Okay, it’s a kayak not a canoe, whatever.”

“Well...with the horse there's a risk you’d be thrown or trampled of course but there’s also the chance you could get him back under control, whereas you can’t do that with river rapids…Where is the river?”

“You think too much. You’re supposed to just go with your gut,” she said.
“You know, you’re really rubbish at this game, Demelza. The ones you offer me are always ‘choose one form of certain death or another equally dreadful one’. And then whatever I pose to you, you’re always like ‘Oh either sounds lovely. Sure I’d love to wrestle seven cobras or bungee jump over a pool of lava’,” he teased.

“That’s not true,” she laughed. “But if you’re bored, we can go to sleep. Let’s just hope we don’t find ourselves floating away in the middle of the night,” she said, settling down farther into her sleeping bag.

“I’m not bored but if you are sleepy, I won’t disturb you. And I believe we’re high enough not to be in any danger of floods. Are you worried about that?”

“No, I’m not really worried. What are you looking at?” she asked.

“At you. I’m waiting for you to fall asleep,” he said.

“No, you always fall asleep before I do,” she replied.

“I do not!” he protested.

“Really, Dwight, what are you thinking? You look serious.”

They had turned off their torches to conserve battery a while before and their eyes had since grown accustomed to the dark. She could make out Dwight’s face not far from her own and even in the dim night, knew how to read it.

He paused before he spoke then laughed lightly.

“I’m weighing the risks and rewards of touching you right now.”

“You don’t have to, you know, if you don’t feel it. It’s not as though I’d be offended if you didn’t want to…”

“You think I have sex with you out of obligation? No, Demelza. I enjoy being with you. I always do...or have I not made that clear in the past?”

“Oh, you make that clear,” she laughed, thinking of the raspy sighs and deep groans she’d heard escape his lips before. He’d proven to be a responsive and expressive lover and she had no doubts she pleased him. “So? Have you reached a verdict?”

“Well, it all depends where I touch you, right? If I touch your arm, like this…” He reached over and rubbed her upper arm gently, “then you’ll most likely sigh and close your eyes and roll on your side and go straight to sleep.”

“Well, probably,” she agreed.

“But if I touch you here...” Now he turned her arm over and stroked her forearm down to her wrist. “Then you’ll look at me with your smiling blue eyes,” he said, watching her steadily.

Even through her long sleeved nylon top, his fingertips tickled. She returned his gaze and tried not to giggle.

“And if I put my hand to your face like this,” he said and ran the back of his hand gently along her cheek, “your lips will open and your breath will become gentle, almost a whisper.”

“Oh,” she said. She wasn’t laughing now.
“And if I put my finger to your lips, your eyes will close and you’ll kiss it without question,” he said, softly leaning closer and closer to her. “Then most likely you’ll take my hand in your own.”

She did just as he predicted and laced her fingers in his. Her other hand threaded through his hair and she pulled him towards hers. Her open mouth met his; their kiss was soft and measured but it stirred feelings in both of them that had been dormant for some months.

She broke away with a slight smile and licked her lips.

“So that’s the reward, Dwight. What’s the risk?”

“That one day I’ll go to reach for you and you’ll pull away, offended. Or that somehow our friendship will be a casualty if we overindulge,” he said soberly. He kept her hand in his and lay his head next to hers again so they were but inches apart.

“Or if we overthink,” she added. “Oh, Dwight, we don’t always sleep together, only when it feels right. I trust that, I trust you…”

“You can— I’ve never been anything but honest with you, Demelza.” His eyes were a stormy grey now.

“And me with you. So if this is one of those times you don’t want me, just say so.” She looked at him slyly. From his kiss she already sensed his desire for her but she wanted him to make the first move.

In the distance, thunder rumbled again. He said nothing but his eyes remained fixed on hers. He unzipped her sleeping bag and slipped his cool hand under her top. His fingers danced against her warm skin but this time she wasn’t tickled.

“Mmm,” she said softly and shifted slightly to meet his touch. She lay flat on her back watching him, fascinated by his steady determination.

Spurred on, he threw open her sleeping bag then hovered over her, his legs on either side pinning her down. The hand that had been skillfully grazing her breast now reached around her back and drew her up towards him. This kiss was longer, more powerful, more passionate. He tore his mouth away, still open, and again met her eyes.

She’d never seen him so dark, so serious, so mad with desire—he almost looked angry. Still she didn’t make a move but watched him intently as he drove on.

He shifted so he was nestled between her hips and pressed himself into her so she could feel his strength, his body heat, his arousal. His mouth was on her neck, no longer gently kissing but feverishly feeding on her skin, her flesh. One hand snaked down under her knickers and grabbed her butt, firmly, greedily.

Now she moved.

She threw her head back with an irrepressible groan and offered him more of her exposed neck, while she tugged her thermal pants off entirely. She gracelessly freed them from her ankles so she was bare below the waist, save her thick hiking socks, then she helped him with his own.

Bare skinned and dewy with sweat, he stealthily slithered back over her, stretching her arms out above her head again. One hand held her arm pinned to the ground while his other held fast to her butt, pulling her body to meet his.
She responded to his curious sexual frenzy with a surprising submissiveness.

The thunder rumbled again, this time closer still, and Dwight met it with roars of his own. His almost feral groans came from somewhere raw and primal. Demelza had never known him like this and had she not trusted him so implicitly, she might have found his strength frightening. She didn't jump at the thunder’s growls-- or at his-- and instead gave her body over willingly to his unmitigated passion.

The camping pad shifted slightly under her back as he forcefully drove on, his powerful body and his unrelenting will, melding them into one. She was almost paralysed with pleasure and let out the softest whispers and gasps as she grew closer and closer to her peak.

“Melz!”

Thunder boomed again just as Dwight called her name out to the dark night that surrounded them. Finally he collapsed into a quivering heap beside her.

“Dwight, I can't catch my breath. I don’t know what to say,” she panted, still on her back.

“Fucking hell!” Dwight sat up quickly.

“Dwight? What is it? What’s wrong?” Dwight rarely cursed so she knew something must be amiss. "Is there a leak in the tent?"

“No, Melz, I’m sorry….the condom broke.”

“What? But...how?"

“I don’t know. That’s never happened to me before, ever.”

“Well.. glad to be your first?” She tried joking then looked to his ashen face.

“Good god,” he said grimly, turning his back to her, presumably so he could remove the defective condom without scrutiny.

“Dwight, don’t panic,” she said gently, fumbling for her clothes. “I’m on the pill so the odds are infinitesimal that I’d get pregnant. And I’ve been checked recently...for infections, I mean.”

“Oh me too, Demelza. We needn’t worry about that.” He pulled his thermal pants back up and lay down next to her.

“So we’re safe. It’s like .1% chance of anything…”

“You haven't missed taking any or been on any antibiotics? That changes the likelihood significantly,” he asked.

“No, Dwight. Nothing to fear there.”

“Still, I’m so sorry, Demelza…”

“For giving me one of the best shags of my life?” she laughed. “Really, Dwight, you were so...animal,” she said with a shiver and a sly smile. “It must have been the raging storm that inspired you.”

“Or it was you,” he said and softly kissed her lips. His brief smile faded quickly into the serious expression he’d worn a moment earlier. “Demelza... you do know if something did happen and you were to become pregnant, you wouldn’t be alone. In whatever you decided, I’d be there with you.”
“I know but joint custody would be tricky between Bristol and Trinidad,” she replied, trying to make light of the situation. She desperately wanted to change the subject.

“So you got the fellowship? Why didn’t you tell me! That’s tremendous, Demelza!”

“Yes, I leave for the Asa Wright Nature Centre next month in fact. I can’t say I’ll miss Surrey,” she said. “You know, Dwight, I’d never made love in a tent before. This was a first…”

“Oh really?” he said casually, avoiding her direct gaze.

“Let me guess, you’ve done it loads of times in this very tent, haven’t you?” she laughed.

“I was very fond of camping when I was at university,” Dwight chuckled.

“So it wasn’t me after all but the the tent that brought out the wolf in you! Oh good god, Dwight, I don’t need to know anymore!” she laughed again then tried pulling a serious face. “Okay, tell me, would you rather make love to me out there in the pouring rain or in a public toilet at Glasgow Central Station?”

“What is this obsession with public indecency?” he laughed, then reached into her sleeping bag and pulled off one of her thick wool socks.

“Hey!” she shrieked and pressed her cold foot against him.

“You know, Demelza, there’s an old wives’ tale that says wearing socks during sex increases your likelihood of conceiving,” he joked.

“Good thing I’m not superstitious,” Demelza giggled. She snatched the sock back and struggled to get it back on her foot in the confined space.

His hands on her waist, he pulled her close again, then kissed her. This time it was a sleepy affectionate kiss. She rubbed his upper arm gently and watched his peaceful, contented face. He gave a soft sigh, then a moment later, his eyes were closed.

She lay awake for some time listening in the dark.

The rain continued to batter the fly overhead but the thunder, like Dwight’s fervor, seemed to have finally abated. A light wind rustled the trees around them and she thought she might have heard a robin in the distance. It was nowhere near dawn but she knew it wasn’t unheard of for robins to burst into song if awakened by thunder or other loud noises.

_In a tent you can hear everything_, she thought.

Next to her, Dwight’s breathing was slow and steady. She tried to concentrate on his rhythm, so she might fall asleep too, but her mind wouldn’t settle.

Yes, the chances they had just conceived a child were slim yet... what if? Dwight was such a giving and caring man, he’d be a great parent, of course. But his ecological consulting business was really taking off now and required so much travel. And of course she had this research fellowship. Two parents, who hadn’t even meant to be together, putting their dreams on hold to raise a child they hadn’t planned for. Maybe it could work--they worked well together after all. But if it didn’t work? The stakes were just too great.
The next morning they broke camp quickly and began the trek down the hill back towards Loch Leven. The rain had stopped but the grey sky signaled any reprieve would most likely be short lived. Even though all their gear was heavier now that it was soaked, it still seemed an easy hike down. They were in good spirits and despite everything, felt surprisingly well-rested. They stopped only briefly for a quick lunch then continued until the car park was in view.

“Ha! I finally have a signal again,” Dwight said, pulling his mobile from his pocket. “I can start looking for an inn for us.”

“I require very little, anything indoors will seem positively luxurious,” she said, “so don’t go to any great fuss for me.” She pulled out her own mobile.

She froze in her tracks and stared at the text from her brother now visible on the screen. Dwight had gone on a few paces ahead of her before he realised she wasn’t behind him.

“Demelza? What is it?” he turned and asked.

“Dwight,” she said. “It’s my father. He’s...he’s dead.”

The evening in a cosy inn would have to wait. Dwight drove them straight back to Glasgow so Demelza could catch a train to Cornwall, though she wasn’t sure what use she’d be to anyone there.

She sat staring out the car window, silent and stone faced, trying her best not to think. She was worried that the initial feeling of relief that had flooded through her upon learning this news would eventually turn to guilt—or grief. She would not be prepared for either. No, better to shut all her feelings down now. And she was surprised to find how easily she could do just that.

_Do others see how cold I am?_ she wondered. _Am I incapable of love?_

When Dwight left her at the station, she gave him a lingering, sad kiss before he drove away to return the rental car on his own. In a time of supposed distress it didn’t feel right to leave Dwight behind and seek out her distant family instead. Yes, her distance from the Carnes could be measured in more than miles.

He’s _closer to me than any of them have ever been_, she thought. She was disappointed she and Dwight had scarcely spent any time together and she suspected she’d miss him when she was in Trinidad. Maybe they’d manage to see each other again later the same year, but who knew what the future would bring?

Demelza watched him drive away then turned her focus. Before she boarded her train there was something else urgent to attend to. She pulled out her mobile. A quick search revealed what she needed to know—there was a chemist right in the train station.

It didn’t take her long to get what she sought; even the required “chat” with the pharmacist was fast. She felt grateful the woman she spoke to saw straight away that Demelza was an adult capable of making her own decisions and didn’t ask anything too probing. Demelza took the emergency contraception pill without any hesitation then went to search out the kiosk to change her ticket.

Yes, the risk that she’d be pregnant was negligible but it wasn’t worth ruining two lives. She wasn’t even considering her own her life now but Dwight’s and their child’s. How harmed would they be if she were unable to feel anything—unable to love?

Maybe some time in the future things would be different. She could only trust that when that day
came, when it was right, she’d trust herself to know.

She found her platform in the bustling station and was pleased that she didn’t have to wait terribly long before boarding. She had a return ticket through to Surrey now --not Cornwall after all-- and once on board, she didn’t look back.
A Night Bell

Demelza woke with a start in the dark bedroom. She’d heard the ring of a doorbell then a muffle of voices, followed by laughter drifting up from the closed window. She sat up and listened again then realised it must have been a dream. They had no neighbours, there were no other houses close by. Besides, who’d be visiting at this late hour? But was it even late? She didn’t know how long she’d been asleep only that she was cold. It could have been eleven or it might be the early hours of the morning already. She couldn’t tell. Their bedroom, unlike her old room, was never lit by any moonlight.

Their room.

Since things had become more serious between her and Dwight, Demelza had moved herself and most of her belongings into his bedroom at the top of the stairs. She still kept her books down the hall, but she brought the fluffy duvet and the vintage print of summer warblers in a gilt frame to this room to mark her occupancy. She thought she might try to soften its manly aesthetic, to make it more of a shared space between them. She suspected the bedrooms had been decorated purposely with such contrasting schemes—a boy’s and a girl’s—to more broadly appeal to the tourists who let the cottage for holidays.

The duvet, soft dove-grey linen, had seemed airy and clean in the brightly lit all-white room that overlooked the sea but somehow now seemed dull in this room with its dark blue walls. Still she found it warmer to snuggle under than the plaid woolen blanket Dwight had been using. He was never as bothered by the chilly spring nights as she was.

If she’d been honest with herself she would have seen she chose to move into Dwight’s room, rather than inviting him into hers, so that she’d have the freedom to leave when it suited her, to come and go and be alone whenever she fancied. She certainly wasn’t acting like a guest with him—she tossed her clothes about and slept there each night without question. But most afternoons she found herself back in her old space, curled up with her cup of tea, reading in the big armchair by the window with the breathtaking view. Dwight jokingly referred to it as her “abbey” when she sought out some retreat there. But she suspected he understood sharing so much intimacy, including all the corners of a domicile, was a new experience for her. He had known her long and understood her well. She appreciated that about him.

Now Demelza laid cold and restless on her back and thought about retreating to her chair in the other bedroom. She tried not to wake Dwight as she carefully slipped out from under the covers in a single graceful swoop. Her bare feet had just hit the of the ancient oak floor when she felt him shift behind her. She turned to see him looking at her in the dark.

“Melz…” he muttered half awake. “You getting up?”

“Yes, but you go back to sleep,” she whispered. “I’m ok,” she added, then realised she was lying.

“Demelza?” He sat up at once and reached for her; he knew something was amiss. She acquiesced and slipped back close to him under the duvet. Sensing her distress, he pulled her into an embrace.

“Melz,” he whispered, this time a soothing purr.

He loves me. I know he does.

“I’m just so cold, Dwight. I can’t get warm.” Her voice was thin, an undisguised edge of sadness.
piercing through her whisper.

“Let me warm you. How shall I, huh? From the outside? Or…?” he asked, kissing her shoulder.

She knew what he was asking but didn’t respond; instead she buried her face in his chest, startled by the silent sobs struggling to escape her.

“So cold,” she repeated.

Dwight was trying his best to comfort her, clearly moved by her sudden dark mood, his arms and palms gripping her tighter.

But the cold was somewhere deep within her, somewhere she couldn’t reach and she knew he couldn’t either. Words from a Kafka story she’d read at school years ago ran through her mind as she squeezed her eyes shut and clutched his warm body to hers.

_A false ring of the night bell, once answered — it can never be made right._
An Unwelcome Memento

George Warleggan found himself lingering longer than usual in the shower after his workout. Today he hadn’t turned on the luxurious waterfall tap but instead chose the four powerful jets, one situated at each wall of the shower stall, to massage his tired muscles. Yes, he’d overdone it this afternoon—even his trainer had warned him. Now his biceps were stiff and tight, reminding him he was getting older.

George was proud of the bath upgrades they’d made recently in their personal quarters at Trenwith. It was more like a spa than a bath really. Everything was the best quality—bespoke and expensive. The wall tiles were split face Indian slate, the floor was heated. Of course the sleek modern lines were decidedly out of place in the historic old home but that pleased George even more. He was leaving his mark.

The shower itself was quite spacious, large enough for two people really, although it had been a while since he and Elizabeth had indulged in each other in such a setting. He was still more than satisfied with their sex life but it had never been an adventurous one, and although they never spoke of it, they both felt a bit inhibited during their stays at Trenwith. Too many memories, too many ghosts perhaps.

Or maybe it was just the presence of a living ghost, Agatha Poldark, whose inescapable dark cloud continued to cast gloom in their lives.

George turned off the gleaming chrome taps and laughed thinking of the bath in Agatha’s suite. It probably hadn't been fitted with anything new since the 1950s-- or even earlier. That seemed to suit her. She was ancient and outdated just like the stained, cracked tiles and leaky pipes.

*Maybe she’ll slip getting out of the bathtub and die alone and naked on the cold floor,* he thought.

He’d never cared for Aunt Agatha, even when he was a teen and Francis was alive. She was cruel, sneering, cutting in her remarks to friends and family alike. She relished any chance she got to point out George’s failings--in his status, in his looks, in his height, in his charm. For years he suffered her abuse but since he’d married Elizabeth he now held little back. He openly shared his great disdain for her and voiced his hopes that she’d drop dead any moment. Of course he delivered the more cutting jabs when no one else was present and usually he took great pains to avoid any moments alone with her.

He would prefer to spend all his time at their place in Truro but he knew that Elizabeth enjoyed the country and he liked to indulge her. He also was pleased to remind the neighbourhood that he controlled the estate of Trenwith and so his occasional presence was never quiet and most often announced with great fanfare. Any parties or charity events that may have already been scheduled to take place at Trenwith were always better publicised if they happened to occur when the Warleggans were in residence. He saw to that.

In the past few weeks, he’d grown even less fond of the place and of the old crone who resided there permanently-- ever since she’d dug out the old photograph to show him. She’d done so triumphantly, like she’d been keeping it a secret for so many years, just waiting for the proper moment to rub George’s nose in it. It wasn’t a professional portrait but a photo snapped by someone close--perhaps even by Agatha herself--as the bridal party assembled after the exchange of vows but before any real celebration had begun.

It was a photograph of Elizabeth's wedding to Ross Poldark.
And there standing next to Ross was the ecologist, Dr. Dwight Enys. They were both younger--mid twenties--but Enys was recognisable nonetheless. The two friends were laughing, their heads thrown back, as though the photo had been snapped at the delivery of the punchline of some joke; the look they were exchanging seemed almost conspiratorial.

Ross was facing Dwight and wasn't even looking at Elizabeth in this image. But Elizabeth had her hand on Ross’s arm. This was what had bothered George the most, to see this. Her elegant fingers were splayed, fondling the round bicep, detectable through Ross’s dark suit. George didn't want reminders that she had ever touched Ross’s body or he hers.

George scoffed at the simplicity of the venue, the style of their wedding clothes. Dressy but nothing too formal. The men were in suits but not proper evening wear. Elizabeth's satin slip dress was long and white, with a cut on the bias that flattered her figure, but didn’t necessarily connote bride. Of course Ross would want to flaunt convention and had imposed his tastes on young and impressionable Elizabeth.

George had not been at Ross and Elizabeth's wedding all those years ago. It had been held in London, not Cornwall, and only close friends and family had been invited. At the time he was neither. But George had been present for Elizabeth’s marriage to Francis Poldark and found that affair dull and tedious. It seemed arranged entirely by Francis’s father, the now-deceased Charles Poldark, who always felt himself more important than he ever really was. He had invited an endless parade of stuffy family members and neighbours who were either too restrained to celebrate or too old to even move about the room. Elizabeth's mother didn't seem to notice Francis at all and instead simply remarked on Elizabeth's place in the great house of Trenwith, as though the house, not the man, was the bridegroom.

George took some pleasure in knowing his own wedding to Elizabeth had been the best the county had ever seen, even though she had wanted to keep it simple considering it was her third trip down the aisle. But he had spared no expense. And while George didn't originally want it to be held at Trenwith, he came around to that idea as a means of marking his presence, his ownership of the place and its inhabitants. Well, technically it was not his property but he was married to the guardian of its heir and he now had rights. All decisions would go through him. That was more than the Poldark down the road at shabby Nampara could claim, and to be able to lord over Aunt Agatha and that self-righteous Verity was a bonus thrill.

Now George came out of the shower into the grand bedroom and standing in only a thick towel, took delight in dripping water on the the ancient floors of Trenwith House. Yes, he had a place in it now that was more important than any Poldark’s.

With purpose he walked over to the drawer where he’d stashed Agatha’s cursed photograph. He’d finally destroy it--burn it, shred it, run it over with his Range Rover-- he didn't care. But it and the memory of Elizabeth's union--albeit brief and wholly unsuccessful-- to Ross Poldark must be purged from this house at once.

And of course that smug Enys must pay as well. Those efforts were progressing nicely, or so his man Tankard had reported. George didn't need details, just assurances that Enys’s intentions to complete another impact assessment would not be allowed to proceed. He had no doubt Ross had hatched those plans with Enys in secret. George had had enough of Ross. He wasn’t going to allow Ross Poldark’s privilege and arrogance destroy what the Warleggans had worked so hard to build up.

George heard Elizabeth's feet padding softly down the hallway coming towards the bedroom. He imagined she was shoeless. He knew she was coming from her yoga session but hated when she walked around barefoot; it was such a common behaviour and it didn't suit a woman of her status.
He sighed a mixture of exasperation and slight disgust but knew he must hasten to retrieve the photograph and conceal it before she entered the room.

George opened the drawer only to find the photograph was gone.
'I need your shoe size'

That was all the text read. It was from a number Demelza didn’t recognise; there was no greeting, no explanation. She suspected it was from Ross but wasn’t sure how to respond. So she didn’t.

Instead she returned to her laptop and tried to push Ross Poldark and his brusque—or at least inconsistent—manners from her mind.

It was Carrington’s work that she was reading. An old study—the data he used was from the 1980s, an extension of his dissertation maybe. She found his writing a bit disappointing, as though he wasn’t sure who his target audience might be. He included detailed charts with carefully reported statistics that no lay reader would have any interest in but then also gave numerous descriptions of basic dove behaviours that even a weekend birder would find obvious.

‘Standing near her, the male coos again and again and, if he is acceptable to her, she will quiver her wings at him and she will utter low notes herself.’

Demelza sensed Carrington enjoyed reporting the mating and breeding activities more than anything else in the study; in the sections describing the five to ten seconds it took for doves to complete their copulation, his writing grew noticeably inspired.

‘The male’s performance is admirably artistic and athletic. In courtship he sidles along her with grace then stamps his feet with all the fervor of a Spanish dancer. In mating he becomes a gymnast—he quickly jumps on her back and beats his wings so as to maintain his balance. Then like a musician masterfully finessing his instrument, he initiates a slight rotary movement of their copulatory organs. Finally he is Caruso, a triumphant tenor, as he drops from her back and emits a harsh ‘kah’.’

The female mourning dove’s corresponding actions, however, seemed to warrant less poetic descriptions from Carrington.

‘The female is not responsive to the male during the three days previous to laying when she is maturing the eggs.’

Demelza sighed and took a sip from the tea that had almost grown cold in her cup.

Great. An old school ornithologist. And only 320 more pages to go, she thought.

Of course she acknowledged male birds performed elaborate mating dances and usually had the more colourful plumage thus the tendency for such write ups as Carrington’s. But there was still much to be gained by observing the females of any species—however restrained or unadorned they might seem by comparison.

Any decent ornithologist these days would do so, she thought but scrolled on all the same and wondered if Carrington had been sexist in other areas of his life.

Also included were page after page of charts detailing the trees in which doves built their nests. Demelza found these quite interesting and wondered how much had changed in the decades since
this analysis was published. It might be fascinating--or depressing--to update it. Carrington reported as many as 34 nests were found on one farm in Cornwall alone. Now there were far fewer farms and even on those that remained, nests were scarce, if present at all.

‘During the three years of the study 7154 eggs were laid in the nests under observation. Table 33 gives information concerning the number of eggs laid at each nesting attempt and the percentage of times…’

She felt her eyelids grow heavy, her head nodded to her chin.

Just then Dwight came into the room holding his mobile aloft. She jerked awake and closed her laptop instinctively, not that he would ever pry or try to look over her shoulder. And even if he had seen her screen, there wasn’t anything particularly suspicious about reading about bird habitats in Cornwall. Demelza had resolved to tell him soon of her plan to find out more on Carrington but didn’t feel ready quite yet.

“Demelza? Sorry to bother you, Ross has rung me. He’s getting the gear from Jinny Carter for climbing tomorrow and needs to know your shoe size.”

Tomorrow?

Demelza sighed in exasperation. Shouldn't Ross have at least confirmed with her before he went through all that trouble?

“Tell him seven,” she said, trying to temper her sharp tone. Dwight wasn’t the cause of her frustration, it wasn’t fair to take it out on him.

Dwight walked back into the hallway and spoke into his mobile then appeared again a moment later.

“He said they are supposed to fit tightly.”

“Yes, I know,” she said, this time irritably. “Tell him seven!”

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“Last chance, are you sure you won’t join us?” Demelza pleaded. She knew Dwight did not care for climbing but thought he might at least accompany them to the place Ross had in mind. Perhaps Dwight could spot them or help manage their ropes, even if he stayed at the bottom of the cliff.

Demelza sat on the bed, her legs folded under her, in no hurry to get moving while Dwight busily dressed. She wasn’t entirely sure why she was dreading her excursion today. She’d finally get to see some nests up close and check out the mysterious caves along the sea cliffs. No doubt the climb would be exhilarating, and it was a gorgeous day to be outdoors.

Yet Demelza wanted nothing more than to freeze time at that very moment--with her cup of coffee half drunk, Dwight, shirtless, standing next to her chatting easily. In the hallway just visible through the open bedroom door, a soft morning sunbeam illuminated patches of the golden oak flooring. She closed her eyes and drew in a long breath.

“It’s a beautiful day and I’m sure the cliffs and sea are simply brilliant, but I’m afraid I’m off to Truro and will stay there tonight as well,” Dwight said, sitting down beside her.

“Tonight too? I’m beginning to think you’re keeping another woman in town,” she teased.

“Hardly, I’m meeting with Tonkin again,” Dwight laughed, and patted her knee.
“I think Tonkin is sorta sexy. He has such glossy dark hair and those kind eyes,” she replied.

“Does he? Should I be worried about a rival?” he laughed. “He and I are strategising our next few moves. What to do if the ethics review comes back in our favour, what to do if we need to appeal it.”

“Can we? Appeal?” She was surprised to learn this. She reluctantly reached for a sports bra from a pile of her clothes on the floor and began to dress.

“Tonkin seems to think we can. It all has to do with some of the phrasing of the initial contract the consortium entered into with Warleggan. Or at least that’s what Tonkin’s solicitor says,” he explained.

“And Ross doesn’t have to be at this meeting?”

“Tonkin offered to take on more of this so Ross was less the public face of the consortium, just for now, until things with Warleggan settle. Ross can be a bit...well…”

Reckless, moody, complicated, she thought.

“Yes, I can see how that would be wise,” she said.

Her nose twitched and she sneezed twice in rapid succession. Dwight knew to wait for the third inevitable sneeze, then handed her a tissue.

“You aren’t coming down with a cold, are you? Could it be allergies? Maybe mould from all this rain?” he asked with alarm.

“I’m fine, really,” she brushed away his concern. “Dwight, you’ve been in Truro almost every day. I know it’s not far but wouldn’t we have been better off letting space there? Should we still?” she asked, rubbing his back.

Of course with what money? she immediately thought.

“No, this is better, don’t you agree? So scenic, reminding us why this assessment project matters after all. And I told you, the laboratory space--even now in its compromised state--makes it worth it. We’d never get that in Truro. Besides, I wanted to have you by the sea,” he said with a soft smile.

“Oh well, you got your wish. You've had me by the sea,” she laughed.

“Not really. We never have made love on a beach, you know, Melz.”

“Nor do I really want that, Dwight. I mean, you know I’m game for anywhere indoors and even most places outdoors but... Let’s just leave it as there are some places in the body one doesn’t really care to find sand later,” she winked, and pulled on her knickers.

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It was early afternoon when Dwight left for Truro. Demelza still had some time before Ross was due to pick her up and she found herself moving restlessly around the engine house. Knowing she wouldn't be able to properly concentrate, she didn't even attempt any more reading. Instead she tried doing the washing up from lunch. When she realised she had washed the same glass more than once, she gave that up entirely. She grabbed her rucksack and decided to wait outside for Ross.

He arrived exactly on time.

“It’s a shame Dwight couldn’t join us,” Demelza said as she settled into the passenger seat. Ross
didn’t seem to hear her or at least didn’t acknowledge she had spoken.

Ross had just disconnected his mobile from the car speakers as she entered and she found herself wondering what sort of music he preferred when he was alone. She was about to ask if only to make polite conversation but then sensed he wanted to drive in silence.

“I have some things for you. The rest is in the boot, but you may have this now,” Ross said after a few minutes, and passed her a small brown paper bag that felt warm.

He flashed a slight smile but even so, she was still finding him hard to read today. Cautiously she opened the bag and peered inside.

“Scones?” she asked.

“Prudie made them—it would seem especially for you. She wanted me to ask if they met with your approval.”

“My approval?”

“I don’t know what you did to win her over but she is quite taken by you, Demelza. She thinks you a proper Cornish maid. Certainly she’s never packed me a packet of scones for the road.”

“Oh,” she said. Demelza supposed she wasn’t displeased that Ross’s housekeeper liked her, but she wasn’t entirely clear why. She hadn’t meant to mislead her. It had been over ten years since she’d last lived in Cornwall and now felt a bit of fraud. She was convinced Ross could see through her.

*I belong nowhere,* she thought glumly.

It was a short drive from the engine house, past Nampara, to the spot along the cliffs that led down to the nesting cave. Ross parked the Peugeot on the side of the road, and without saying a word to her, got out and began rummaging through the boot. Before she had unclicked her seat belt he returned with the promised climbing shoes and a pair of fingerless gloves. She changed quickly then joined him at the back of the car.

“Here try this on,” he said, reaching into the boot again. He placed a black helmet on her head that was clearly too big. It wobbled comically to one side before almost sliding off entirely.

“Okay, I got that wrong. No worries, I have another,” he said, laughing lightly.

“Did you really think I had such a big head?” she asked in a tone that was almost playful; she still felt a little on guard around him today.

He laughed again, but this time it was the deep hearty laugh that she’d heard before from him. She hadn’t expected it and for a moment its warmth took her breath away.

“No, I thought--mistakenly-- your hair might take up more space. It hadn’t occurred to me it could be smoothed out like that,” he said and pulled out another helmet that looked considerably smaller than the first.

She looked at him again, not sure what to think. Was he saying that he usually found her hair unruly? Was it a backhanded compliment noting that today she was--for once--well groomed? Or was he really just inept at articulating any of his thoughts?

“I’m sure this one is perfect,” she said, taking the helmet from him and placing it on her own head.
“Wait,” he said, examining her closely. He took the helmet off and adjusted the back strap ever so slightly then placed it back on her head. He fastened the clasp carefully under her chin as though she were a small child, and holding her by the shoulders, looked her up and down.

“Yes, that’s better,” he concluded after his inspection. “Dwight would never forgive me if I brought you back concussed.”

Is his care for me only wrapped up in his allegiance to Dwight? she wondered, and tried not to read his tone as patronising.

“Come,” he said and closed the boot of the car. “At first I thought we’d start up here and abseil down. The opening I have in mind is about thirty feet below so it’s really closer to the top than the shore. But then I thought climbing up might be a better adventure--you know starting from the bottom. It will be slower going, but you’d see more of the sea and cliffs--that is, if you can bear to look down.”

“How do we get there, to the bottom?” Demelza asked. She was recalling, not too fondly, the last time she had ventured close to Kellow’s Ladder and had tried to peer down. She was grateful she was steadier on her feet today or at least had no hangover.

“Jinny Carter will take us in her boat. There’s a natural little harbour at the bottom of the ladder, which is I suppose why Kellow put it in long ago. I’ll leave my car here so when we get to the top--whenever that is--we don’t have to go back down again and wait for Jinny to return. She’s meeting us at Sawle Cove but we can walk over. It’s such a nice day.”

“You seem to have this all worked out,” she said. “Did you know him? Kellow, I mean,” she asked.

“No, he was before my time. But I believe my father might have known him or knew those who knew him--my father knew everyone around here.”

“And you? You seem to know quite a few folks. Rather impressive for a self-proclaimed recluse,” she said with a slight smile. She found it was easier to talk to him if she maintained her teasing edge.

“Did I proclaim that or is that just your observation?” he smiled. “Most of my local contacts are through my father. Jinny Carter, who you’ll meet today, is a good example. Jinny’s late husband used to work for us at Nampara. And her father is Sergeant Martin, who old Joshua counted as a dear friend. I think he liked the idea of keeping a police officer close as a way of sort of flirting with danger.”

“Was your father ever… unlawful?” Demelza asked tentatively.

“No... I don’t think so. At least no more than I ever was,” Ross laughed, then saw this made Demelza slow her pace beside him. “Oh, it’s nothing to fret about. Ask Dwight if you’re so worried. He was witness to much of my youthful transgressions, though we were hardly in our youth, I must admit.”

“Dwight doesn’t really talk much about you,” she said, then realised how cold that sounded. “I mean, maybe he’s just good at keeping people’s secrets.”

“Dwight Enys is masterfully discreet,” Ross agreed.

Demelza glanced quickly at Ross and thought he had given her the slightest raise of an eyebrow when mentioning Dwight’s name. Could Ross be hinting at the romantic developments in Dwight’s life that he kept secret? Or perhaps she was wrong, and Dwight had confided in Ross. Since Dwight had begun planning a future with Demelza, would he now be talking about their relationship with
others? The idea hadn’t occurred to her before and suddenly she felt exposed.

“Jinny’s teaching a paddle board class this afternoon or she’d stay with us, but I think we can manage the rest on our own. Dwight said you had loads of climbing experience.”

“I wouldn’t call it loads,” she mumbled and unfastened her helmet. “Isn’t it a bit cold for paddle boarding?” she asked. “Even with all this sunshine, the sea temperature was only twelve degrees at its highest yesterday.”

“You know this?” He looked at her incredulously.

“I’ve been tracking the local sea and air temperatures for weeks now,” she explained.  

_In case we ever get to work_, she thought.

“Of course you have,” he smiled. “No, the paddle boarders will most likely wear wetsuits today. Although even this early there’s always the idiots who want to show off their flat abs or bikini bodies. They usually regret it very quickly, especially the ones with no body fat to speak of.”

Ross and Demelza began their walk towards Sawle Cove. It was cool but clear and the view along the path was extraordinary. The sky was a brilliant ultramarine with only a few wisps of white threaded far above the horizon; the sea was calm, as it had been for the past few days.

They walked on in a comfortable silence, a tacit agreement that such a pretty view should be interrupted by words only when necessary. At one point the path curved to the right and began a gentle descent. After a few feet they had to clamber over a boulder before the seagrass returned under foot. Ross led the way, and as Demelza stepped down, he reached up for her, placing his palm lightly on her lower back, ensuring she had her balance.

His touch was light yet she was aware of how much strength—restrained but still discernible—there was in his broad hand. An uneasy feeling had returned. She wished she had a dram of single malt now to settle her nerves.

_For fuck’s sake, Carne! Just let him be your friend_, she admonished herself.

But when Ross removed his hand from her back she found she was even more unsettled. A shiver ran down her spine.

“You cold?” he asked.

“No, no...I’m fine. Are there many of these old mine shafts about?” she asked, trying to distract herself. “Sounds hazardous if you don’t know where you’re going.”

“They were dangerous centuries ago too. Old bones are still being found in them, people who fell in, people who in their misery and despair threw themselves in. But don’t let that worry you. I’m sure we won’t find anything so gruesome today.”

.Does he really see me as some sort of delicate flower?

“I’m hardly worried, Ross,” she said, half a laugh and half a scoff. “I’m a scientist so I’ve handled my fair share of bones, you know! And I’ve seen all sorts of gruesome things in nature.”

“Well, some of the old skeletons were infants. They don’t highlight that on the historical tours of the area,” he said solemnly.
“It’s so jarring to hear but I suppose history is filled with such horror. Probably far more than we realise. We see that cruelty for sure in the animal world, with birds anyway. Sometimes they just don’t have the nesting instinct and then kill their own young or they just fly away and never return.”

“But we like to think we’re better than that, don’t we?” he mused.

“By no means am I in favour of throwing babies into mine shafts but good god, it makes you think. And shudder,” she said. “Can you imagine, Ross, the desperation that would cause someone—as a human—to do that?”

“You mean were I some eighteenth century maiden taken advantage of, then abandoned?” he asked.

“Let’s say she went willingly to go lie with the bloke in the hedge or wherever—she’d have all that guilt and shame to contend with afterwards,” Demelza posed. “And if it wasn’t willing, she’d have...well, still guilt and shame, but also trauma. Either way, willing or not, her family might throw her out, she’d have no means to support herself…”

“Or maybe there were already too many mouths to feed at home, so in order to save the lives of others who were already starving…” Ross said grimly. “At least now women do have choices. Even though up until recently most didn’t…”

“And not just choices about becoming a parent but also how to live one’s life, who to marry, who to love…But Ross, still today there are so many who don’t,” Demelza added.

“You think we have choices about who we love?” he asked with a curious smile.

“To an extent, yes. Certainly we choose to be happy or not with what we have. Sometimes it’s about taking a look at what you overlooked or had taken for granted because you were longing for something else you couldn't have. I mean, I’m never going to marry Colin Firth, so if that’s what I’m looking for in a partner, I’ll always be sorely disappointed.”

“Colin Firth?” he chuckled. “I suppose I can see the appeal.”

“Oh, I could see you two getting on well, Ross,” she laughed.

But Demelza wondered for a moment, as she had before, if her own mother had actually chosen to marry and to become a mum, or if she felt she had no choice. Demelza always suspected, but could never confirm, that her own conception had not exactly been planned. Once a drunken uncle said something ugly and mean about her birth that had stuck with her until she was grown and understood what all the rude words meant. She’d never spoken of it to anyone, not to her brothers nor to Dwight, and certainly never to her father. But since she didn’t know the exact date her parents were married, she couldn’t know for sure how she, as their first born, played into the story of their union. Of course their marriage was matter of public record so it was something that could be looked up, but she had never gone that far. And since her father was now gone, she’d never know why her parents married. Had there ever been love?

How might things have been different had her mum lived? Maybe she would have eventually left Tom Carne and taken her along too. Or would she have left them all behind? If she had stayed and endured the misery, would it have changed her? Broken her? Maybe it was better this way, to die young and escape with her spirit still in one piece.

Demelza’s heart went out to all the folks—the women and the men—of Cornwall past who stood on these cliffs in their despair. How many broken hearts and broken wills walked this same path?

“Demelza?” Ross spoke gently. “You looked far away for a moment.” The way grew steep and this
time he took her hand to help guide her down. She gave it willingly.

“Oh, no I’m here,” she tried to answer brightly.

Why did she always seem to think about her childhood, her family, her mother when she was with Ross? What was it about him? She pushed away an uncomfortable thought that flickered through her mind.

“Brilliant, you’re here! Mum’s been waiting,” a young boy called out to them, then disappeared back down the slope towards shore.

“That’s Jinny’s son. Benjy Ross.”

“Benjy Ross? Is he named after you?”

“Yes, I suppose,” Ross answered and Demelza thought he blushed a bit. “He helps his mum with her outdoor adventure business when he’s not at school. He’s a fearless little fellow-- I suppose he gets that from Jinny. She’s been rather resilient and worked hard to make a life for herself after her husband died. Not a bad role model for the boy.”

“No, not bad at all,” Demelza smiled. “When I was younger I used to pretend my mum hadn’t really died but had run away to a foreign land instead. Then I’d think when I grew up I could travel the world and we’d find each other again and just keep going together.”

“Is that why you like to travel so much?” he asked.

“Did I proclaim that or is that just an observation?” she laughed. “I suppose it’s how I first got thinking about traveling anyway. But when I was a girl no one I knew ever went anywhere or even talked about it. Not until a teacher suggested I could go to university away from Cornwall. And that was lucky because at Sheffield I met Dwight. He was the one who encouraged me to go further still.”

Yes, I am lucky to have met him and am even luckier to still have him in my life. Where would I be without Dwight? she wondered.

Chapter End Notes

If you want to read a real dissertation on mourning doves, please see https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/\&httpsredir=1\&article=14649\&context=rtd

I'm tremendously grateful for this information from Howe Elliot McClure's 1941 publication and adapted sections for Carrington's fictitious work.
Dwight put his overnight case down next to the single bed that was wedged between the wall and a tall mirrored sliding wardrobe. He was familiar with this guestroom in Caroline Peneven’s smart townhouse in Truro; he’d stayed here several times since the night he found his tire had been punctured.

This afternoon he found the bed was covered with half a dozen shoe boxes. He didn’t think she’d mind if he moved them closer to the others that were stacked nearly floor to ceiling on the opposite side of the room. Louboutin, Miu Miu, Jimmy Choo. These names meant nothing to Dwight but he sensed, rightly, that each box was rather precious and must be treated with care. He gingerly set them aside and looked around.

The room itself wasn’t small, just so overwhelmed with clothes and accessories that the space felt confusing and cramped. Besides the mountain of shoes, two large clothing racks--full of course--and what looked like an industrial garment steamer sat in the middle of the floor. Were these Caroline’s own possessions or were they being stored here as tools of her trade as a stylist? Dwight didn’t know but suspected she didn’t entertain overnight guests very often. At least not ones who slept in this room alone.

The drive from Truro to the engine house wasn’t a long one but at night, with unlit winding roads, it could feel slow going. It was undoubtedly easier to have a place to land especially since Dwight’s recent meetings seemed to be oddly timed. Today for example, he saw Tonkin in the early afternoon but wouldn’t see Pearce again until after dinner.

Of course he was grateful for Caroline’s continued hospitality and even in the midst of her fashionable clutter, couldn’t find fault with the accommodations. But there was something about the engine house by the sea. Had he merely come to think of it as his base of operations or was it--with its warmth, its comforts, its other inhabitant--becoming his home? Regardless of the reason why, he certainly missed it when he was away.

Dwight sat down on the bed, then worried he might have tracked dirt on Caroline’s pristine beige carpet, and removed his boots.

Later today at some point, she would be joining him but the other times he’d had the place to himself. It felt odd to be alone in a stranger’s house--well, he supposed Caroline was no longer a stranger but he didn’t really know her, not as well as Demelza seemed to. He knew he should let his guard down and allow her in as a friend. She’d certainly been generous to them both and more than eager to come to their aid.

So why did this disturb him?

He supposed this proud streak was something that had been instilled in him when he was growing up. A staid determination to be self reliant and to remain steady even in the face of distress--these were certainly Enys family traits. Dwight had always found it difficult to accept help from others and still did.

There was one exception.

It had been Demelza who had helped Dwight challenge his stubborn mindset and accept help from someone else. Of course this was slightly ironic since Demelza herself was fiercely independent and loathe to ever ask for assistance. But over the years the two had forged a sort of secret pact that no
Dwight first opened up to her years before, at a time when he’d found himself helpless and unusually desperate.

He had just gone on a late winter ski holiday to the Zugspitze with some work colleagues and was feeling rather pleased with himself for having sought such an uncharacteristically daring adventure. And despite his dislike for heights and speed, he’d braved the slopes and managed to return to Bristol unscathed. Yet a few weeks later—in his own kitchen—he had met unexpected peril when he slipped on a greasy chip that escaped from a takeaway container. It had been an inelegant fall and in an effort to temper it, Dwight tried an old football move and slid his leg under himself at the worst angle. He succeeded in breaking his leg but not the fall.

When Dwight returned from hospital, his leg in a plaster cast, he found he could barely get by on his own. Hobbling about his flat on crutches, everything he tried to accomplish took twice—maybe three times—as long. He soon was exhausted and dispirited.

There was a flatmate, a doctor in fact, but he couldn't really be called on to offer the kind of attentive care Dwight needed. Daniel was a cardiologist and worked odd hours—night shifts lately—and even when he was home, he wasn’t really a friend to Dwight as much as just another person who happened to live in the same space.

Dwight had been given instructions that he mustn't return to work for a full week to ensure proper healing. At home, supposedly resting, he tried to be productive, to read or to write, but his mind kept returning to his own wretched state and the foolish circumstances that had caused the injury in the first place. After some internal battles he gave in, and found it easiest to park himself on the sofa watching miserable television for hours on end. The diversion only worked for so long.

Finally he picked up his mobile and texted Demelza in Cambridge.

Knock knock

Who's there? She answered almost instantly.

To He texted back, pleased she was able to connect.

To who?

Don’t you mean ‘To whom’? He laughed out loud at his own joke.

Seconds later his mobile rang

“Oh Dwight! Is it that bad?” Demelza cried.

“No, the pain has mostly subsided. And that’s even without any more pain medication.”

“No, I was referring to your spirits. I mean, Dwight, you’re resorting to knock knock jokes.”

“I’m also watching a lot of rubbish television. Someone please tell me what is the appeal of Gordon Ramsay and his aggressive rants?”

“No, Dwight, you wouldn’t understand the entertainment value of dramatic rage, would you?” she replied.

“But seriously, my feelings are hurt—I thought you of all people appreciated my sense of humour.”
“Of course I do,” she said gently. “Tell me that one about the man at the chippy who orders a birthday cake for his pet cod….”

“That’s the punchline, Demelza...you’ve already ruined it. Okay, let’s play ‘Would You Rather’ instead. I have one-- would you rather fracture your own leg and have Gordon Ramsay take care of you or would you rather break Gordon Ramsay’s leg but then have to wait on him?”

She ignored this.

“I have one, Dwight,” she offered instead. “Would you rather I come tomorrow--I can move some things around--or can you possibly wait until Saturday?”

“No, Demelza. Don’t you dare come to Bristol. I know you’re busy and I’m not completely helpless,” he said sternly into his mobile.

“Maybe not completely but somewhat. And more urgently you are down in the dumps. So you can scrap your inner iron and accept my help. Expect me Saturday,” she said undeterred.

She came Friday. And the timing was perfect as Dwight’s frustration at accomplishing the simplest tasks was reaching new heights.

The only toilet in the flat was upstairs and he found going up the narrow staircase--to scoot up on his backside while dragging his crutches alongside him-- was a continual challenge. This time he’d almost made it to the top when one crutch slipped from his grip and slid all the way to the bottom step. He had to drag himself back down and start all over. It took more than a few minutes to finally make it upstairs to accomplish his urgent mission; he thought next time he might just resort to pissing in the weedy garden beyond the kitchen.

Dwight was on his way back down when he heard someone ring the bell but only once. He didn’t rush--and couldn’t really if he had tried-- as he assumed whoever it was had given up and gone on. He didn’t expect to see Demelza standing on his door stoop waiting patiently, her face betraying both warmth and worry.

He staggered to maintain his balance while she threw her arms around him.

“Oh, Dwight, you poor thing!” She took his elbow gently and helped him hop back into the long hallway.

“Is this all you packed?” Dwight asked when he saw she had just the one rucksack. Demelza was a masterful traveler whereas he still, after all these years, consistently overpacked no matter where he was going.

“Well, I’m not staying a month you know,” she winked and gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Never better,” he replied with a wry smile.

“You’ve always been a rubbish liar, Dwight,” she laughed.

He reached to take her bag from her but then, as he balanced awkwardly on his crutch, saw that was not really practical. She smiled and tossed the rucksack into the corner by the door on top of a pile of trainers and umbrellas, then walked on towards the sitting room knowing he’d follow.

“New car?” he asked.
“No, I wasn't sure mine would make the drive from Cambridge so I borrowed this one from a mate.” She flopped on the sofa and stretched her long legs out in front of her. Then realising with embarrassment that she shouldn’t flaunt her able-bodied agility in front of him, she tucked them discreetly to the side and patted a spot next to her for Dwight to sit.

“From your beau?” he asked and shuffled slowly over to join her.

“My ‘beau’? You mean, Ted? No, he only rides a bicycle. Carbon footprint you know,” she scoffed. “And he’s now officially my ex. Although he hasn't really let that sink in fully and still has his laundry hanging up all over my flat. I thought some time apart might help him.”

“Sorry to hear of your trouble in paradise,” Dwight said.

“Oh, it was never paradise,” she replied with a sigh.

“I thought you liked him?” he asked. He was so pleased to see her again and hadn’t realised what an instant balm her very presence would be. He watched her as she leaned her head back and comfortably launched into conversation with him picking up exactly where they had left off last, as though they hadn’t had any months apart.

“I did and I still do but he’s... good god...he’s too similar to me!” she cried in exasperation. “Really! He also studies birds, we are the same age--in fact he’s less than one month younger than me so we had a joint birthday party last year-- he’s even a ginger! He agrees with everything I say. He’s well...dreadfully boring.”

“That doesn’t sound boring to me,” Dwight smiled.

“But I don’t want to date myself--I want a challenge. I’d even prefer that Hugh I used to see back in Liverpool. We had nothing in common but it was interesting to rail against his values, or at least it was entertaining.”

“I thought you were the one who told me love shouldn’t be a struggle,” he teased.

“Yes, of course, it can be a warm and fuzzy blanket but even still, love should change you in some way, for the better I mean. Shouldn’t one be a better person as a result and so should one’s partner, no? Anyway, I’m not only done with Ted, I’m thinking of giving up birds... for eels.”

“Eels?” He chuckled then saw she was serious. “Demelza, are you insane?!”

“No, I have an opportunity to travel to the States for a study of eel counts. It’s an international project linking the glass eels found in American estuaries with…”

“You do see what this is, right? Just a chance to escape? From Ted…”

“Am I that transparent?” she asked with a sigh.

“As see-through as a glass eel. Besides you hate wearing waders,” he replied.

“I could learn to live with that… and analyzing the migration patterns of eels is not terribly far removed from studying birds…” she continued.

“As your official, albeit self-appointed, lifelong mentor, I won’t hear of it. Give yourself another few weeks to shake this bloke before you give up everything you’ve been passionate about your whole life,” he said sternly. “And have some sympathy for the man--you just broke his heart. It must be hard to get over you.”
“Bollacks.”

“Seriously. You have no idea how amazing you are, Demelza. The poor fellow must be crushed,” he said.

“He’ll live.” She brushed away the idea then turned to him, her face suddenly bearing a serious expression. “Dwight, tell me, do you think it’s worse to be left behind or to do the leaving?”

“I think,” he said, after a moment’s consideration, “I might genuinely prefer someone leaving me….I mean yes, the pain, the betrayal…but I can’t handle guilt well at all. I hate to hurt people.”

“Me too. Yet I seem to be the one doing all the leaving lately,” she sighed. “Dwight, will we ever find love?”

“Actually, I’m rather confident we will, Demelza. Life has a way of working itself out and people who should be together usually find each other,” he said brightly. Whatever gloom had possessed him the last few days had almost fully evaporated.

“Usually? That’s not a very convincing success rate!” she laughed. “What if they don’t find each other? And don’t even talk to me about ‘meant to be’ or ‘soul mates’ because you know I think that’s rubbish.”

“Someday you’ll find someone who is the missing ‘other half’ of your matched set and you’ll have to admit I told you so,” he said confidently.

“That’s quite a bit of Plato from an ecologist, Dr. Enys! Enough of that--we must now attend to the more urgent business at hand. Let's get you settled and fed. You look like you need a hot cup of tea and a proper meal.”

“I don’t want tea but there are a few bottles of beer in the fridge. And you don’t have to cook for me, Demelza. You being here is already more than I could have…” he began.

“Oh I’m not planning on cooking--I was thinking take away. But only if you promise not to slide-tackle your dinner this time,” she said.

“--

“I’m not sure what sort of accommodations I can offer you, Demelza. I suppose I should have sorted this before you got here. The sofa makes the most sense but Daniel, my flatmate, might prove an obstacle there,” Dwight explained as Demelza cleared up after their Thai dinner.

“Dr. Love?” she smirked.

Dwight had at times referred to Daniel as Dr. Love since he was both a heart specialist and he made it a habit of bringing women home at regular intervals.

In comparison to his flatmate’s vigorous love life, Dwight felt himself a bit of a monk these days. And that certainly wasn’t going to change until he had the plaster cast removed.

“Yes, he works odd shifts and so recently comes home quite late. If he returns alone--and that’s an if-he stays up all night watching telly and blasting music down here. I’m afraid you wouldn’t get much rest if you took over the sofa,” he explained. “We can share my bed but I’m worried I’ll kick you with my cast. There's always the bath, I suppose,” he laughed nervously.

“I never understood why someone would choose the bathtub over just the floor?” she replied. “No
worries, we can make your bed work, Dwight. We’ve done it before.”

---

But that night they did find Dwight’s bed unusually tight. He was not able to move about without tremendous effort so wherever he settled, he’d need to stay like that until morning. He laid flat on his back and as much as he tried to keep to only one side of the bed, he was most comfortable if he positioned his broken leg at a slight angle. Demelza laughed and pressed herself close to the wall to give him space.

“Demelza, I’m sorry. Is this dreadful?” he asked.

“No, Dwight, I’ll be fine. I’m just nervous that if I shift at all, I might bump into you,” she tried to reassure him.

“Please,” he said. “Don’t give me another thought. I’m heartier than I look.”

But a few minutes later she did accidentally brush against his leg and while he grit his teeth and declared he was fine, it was obvious to all that she’d caused him discomfort.

“Oh Dwight!” she whispered and rubbed his arm gently hoping to soothe his agitation. “I promise I’ll try harder.”

---

Dwight woke after several hours to find he was alone; Demelza must have given up and left him the bed. Coming through the wall he heard the muffled sounds of Demelza talking on her mobile. He couldn’t hear the words just the tone and the cadence of her speech. First she was trying to placate someone, then she grew impatient, almost curt, before she rang off.

*That’s Ted on the line. She’s told him where she is and he’s not happy.*

Restlessly he turned his head on his pillow, desperately wishing he could swing himself over on his belly, his favourite sleeping position. Now he heard Demelza’s soft steps on the stairs followed by more hushed tones coming up from the living room.

*Now she must be talking to Daniel, he thought. The television that Daniel kept humming in the background most nights was abruptly silenced. Dwight recognised Daniel’s smooth baritone prattling away followed by Demelza’s soft laughter.*

Knowing that she was at least somewhat entertained helped allay some of Dwight's anxieties and eventually he found himself able to drift back into sleep.

It was not until the early morning hours that Demelza returned and stealthily squeezed her long body back against the wall.

---

Even with Demelza’s comings and goings in the night, Dwight found he slept better having her around. It wasn’t just her gentle, soothing presence in the night but her cheering companionship during the day that helped his mood overall and allowed him to relax. Demelza did her best to make him laugh--often at himself-- and he quickly ceased feeling sorry for himself.

And she was a tremendous help around the flat. Despite his objections, she insisted on tidying up.
“You forget all my years living with slovenly brothers. This in comparison, my dear Dwight, is nothing,” she explained.

“Demelza, I can’t in good conscience let you mop the kitchen floor!” Dwight moaned.

“Well it’s sticky and rather disgusting from the curry I spilled last night so I’m really doing it for myself,” she countered.

“That wasn’t you! Whatever that spot is has been there for days, it’s probably from before my fall.” Dwight protested. “Or from Daniel.”

“Oh shush! I’m practically finished so your pleas have fallen on deaf ears. And when I’m done here, you are next.”

“Me?”

Sure enough, he was soon led upstairs for a sponge bath. Obeying her directions, Dwight sat on the toilet and stripped off his shirt. She filled the basin with warm soapy water then passed him the wet flannel. He managed to get his torso himself but suspected things were about to become more complicated.

“Now let’s stand up and get those trousers off you,” she said matter of factly. He’d been wearing wide legged cotton track pants that slipped easily over his cast.

“Okay you’ll have to manage your nether bits on your own. I’ll be back shortly to help you dry off,” she winked and left the room.

He stood in his boxers balanced on his one leg, clutching the basin for support. This endeavour wasn’t going to be easy and he quickly realised standing wasn’t an option. He’d need to sit again but even then he wasn’t sure he’d be able to reach his lower legs or feet. And certainly not his bum.

A few days ago he would have found this depressing, today he found it humorous.

“Melz!” he called out.

“What is it?” She came back in a flash, concerned that something was terribly wrong.

“Umm...for this next... I think I still need you,” he smiled sheepishly.

“Oh, c’mon then,” she laughed and took the flannel from him.

Crouching, she started low and first washed the uninjured leg. The warm water and her long, firm strokes felt good on his knotted calf and thigh muscles. He hadn’t realised how tense he had been. Then she gingerly attended to the exposed toes and the flesh above the plaster cast. She’d learned over the past few days what touches were gentle, what tickled, and what caused him to wince.

“Alright?” She looked up at him.

“Mmm yes, thank you.”

“Look Dwight” she began. “Now I’m going to pull down your boxers and you lean on me. Then you get your own backside and your crotch. Can you do that?” she asked earnestly.

“Yes…”

He felt her slim fingers slip under the elastic waistband and begin to roll his underpants down to his
knees. Averting her eyes from his crotch, she looked up at him and smiled while he took the flannel and began to wash himself.

For days he had been in close proximity with her, sharing a bed, allowing her to help him with almost-- but not quite-- humiliating tasks and had felt it was all just part of their special friendship. But today in this moment, naked and exposed, with her on her knees in front of him, he suddenly flashed to other times they’d shared over the years.

Times when she’d stroked his bare legs with purpose, when she’d hastily removed his pants with a look of hunger, when she’d crouched at his feet, when she’d taken him in her mouth. Times when he responded by weaving his fingers in her hair and pulling her towards him. The memories of those past pleasures were overpowering.

He felt himself stir and started to panic.

*I can’t...with her...not now...*

He was relieved when she gently closed her eyes and turned her face away entirely.

*She sees this is awkward for me,* he thought, *maybe it’s awkward for her too.*

He desperately began to think of cricket statistics and hoped that he could calm, or at least stall, the erection that was beginning.

He rapidly finished his washing and bent to yank up his pants, almost toppling over on to her.

She caught him and met his gaze with a look that instantly put him at ease. Her brilliant blue eyes--so warm and so knowing--told him the crisis was over.

She understood his vulnerability and of course-- of course--she’d never play with him or take advantage of him in such a state. Whenever they had come together in the past they did so because they both chose it, when they were both whole and free, when it would serve them both. This was not one of those times.

He knew he needn't be embarrassed. His love and appreciation for her--for his friend Demelza--was overwhelming and he felt himself buckling at the knees. She wrapped a towel around him then sat him down on the toilet.

“There, Dwight. We’re all done,” she said brightly, clearly trying to ease the tension in the room. “We can wash your hair in the kitchen sink tomorrow but I’d say the rest is all properly clean for now.”

“Thank you,” he whispered and looked up at her with a soft smile.

---

After only two days Dwight was feeling rested and much more assured getting around the flat. It was odd, as though knowing Demelza was there to back him up, he was more willing to try things on his own. His hobbles grew more adept and more efficient. But with this increased mobility, he was also starting to feel cooped up. Dwight felt conflicted on this score; he was looking forward to getting back to his regular routine but that would mean Demelza would leave; he knew she couldn’t stay indefinitely.

Monday morning Dwight automatically woke at seven AM as he usually did on weekdays, then after several confused seconds, recalled he still wouldn’t be going to work. Demelza wasn’t in the room.
but that didn't seem strange to him. Over the past few nights she came and went from the bed but she had learned to do so carefully without disturbing his rest.

Dwight recognised the sound of her soft footsteps outside his bedroom door; they weren't coming from the toilet but from further down the hall. Then he heard them and another less graceful pair of feet on the stairs. A giggle rang up the stairwell then the front door closed. About ten minutes later Demelza appeared at Dwight’s bedroom door with a steaming cup of coffee for him.

“Good morning, sleepyhead. Just the way you like it,” she said cheerfully.

“There was milk?” he questioned.

“Yes, Daniel brought some home last night--this morning--whenever that was.”

Dwight took a sip and knew from its warm perfection that she had been the one to brew it. Even though he insisted on buying expensive whole beans from a specialty roaster, Daniel’s coffees were always too weak and ultimately unsatisfying.

As Dwight felt himself growing more fully awake, a question suddenly occurred to him.

“Demelza, where did you sleep last night?” he asked.

Gingerly she sat down next to him on the side of the bed and bit her lip in hesitation.

“Well this a bit embarrassing or awkward maybe. I don’t want you to think I’m a hussy …”

“Demelza, have you time traveled back to 1956 again?” he asked laughing. “Hussy? Don’t you mean slag …”

She did not seem to hear his joke and instead twisted the duvet nervously without speaking.

“Demelza?” he asked, now with growing concern.

“I slept in Daniel’s room...with him.”

“You slept with Daniel?” He let out a loud chuckle and almost spilled his coffee as he struggled to sit up fully in the bed. “Oh that’s brilliant!”

“I don’t want you to think I’m taking advantage of your hospitality by sleeping with your flatmate…”

“My hospitality? You’ve driven down here to take care of me, you did the washing up, you even mopped my floor! Demelza, you’re the hospitable one. And if Daniel can offer you a bed then that’s more than I can do. So tell me...how was it?”

“What?! Dwight! If you weren’t already injured I’d throw a pillow at you.”

“Listen, I can hear him through the walls sometimes so I know he thinks himself quite the Casanova,” he said.

“He does have a sort of... arrogance in bed,” she conceded. “It’s more than just confidence, he’s so…”

“Cocksure?” he offered.

Now it was her turn to spit out her coffee as his joke caught her unaware. She tried wiping up the
dribble on the sheets with her hand but she was still shaking with laughter.

“I think it’s the doctor thing. The arrogance, I mean,” Dwight added.

“Oh yes, Dr. Enys?” She laughed then grew serious again. “But tell me, do you think I’m wanton? I don’t usually go in for casual sex with strangers, you know.”

“I know-- other than this incident, you’ve always been the very definition of serial monogamist,” he said, trying to reassure her.

*Even when you sleep with me, you only do so when you’re not with someone else,* he thought then immediately pushed the idea aside. She was not her to be his lover but his friend.

“And he’s not a total stranger,” he added.

“I think I may have done it to show Ted I’m really done with him.”

“You’re going to tell Ted?” he asked

“I have to, don’t I?” she asked earnestly.

“No, you don’t! You are pathetically honest, Demelza, but sometimes it might be better for all parties if you weren’t so transparent. You needn’t say anything to him at all. I mean I’m certainly not going to, so it can be a secret that stays here. But tell us, when will you see Daniel next?”

“Oh we’re not going to again--see each other I mean. We were clear about that, speaking of honest. He’s got work and I’ll be leaving on Wednesday. But now for the next few nights, when he’s not here, I can use his bed and I needn’t bother you.”

“You did this for me?” he laughed. “So generous and self-sacrificing as always.”

“If you must know Dwight, it wasn’t bad and really sorta fun. And...I have no regrets.”

Throughout the day Dwight mused about this development; he wasn’t concerned that it would be uncomfortable with Daniel. Daniel still had no idea Demelza and Dwight had ever slept together and Dwight’s lips would remain sealed on that score.

And Dwight was not surprised that he felt no jealousy. They’d never laid out the rules of their relationship but just trusted they’d never hurt each other. This time it didn’t hurt or even sting that she had chosen someone else. Dwight had already concluded he wasn't really in any state to be an attentive lover.

Demelza hadn’t come to see him because his body was lonely, just his soul. She had been more than generous in giving her time and her bright energy to heal him.

*What did I ever do to deserve such a friend?* he wondered.

--

Tuesday afternoon Demelza suddenly seemed preoccupied. Dwight had been talking to her about a shift in departmental politics with the arrival of a new professor from London but Dwight soon became aware she wasn’t really listening. She nodded a few times and said “mmmmmm” or “how interesting” at the right intervals but clearly her mind was elsewhere. Repeatedly she glanced at her watch until finally her mobile buzzed with a text. Her face brightened at once.

*So she is distracted by Daniel,* he thought and felt a barb of disappointment he hadn’t expected.
“Listen, Dwight. Daniel is on break from his shift and has popped by quickly. He’s outside…” she began with a big grin on her face.

“By all means, go to him,” he said looking into his nearly empty tea cup.

“Oh stop feeling sorry for yourself, you big silly. He’s only helping me with a surprise for you.”

“A what?” He stood up and instinctively moved towards the window.

“Don’t peek, Dwight, you’ll ruin it. I told you this is meant to be a surprise.”

By the time Dwight hobbled to the window to peer out all he saw was Demelza closing the boot of her borrowed red Polo. Daniel bent to kiss her lips but she moved ever so slightly so the kiss landed on her cheek. Daniel acted as though of course that had been his plan all along. But his hand did graze her hip then settled on her bum. She gave it a quick pat then turned to go back inside. She caught Dwight’s attention as he watched from the window and gave an eye roll to show her impatience with Dr. Love’s insistence.

Dwight laughed.

Whatever Daniel had just done, he did for Demelza, certainly not for Dwight. Demelza knew this, but wasn’t going to let Daniel get any ideas about ‘repayment’.

“Okay Dwight. Let’s get ready to go!” she said brightly as she re entered the flat.

She wasn’t letting on what her secret plan was, so he resigned himself to just go along with it and allowed her to bundle him up in a warm waterproof jacket and a woolly scarf. She then helped him to her car parked out front.

“I’m surprised you haven’t blindfolded me,” he said.

“I wish I had thought of that, Dwight. It’s not too late, I can pull over… “ she smiled.

She seemed to know where she was going as she drove them north on the M32.

“You’re taking me to Ikea?” he teased

“Not very likely. Guess again,” she replied. Ten minutes later she pulled into the nearly empty car park at Oldbury Court Estate. “Well, here we are!” she said cheerfully.

“Demelza…,” he began gently. How was he going to tell her that he really wasn’t up for a long, slow hobble along the river path? He hoped she would be content with just a brief shuffle and maybe an extended stretch sitting in a bench by a scenic view.

But she ignored him and jumped out to open the boot.

“Tah dah,” she chirped and brought a borrowed wheelchair round to the passenger seat. “See Dr. Love is good for something. Apparently he had to smuggle it out,” she winked.

These were still the earliest days of spring and while the outdoor temperature hadn’t shifted much, a different sort of sunlight had made its first appearance bringing with it the promise of a new season. Elsewhere in the city, tulips were on display at florists in great bunches, shops flaunted spring clothing and housewares in cheering colours, even the most modest gardens began to be dug up and worked in earnest. Here in the park, even though it was relatively empty that afternoon, those who ventured out nodded knowing smiles while they passed one another, as though they were celebrating
a secret rite.

It was the perfect day to be out of doors and Dwight turned his face greedily upward towards the weak sun and cool breeze. Beyond the parkland, they followed the path down to the River Frome, towards Snuff Mills.

It wasn’t long before Demelza slowed her pace as she pushed Dwight’s chair along the walkway to take in the sights around them. Right away they saw a pair of stock doves, their iridescent neck patches catching the afternoon sun. Soon after a lone kingfisher and several grey herons made an appearance. The herons were unmistakably tall, and appeared even more so standing with their necks stretched out, looking for food.

“Now I know why you chose this place!” Dwight laughed. ”You’re here for the birds--I’m just an afterthought!”

“No, I admit I did my research to find a good place to take you for your big outing but I chose here because the paved paths are smooth and wheelchair accessible,” she said earnestly. “And I’d have come even if there were only a few odd gulls,” she added to referring to a white headed juvenile swimming towards them eagerly.

“I love when gulls pretend to be ducks to get fed. Look at that one swimming around so confidently like ‘What? Of course I belong here’,“ he laughed.

“You get the sense he almost believes it himself,” she said.

A sudden wind picked up and whipped around them as they gazed at the river. Without asking if he was cold, she bent to wrap the woolly scarf tighter around his neck.

“You’ll make a good mum some day,” he laughed.

“Why do say that? Because after this week you now know I can wipe a bum and do the mopping up?” she asked with a raised brow. “No, I’m completely unsuited for parenthood. My head is perpetually up my arse and I’m entirely too self absorbed.”

“Yes, those are indeed the very words I’d think of when describing you,” he said sarcastically. “Demelza, I’m not going to play that game. You claim to flit about aimlessly but you are caring and dedicated. But you actually care how others feel--how they are. You’ve always been more mature than your years.”

“Nice to remind me of ‘my years’ a week before another birthday,” she said.

“Oh hell! Why didn't you remind me you had a birthday coming up? We should have celebrated while you were here. We still can.”

“Dwight, this feels like a celebration enough. Just to spend a little time with you,” she said and looked at him with her soft earnest smile.

“So, what are your hopes and dreams for your twenty-seventh year?” he asked.

“To fully absorb myself in the role of trichomoniasis in the decline of the East Anglian turtledove--and make some serious progress on this fucking Ph.D.”

“No glass eels then?” he teased.

“No eels. You’re right, I’m too stubborn to give up that easily,” she laughed. “Maybe I’ll also give
love another try. Not with Ted--that's over. But if ‘life has a way of working itself out ’ or whatever it is you claimed, then who am I to argue with my mentor? You’ve never steered me wrong before, Dr. Enys. I suppose I just need to be patient.”

“Thank you, Demelza,” he said. “Thank you for taking me out today, for coming to stay with me, for everything,” he said looking up at her as she stared at the water.

“Oh, Dwight! You do know I’m happy to. After all you’ve done for me over the years?” she said turning and taking his hand in hers. “And thank you-- for accepting my help. I feel tremendously honoured knowing how infrequently that happens! But I’m also confident you’ll be back to your old self soon. You’ve made so much progress in just a few days. When can you return to work?”

“There’s a staff meeting Thursday that I’m planning on attending. I’ll take a taxi and allow extra time to get there. And there’s a working lift in the administration building.”

“Well you be sure to heal up, Dwight. I know it’s field work you’re most eager to get back to. Meetings and stuffy classrooms aren’t really your thing. You need to be knee deep in some murky swamp. I recognise the restlessness in your eyes!” she said. She kissed him--on the lips-- but there was something entirely friendly and not at all sexual about it.

Again Dwight marveled at how his feelings and desire for this woman could fluctuate so much. Right now they were equals in their friendship, wanting the best for each other on whatever paths laid ahead.

He did hope she found her missing half someday and that whoever the bloke was, he’d be a match for her in character and strength. She deserved the best.

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“Dr. Enys?” Caroline’s voice called out in the silent townhouse.

Dwight had been trying to review his notes in preparation for his meeting with Tonkin but had gotten lost in his thoughts instead. He quickly left the guest room to meet Caroline at the door.

“Oh good, you’re here,” she smiled and took off her coat.

“Hello Caroline,” he said and reached for her hand but she instead handed him the coat. He laughed lightly at this friendly gesture and hung it on the hook by the door that he assumed was meant for it.

“I was hoping my presence today wouldn’t scare you away,” she said and moved towards the elegant dove-grey sofa in the sitting room, beckoning him to follow her.

Dwight smiled back at her and found--to his surprise-- he was not disappointed to see her.
It was mid afternoon when Ross and Demelza approached the small dock at Sawle Cove. A petite but strong looking figure in a wetsuit was loading gear onto a small fishing boat fitted with an outboard motor. She turned, shading her eyes from the sun, and waved to them.

“Aye, Mister Poldark!” she called. “Just in time--Benjy Ross was getting antsy! Weren’t you, my lover?” She smiled and ruffled her son’s hair.

“Afternoon, Jinny. Thanks again for taking us out. This is my….” Ross wasn’t sure why he paused; he caught himself and hastily continued his introduction. “This is my friend, Dr. Demelza Carne.”

“Nice to meet you Dr. Carne. Mister Poldark tells me you study birds. This is the the right place in Cornwall for that,” Jinny said.

“Please call me Demelza. Yes, I’ve heard a lot about the ones that nest along the cliffs here,” Demelza replied. She glanced over at Ross who suddenly seemed to have grown uncomfortable.

Poldark mood #437 in less than a half hour, she thought to herself and shook her head. Was it something she said?

“What’s your plan then, Mister Poldark? I saw someone’s already put an anchor at the top of the ladder. Are you going to do some top rope climbing?” Jinny asked and handed several paddles to Benjy Ross. The boy was now dancing up and down inside the boat like he needed to wee.

“Mum!” he said impatiently, stacking the paddles in a pile. “Come on, let’s go. You can talk on the ride over.”

“No, I thought we’d do lead rope going up--it’s not a long climb and shouldn’t be difficult,” Ross answered. He felt the boy’s eagerness to get the trip underway and put his hand on Demelza’s shoulder to guide her towards the edge of the boat.

Ross caught a sly smile form on Jinny’s face before she turned her attention back to her own preparations.

Jinny thinks we’re together-- a couple. I should say something, Ross thought, yet he didn’t take his hand off Demelza’s shoulder. Instead he moved still closer to her, as though she were in danger of walking off the pier entirely.

“If you’re wanting to abseil down when you’re done going up, I can come back and be your anchor at the bottom. If you’re not in a hurry, that is. But you’re also both welcome to come SUP,” Jinny offered.

“SUP?” Ross asked Demelza in a low voice.

“Standing Up Paddleboard,” Demelza whispered back.

“Of course,” he laughed. “No thank you, Jinny. I left my car near the top so when we’re done we won’t have to come back down. We’re really here more for the cave than the climb,” he explained.
Ross was suddenly struck with a fear that Demelza might be disappointed following all his build up. She’d traveled around the world after all, perhaps she’d find this opening in the cliff nothing more than an underwhelming damp hole. And he could offer no guarantees there would even be any nests to speak of. Why had he been so eager to arrange this excursion?

Ross gripped her arm tightly as they approached the side of the boat.

Alarmed, Demelza turned to read him; he seemed miles away when only seconds before he was laughing.

Make that mood #438, she thought.

“You’re in luck--weather’s nice and the tide is low, so you’ll be able to set up in the sand at the foot of the ladder. You okay, Demelza?” Jinny asked as Demelza stepped cautiously onto the boat.

“Oh yes, I’m fine.” Demelza tried her best to remain cheerful. She was not overly fond of boats--that was Dwight’s thing. He’d once spent almost three months straight on a boat in the North Sea doing research and loved every minute of it, while Demelza got sick just hearing his stories. She was grateful the sea was calm today and that this would be a quick ride.

“I’ve the rest of your gear here, Mr. Poldark.” Jinny pointed to a pile already in the boat, and once she saw her guests were settled, got ready to take off.

The old motor sputtered its objections to her fiddling then abruptly stopped altogether. Jinny closed her eyes with a sigh then tried again. This time it started up and steadily chugged on, as if it had been willed into action.

“This motor has to see us through the summer. Maybe next year we can replace it but not before then. Maintaining and replacing equipment is such an expensive part of running a business,” she shouted. They’d all need to talk in loud voices now to be heard over the motor and the wind.

“Yes, we’ve certainly learned that at CEA,” Demelza replied, soberly thinking of their own dwindling finances.

Jinny nodded and Demelza got the sense Jinny Carter was the sort of person who could accurately read others without saying much herself. Maybe a person who had seen much in too few years. Demelza also thought they could be friends.

“Maybe someday, Demelza, you could teach Benjy Ross a little about the local birds?” Jinny suggested, almost as though she was reading Demelza’s mind about friendship. “He’s shown a real interest lately.”

“Oh, of course, I’d love to!” Demelza said. And she realised as she spoke that without questioning it, she was seeing a future for herself-- here in Cornwall.

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It was only a short ride along the coast to the natural harbour at the foot of Kellow’s Ladder. After disembarking, Ross and Demelza piled their ropes and harnesses on the soft sand and thanked Jinny once again. Then they said goodbye to Benjy Ross, who after only ten minutes seemed to consider Ross and Demelza the closest of friends. He enthusiastically waved to them from the boat as it sped off, and he continued to do so from quite a distance away.

“I almost forgot these. Put it on before you fasten your helmet,” Ross said, and handed her a headlamp. “We’ll need them once we’re in the cave. It’s rather dark in there even on the sunniest of
Demelza stepped into her harness, and this time, put her helmet on without any assistance from Ross.

“May I?” she asked tentatively as she saw Ross hesitating with a stopper knot.

“Thank you,” Ross muttered, half embarrassed. He thought about making a joke about how she really could trust his climbing skills but decided in the end to let it go. Instead he watched her nimble fingers form the knot and when she pulled the rope tight, he saw how much strength she had in her arms.

Ross had been correct when he said the route wasn’t terrifically taxing, even by novice climbing standards. The entire height of the cliff face was no more than sixty feet and it was easy to spot the opening about halfway up that was to be their first destination.

“I hope you won’t be disappointed, Demelza, to learn there are already bolts in the rock next to the rungs,” he admitted sheepishly. “It’s a lot like climbing at a gym.”

Demelza didn’t mind this at all and knew it would only make their ascent that much faster. They agreed Ross would go first, and once he was about halfway to the opening of the adit, she’d begin to follow.

This was the first time she was close enough to really check out the ladder rungs that gave the place its name. They hadn’t been noticeable from the boat and it was only when one stood right at the face of the rock that they could be seen at all.

She shuddered thinking of Ross as a boy, scrambling up and down these treacherous-- and at some places, broken-- rungs made of ancient timbers, without any safety precautions.

And he seemed just as comfortable now. Demelza watched as Ross began the climb and made it to the first bolt not ten feet up. His frame was strong but there was a grace and lightness in the way he moved, almost like a gymnast or a dancer. She marveled at how different this was from the first time she had met him, when he had barreled into her like an ox. She waited for him to ascend another five feet before she started up herself.

The small ledges and outcroppings they found along the rock face were still slippery from the previous days of rain and the rungs of the ladder felt almost greasy from years of damp and rot and encroaching moss.

Somehow Demelza hadn’t expected them to be wooden and wondered how long they’d been in place--a decade? Fifty years? It didn’t much matter; she knew better than to rely on them for any lasting support and looked to the rock for footholds instead.

“You alright?” Ross called down to her.

“Yes, I’m doing fine,” she began. Just then she slipped, and before she caught herself, she slammed her shoulder against a sharp edge.

“Demelza!” Ross shouted. He knew that with the slack in the rope she’d fall only a foot or two at the most, but still he froze in fear. He regretted going first and now helpless, wished he could reach her. But he also sensed she’d resent the attention.

“Fucking hell,” she grunted, more embarrassed than hurt. “I’m fine, Ross, really. Don’t distract me or worse, fall on me!” she laughed, trying to ease the tension.
Ross exhaled in relief and continued upwards. When he was just a few feet from the opening of the cave, he too lost his footing for just a moment, expecting to find a rung where there was none.

Demelza looked up to see this happen and felt herself flood with worry. But Ross righted himself quickly and moved on. He chuckled at his own carelessness and she found his laugh soothing.

*I’m getting soft,* Demelza thought. *This is a short climb but I’m acting like it’s Kilimanjaro with way too much drama in every misstep.*

She tried to shake off the tension she didn’t really understand, unaware that Ross was feeling the same way.

“Watch out for the missing rung,” Ross warned. “Can you see I’m almost at the opening? It’s about three feet to the left of the ladder. You can just take a big step or try finding a toehold in the rock. I’ll be waiting for you.”

Ross swung easily from the ladder, and at once the mouth of the cave swallowed him in darkness.

A few moments later Demelza reached the spot herself and hesitated. The step off the rung looked to be more challenging for her since her legs were not as long as Ross’s; she’d need to plan her next move carefully. She took a deep breath and gave it her best stretch, but when she found his hand reaching out for her, she relaxed and tumbled forward into the opening.

“Nice move,” he said admiringly, pulling her away from the edge and into the darkness.

After they switched on their headlamps and pulled more slack in the ropes, they untied their harnesses. This time Ross was glad to find he could undo his knot without her help.

He then led the way deeper into the cave.

“You can see by the remarkable colours of the rock here why this tunnel was explored for minerals years ago. See these veins of green and russet?” Ross pointed out but Demelza’s focus was elsewhere.

She had already taken off her helmet and her headlamp. Now that she had both hands free she preferred to hold the lamp like a torch so she could aim the light more precisely at whatever was in the back of the cave.

Ross listened to her excited breathing as she crept further into the shadow.

The cave was foul from years of stale water and rotting plant matter. The abandoned wet nests coated in bird droppings stank worse than an untended chicken coop after a heavy rain. Water dribbled from some unseen crack, each droplet echoing ominously in the otherwise silent space. The moss under their feet felt disturbingly mushy and slick. Most people—even the nature lovers and outdoor enthusiasts who let Verity’s cottages up and down the coast—would be repulsed by such an unpleasant setting. But to a miner and an ornithologist, it was simply rapturous.

“Of course, I should have expected a shag in here!” Demelza suddenly cried. “Right here, in that perfect nest.”

Ross, confused, turned his head quickly.

“You might have thought it was a cormorant but shags are smaller, with a more defined head profile,” she added without realising he had not, in fact, been thinking about birds at all in that moment. “And what a beauty! Not at all fazed that we’re here.”
“Shag? You mean the sea bird?” he smiled, charmed by her focus. He followed her suit and removed his own helmet, running his hands through his hair. The thick curls stood on end now and gave him a bit of a wild air.

But Demelza didn’t notice this. She was no longer interested in the depths of the tunnel and turned her attention to the nests she spotted along the walls closer to the cave entrance.

“Yes, shags are common cliff nesters. I shouldn’t at all be surprised to see them here. But maybe so far into a cave and not out on the cliff face is odd? I wonder if rats are a danger to them in this one?”

“Rats?” Ross asked. This surprised him. He had never encountered them in all his years exploring this cave and wasn’t eager to meet any now.

“Yeah, I think I can smell them…” she continued, taking another whiff of the stale air around them.

With her frame stooped just slightly under the low rock ceiling, she inched slowly towards the shag in its nest near the ledge. The bird watched her curiously as she approached but did not move.

“Ross!” she cried. “I think she’s ringed!”

“What does that mean?” Ross asked stepping closer to her, fearful that his clumsy moves might scare the bird off.

“That someone, somewhere has counted it, is tracking it. Ross! Your shags could be part of a bigger migration study!” She turned to him, beaming.

She had aimed her headlamp down at the floor of the cave so it didn’t shine in his face, but even as she stood in shadow Ross still caught the brilliant sparkle in her eyes.

Demelza had been so animated this afternoon and Ross began to suspect that it was the result of being in out in nature, close to the birds—in her element. He felt just a bit pleased to have given her the opportunity to get away from her laptop and the data analysis she had been undertaking at the engine house.

He found himself exhaling a soft sigh of relief that she was not, in fact, disappointed in this excursion as he had feared.

“I wouldn’t call them my shags, exactly. How could you know who has ringed it?” he asked her.

“Well, if I could get closer and actually see more of the markings on the ring…” she whispered.

“When we get back I can check the BTO website or put a message out on the listservs and contact the major bird centers in the UK. Someone will know–there are databases of course.”

“Of course. Too bad we didn’t bring a camera,” he lamented.

“It’s odd, I don’t see any other ringed birds here but there’s bound to be others. Seems unlikely she’d be the only one,” she continued.

The shag moved closer to the entrance of the tunnel and she carefully tiptoed after it. The bird turned and looked at her, her gaze fixed as if she were studying her too.

Ross stood still and tried not to breathe too heavily lest he disrupt this intense interaction between Demelza and the shag. There was a significance to the moment that wasn’t lost on him.

Just then another bird, this time a fulmar, no bigger than an ordinary gull, came gliding into the
opening, its wings straight and stiff. It’s unexpected appearance and unwavering course caught Demelza off guard. She had been facing the shag so when she twisted around to see this new disturbance, she shifted her body weight just a fraction, mid stoop. It was enough for her to lose her balance; she careened to the mouth of the cave, her arms thrown up in the air in shock.

“Oh!” she gasped.

“Demelza!” Ross’s left arm shot out and just before she got any closer to the edge, he caught her and yanked her towards him. It had been an inelegant catch but effective nonetheless.

“Oh,” she repeated softly, as she took in the magnitude of what might have just happened.

“You should be more careful…” Ross muttered gruffly, but even he wasn’t convinced he was admonishing her. He hadn’t yet let go of her hand; he held it aloft and seemed to grip it now with even more purpose. He could feel his heart racing and her body trembling --or maybe that was his own?

Demelza stood silently for a moment, her frame still twisted from her awkward landing, and looked up at Ross, his eyes dark with fear. Then she saw them change, and a spark of life danced there that drew her in.

Instead of saying ‘thank you’ as she intended, she closed her eyes knowing he would kiss her. She wasn't wrong.

Her lips were parted slightly, and when he first pressed his against hers, it was as though they were exchanging life-saving breaths as well. And although this was their first kiss, it was apparent to them both that they had already been following a trajectory beyond their control, and so presently they were further along the arc of a love affair than one that had only just begun.

Her arm that he had been clutching, he now folded close to his chest. The fingers of his other hand he wove through her hair as he pulled her gently towards him. His touch was cautious, guarded, as though her curls were made of glass fibres so delicate they might break if mishandled by careless hands.

She wanted to feel him too and let the headlamp she had been holding fall to the mossy floor at her feet. Her eyes still closed, her hand reached up to stroke his beard. She recalled how soft she had found it when she had accidentally brushed against it at the gala. This time she let her fingers linger and drew them slowly down his face along his jaw.

“Demelza,” Ross whispered at her touch. He hissed the last syllable of her name, like a long aspirated sigh.

She was glad that he had found a way to say her name that was all his own. Lately she’d been called something else in the act of love, but she didn't want to think about ‘Melz’ now-- that was some other woman.

How curious that a kiss--a first kiss especially-- could feel so monumental. Perhaps even more intimate, more important than the act of making love? Was it the lips? Yes, delicate, perceptive, intelligent lips. Our first and favoured way of knowing.

Demelza felt all the nerves in her lips were alive and firing full force. And his lips--as she expected--were full and strong, yet they did not overpower.

These were lips that belonged together. They met as coequals, two halves of a matched set--rejoined. And between them, in this kiss, so very much was communicated--some understood in the
moment and some promises of truths to be revealed at a later date.

All these impressions flooded through Demelza’s mind in one heartbeat, all at the same time and all intertwined. It was as though time--linear time-- had been unraveled and each sense was experiencing the world around her at its own pace, to be knit together later in memory.

But she knew that was the way profound happenings could be understood sometimes. Several years before she’d had a rear end shunt that similarly had jarred her understanding of time. She had felt the jolt as her car was forced through the intersection, but the shattering of glass seemed to happen at some other moment all together--later? before? She couldn’t say. The impact as it was absorbed through her body was terrifying yet the tinkling glass was beautiful and magical, almost sublime. And around her the January afternoon light appeared dim and soft, as though muted through a filter. What she felt, what she saw, and what she heard, had broken loose from the mesh of time that usually held sensations together, as though all had happened at separate instances.

And that’s how it was in the first few seconds of their kiss. A thousand thoughts, a thousand sensations, and none could be ordered or fully understood.

His lips tasted salty. His face--his beard-- felt so warming next to hers. She could hear his every breath hit the cool sea air that surrounded them. His dark hair shone in the dimming light.

His mouth grazed against her cheek then he pulled his face away ever so slightly. His eyes met hers again. They flashed with a white hot intensity and she was like a smith’s forge, long cold but now re-ignited.

Something new and at the same time very old awoke in them both. Yes, they’d felt like this before but it had been years. Or was this something new?

To be so alive, so present in the moment but also leaning into the future at the same time, holding and possessing the whole fullness of life in one single moment.

But time was something for other people--not for them.

Chapter End Notes

As always, I'm grateful to the glorious Winston Graham for his wonderful descriptions of the Cornish seaside. And also to his "Latin poet" who described the beauty of "holding and possessing the whole fullness of life in one single moment," one of our favorite lines from Ross Poldark: A Novel of Cornwall.

I adapted Graham's geography so it is not quite as it it appears in the books (Kellow's Ladder for example runs down a narrow shaft which I widened in my mind). For more on Kellow's Ladder see Graham's The Miller's Dance and The Loving Cup.
Standing steady on her paddle board, Jinny Carter again looked up to the sky. Over the course of just an hour she had watched it turn from a radiant cerulean to an opaque blue-grey and then a dull ash. She sighed. The brilliant spring weather had been too good to be true, too good to last more than a few days. The wind picked up, whipping her brown hair into her face and, as she might have predicted, upending some of the other paddle boarders where the faithless sea grew choppy. Her son, Benjy Ross, still upright himself, poked about with his paddle, perhaps with the devilish intent of further disturbing the water and a few paddle boarders as well.

At this she laughed.

*Just what his father would have done. And then he appears so innocent--a smile that would be forgiven of any sin.*

Jinny knew it wouldn’t be long before a chill set in and the paddle boarders would want to give up and head back to the pier-- and then to the pub. Over the years she had learned to read her clients and could tell the difference between the herbal tea and kombucha drinking ones and those who’d want a good pint or even a dram of something warming. And whether they stuck out the whole session or gave up after just thirty cold minutes, she didn’t judge. Either way she got paid.

Overhead a magnificent pair of terns flew in great circles then, without warning, plunged well below the water’s surface. Jinny waited for them to come up, counting in her head the seconds they remained submerged. She wondered if Ross Poldark and Dr. Carne had spotted any tern nests in the cliffside and hoped they’d be able to finish their climb before any really heavy rain started.

But in the cave thirty feet above the natural harbour where Jinny had left them, Ross and Demelza were quite unaware of the changing sky and the biting winds and the diving birds. Whatever happened outside in the world along the cliffs and the coast, was beyond their concern.

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Ross pressed his mouth to Demelza’s and felt his whole chest expand. Her soft, sweet lips were giving him more than just pleasure--they were giving him life. To kiss her felt so instinctual--there was nothing to think about, only to *experience* over and over--and yet he paused for a moment to allow his conscious mind to take it all in.

His hand was splayed on her flushed cheek, his lashes brushed her brow, her nose nuzzled his jaw. The fingertips of one of her hands gently danced on his beard but the other hand was locked in his hair, pulling him closer. He felt her exhale on his skin and when he listened for her to inhale, he realised he could no longer tell his own breathing from hers. He held her closer still then kissed her mouth again.

Somewhere beyond them deeper in the dark, a single bead of water dripped into a puddle--a rich metallic plop echoing throughout the cave--yet neither of them paid any mind to where they were.

Demelza moved her lips away for just a moment. Keeping her eyes trained on Ross’s, she snaked her soft hands under his jacket and began to lift his shirt up just enough to reveal his bare torso. He reached for her, to pull her to him, but she took a step back and lifted her own top up. Only then did
she allow herself to be pressed to him and he felt the alarming tingle as her warm skin joined his.

Ross groaned and as he put his mouth to her neck, he strummed his fingers up and down her spine. Her frame suddenly seemed so delicate, her skin so smooth, and he grew aware of his own cold, rough fingers. He’d need to be gentle, attentive with her.

What was that poem he knew from school, about the guitarist tuning up?

> With what attentive courtesy he bent
> Over his instrument;

He felt her hip bone grind into him, her hands continued to tug at his hair.

> Not as a lordly conquerer who could
> Command both wire and wood,

He was awake to the desire that was driving her body to him with an unwavering determination.

> But as a man with a loved woman might,
> Inquiring with delight

Her hands slid down his exposed chest and around to his waist. She pulled him closer to her and between them now they both felt the extent of his arousal.

He gasped.

“Ross...” she uttered low and deep in response.

> What slight essential things she had to say
> Before they started, he and she, to play.

Good god, what was this folly that brought verse to mind at this very moment? And were they--he and she--about to “play”?

Ross wanted her then and there, in the cold damp cave with its foul smells and questionable inhabitants. He could suffer the uncomfortable sensations around him if it meant he could experience her, all of her, and all of her on him. But somewhere deep inside, he knew that just wouldn’t do.

He could hardly bear the idea of separating from her body now, but also acknowledged he had an equal desire to take his time exploring her, not just to satisfy this present urge. If they both gave in now, it would be fantastic no doubt, but would merely be a once off, the quick release of tensions, frustrations, and explosive sexual chemistry. And then that would be all--there would most likely not be another opportunity for them to come together again. Somehow in a flash he recognised this and knew what he needed.

“No, Demelza, not here,” he breathed in her ear. “Come with me, back to Nampara.” And with tremendous restraint, he pulled away, then kissed her eyelids tenderly.

Demelza, bewildered, opened her mouth to speak. Moved by the importance of this gesture, she had no words. He was waiting, despite the unmistakable hunger she knew he had for her. This wasn’t solely a mad rush of sexual impulse, it was-- it meant --something more. Just as surprised as she had been by the fulmar flying at her moments before, she thought herself losing her balance again and
was glad to feel his arms steadying her.

She leaned her cheek against his lips and stayed that way silently, until she caught her breath.

“Yes, Ross,” she said softly. “Yes.”

*Always yes.*

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Ross proposed to go first again. Ordinarily Demelza would have read into this, looking for the implication that she—as a woman—was weaker and needed help. But this time she knew he was right. He was stronger, he knew the way better than she did, and if he helped her up once he’d scaled the cliff, they’d be at Nampara all the sooner.

After they refastened their helmets and harnesses, Ross carefully reached out to retrieve the ropes. This time he allowed her to check his knots and as she crouched before him he realised how she was a partner now. In whatever the endeavour—talking, climbing, exploring, loving. In just a matter of minutes, the world had shifted for him and ancient walls had come crumbling down.

She was his match.

He hesitated to let go of her hand but finally swung his leg out of the cave’s opening to reach the nearest ladder rung three feet away. The wind, which hadn’t been noticeable when they had climbed up, now stung his face and howled in his ears; he could taste the salty air on his lips. Bracing himself, he looked up for either an anchor or the next rung, then once again began his ascent.

Demelza stood at the edge and tried her best not to look down; this was not a moment she was looking forward to. The leap from ladder to the opening had been hard enough but at least then she could heave herself forward and land on the cave floor. Now if she tumbled? She had watched Ross stretch out with his long legs—again with the ease and elegance of a dancer. And now he moved steadily upwards, further and further from her.

*This is not the time for vertigo, Carne!* she chastised herself.

She took a deep breath and started to reach out then lost her nerve and stepped back again. Now she laughed at the absurdity of her predicament. She couldn’t stay in there forever. It would have to happen sometime.

So without any more planning or caution, she reached out with her right foot and found the small crevice near the rung that she had used as a toe hold on the way up. Then she edged along the cliff face with her hand until she found the ladder again. She was so relieved to place her foot that she hadn’t properly minded her hand grip and at once started to slip from the slimy wood.

“Uh…” she gasped, clinging desperately with one hand. The other flailed about and found an old anchor left in the rock by a previous climber, which she gripped tightly. The wind whistling around her was strong enough now to upset her balance.

“Don’t fucking look down,” she said aloud and was surprised to hear her own words carried away. Only then did she listen attentively and hear Ross calling her name from above.

“Demelza!”

“I’m fine,” she shouted, but suspected he wouldn’t be able to hear her, so after centering herself on the rung, she feebly lifted her left hand to give him a thumbs up. Then she took another deep breath
and climbed on.

The cave opening was located at about the halfway point down the cliff but with the growing wind and darkening sky, the ascent to the top felt longer and more arduous than their climb earlier had been. It was a different anticipation now too. Demelza had all but forgotten about cliff-nesting birds and was eager for what—or rather who—would be waiting at the end of the ladder.

Finally she spotted the top and the expanse of leaden-grey sky that opened around it. She tried to hurry her pace just a bit then caught herself as she nearly slipped yet again.

Ross was waiting anxiously a few feet from the edge and hadn’t seen this last gaff but as soon as she appeared at the top rung, he reached for her and helped to haul her over the edge.

“Oh,” she whispered again, so grateful to see him, to have that last ordeal behind her. His strong grasp on her wrist was enough to reignite the feelings that had flared in her while in the cave.

She crawled on her knees away from the ledge then stood breathless while he hastily untied the ropes and unfastened the harnesses. Just like the last time she had crouched near this overlook, she felt dazed but tried hard to quickly steady herself.

There was still quite a bit of scrambling over large boulders before they hit the v-shaped cleft in the rock. Then they met the crumbling walls, the sharp seagrass, the scrubby heather, the menacing gorse, and eventually the road. Ross insisted on carrying most of the ropes but still reached out from time to time to help Demelza as they made their way over the steep terrain.

Once back at the boot of Ross’s car, Demelza was glad to finally be rid of her helmet and the restricting harness, which she couldn’t help but think of as a sort of chastity belt. She settled into the passenger seat to change her shoes then reaching into her rucksack, quickly switched off her mobile.

“Is everything okay?” Ross asked solemnly when he saw her check the phone.

“Yes,” she said simply.

It was important he not ask more, not yet.

“Even with the grey sky and the threat of rain, it would be lovely to walk back to Nampara,” she sighed.

“Yes if only we didn’t have the gear,” Ross reminded her. He was saddened to deny her something she desired. But he was also impatient to get her to his place.

He didn’t dare think beyond that.

He drove silently with focus. The whole way back she too said nothing, afraid he’d change his mind or ask about Dwight in such a way she’d change hers. But as they were pulling onto the gravel drive at Nampara, she recalled something and cried out in alarm.

“Oh Ross! I left my headlamp in the cave!”

He laughed—his deep and hearty laugh—so grateful to have the tension broken. He switched off the engine and then turned to look at her.

Yes, she was lovely. She flashed a nervous, youthful smile—teeth gleaming, eyes shining.

He reached over and put his hand gently to her head, stroking the soft but windswept hair. He was
still smiling as he slowly kissed her forehead. But when he moved to kiss her lips, they both burst out in a torrent of laughter and giggles.

“Come,” he said and took her hand in his.

Chapter End Notes

The Guitarist Tunes Up by Frances Darwin Cornford. To read the whole poem with Ross’s interjections try here https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-guitarist-tunes-up/
Ross kept his hand on Demelza’s elbow as he led her to the front door of Nampara. Perhaps subconsciously he was worried she might wander away from him but he also felt an overwhelming need to keep touching her.

At once they could tell they were not alone. The Clash were blaring from the kitchen and Prudie, unaware that anyone had entered the house, continued in a spirited accompaniment.

“Sheep I stay or should I go now? If I go, there will be troub-bull ... And if I stay it will be doubt-bull,” Prudie sang out.

Demelza bit her lip to contain a laugh but Ross was less amused. He closed the front door with a slam to signal he’d arrived home then immediately regretted it. They might have been able to sneak away to another room, just the two of them, but now they’d have to explain their presence, if not their purpose, to the housekeeper.

Adding to the melee, Garrick came bounding down the hall, barking joyously. He leapt on Demelza, licking her face, demanding her attention, and completely ignoring his master.

“Oh yes, my dear sweet lover. I’ve returned,” Demelza cooed and ruffled the dog’s ears.

*So much for any peace or privacy*, Ross thought.

“Ah Mister Ross, yer back sooner than I expected!” Prudie came out to meet them. “But no worries, I been makin’ you a good hot supper--it’s almost ready. An’ you brought back Dr. Demelza! You enjoy ole Prudie’s scones, did ya? I told Mister Ross you would.” She had to shout over the music still playing in the kitchen.

“I think we’ll be going out for a walk,” Ross announced abruptly.

“In the rain then?” Prudie questioned.

Sure enough, what had been just a light mist on the drive home was now a steady beating on the roof and window panes. The wind gave a most dramatic howl as it swept through the yard and sought to creep into the drafty house.

“You two go warm up by a fire while I set dinner straight. There’s enough for you too, Dr. Demelza.”

“The library,” Ross said hastily. “We’ll be in the library.” Without waiting for Demelza, he strode down the hall, assuming she’d follow. Once inside he pulled the heavy door behind them, shutting out Garrick’s barking, Prudie’s singing, and the rest of the world.

Demelza had never been in the library before and found it quite different from all the other rooms in Nampara that had more recently been redone under Verity’s watchful eye. Demelza marveled at the cracked and yellowed plaster, the hazy old window panes, and the vast collection of things that cluttered the room. There were rolled up charts, model ships, ancient bottles, what looked like navigational equipment, and everywhere loads and loads of books. Books lined the shelves built into the walls but were also stacked here and there on the floor and along the window sill, many covered
in an impressive layer of dust.

Was Ross the packrat or had it been some other Poldark?

On the desk, Ross’s smart laptop seemed decidedly out of place in the midst of so many curios and artefacts. Demelza ran her fingers over an old brass letter opener shaped like a dagger then looked to Ross, fussing at the hearth across the room.

With a quick turn of knob, a flame flickered orange, then blue, in the grate.

“My father was always impatient building a good blaze...” he began.

_That’s what Dwight always says about me_, she thought then caught herself. She’d been so disciplined up to now keeping Dwight from her mind. Ross still had his back to her so he didn’t register the panic that washed over her face.

“So he had this gas fire installed years ago,” Ross continued. “Verity has been after me to refit with something more historically accurate but I haven't bothered. I suppose it reminds me of him. Not the warmest fire but...”

“It does the trick,” she assured him. “But tell me, Ross, do you want to be reminded of your father now?” she teased.

“No, I do not,” Ross replied and turned towards to her with a playful but determined grin. She looked around for somewhere to sit.

There was one chair, with gleaming carved arms and tattered silk upholstery that was frayed along the edges and across seat. She wasn’t sure if it was meant to be sat on, was a priceless antique, or was destined to soon be chopped up for kindling.

Reading her hesitation Ross grabbed an old thick sheepskin that had been draped on a trunk and laid it over the threadbare rug in front of the fire. Without saying a word, she settled on the floor, tucking her long legs under her, grateful to be freed from the restricting harness she’d worn earlier. He quickly joined her.

‘After the female has recognised his presence, the male sidles along the limb and when he stops at her side, they bill.’

The phrase seemed to come out of nowhere, a passage she unexpectedly recalled from Carrington’s study she’d been reading the day before. She fought to contain a giggle, doubting very much that Ross would appreciate being compared to a mating dove. But just like his bird counterpart in the natural world, his actions were somewhat predictable.

He could restrain himself no more and reached for her, pulling her clumsily towards him. She fell against him and closed her eyes, resting her head on his shoulder before turning her lips upward to meet his.

_The doves always close their eyes as they bob their heads to each other, preening the feathers of the head, neck, and back. This is a very important part of their love making and is enjoyed by both birds. If the male stops, the female will edge over to him and rub her bill through his feathers coaxing him._

She reached up and ran her fingers through his thick curls. And so it seemed she too was as predictable as a female dove.
Outside the window the rain spilled from the ancient gutters in great sheets and the library grew
darker. The only light came from the flame glowing in the grate, but neither of them noticed.

Their kisses were different now than they had been in the cave. Deeper, more driven, nothing was
held back. Ross and Demelza stayed like that for some time, exploring a passion and wonder that
seemed boundless.

They both felt the shock of this intimacy which had emerged and deepened in such a short time.
Ross brushed his lips against her temple while she nuzzled his beard with her nose. Their interlaced
fingers moved together as one hand; even their scents had intermingled.

And while they might have been content to just kiss each other over and over, their bodies seemed to
be operating under different assumptions. Earlier they’d both experienced a change in their
perception of the very world around them. Now whatever seismic shifts occurred were definitely felt
below the belt.

As she had done in the cave, Demelza slid her hands under Ross’s shirt and stroked the warm skin
along his sides and back. But this time she pulled it entirely up over his head. He helped free himself
and flung it aside before leaning over her, bare chested.

“Mmm,” she gasped and gingerly put her hands to the glorious hair that ran along his arms, his front,
and all the way down beyond his waistband. Then she reached for her own top and tugged it, and
the sports bra underneath, off in one surprisingly graceful swoop.

“Demelza,” he groaned when he saw her body for the first time--the beautiful silhouette of her waist,
the gentle curves of her breasts, the pale nipples, the expanses of firm skin. He wanted to put his
mouth to her but before he could, their bodies drew together so he instead wrapped his arms around
her and, as tightly as he could without crushing her, held her to him.

For just a moment his growing desire was interrupted when he felt her heart beat against his. He was
caught off guard and again experienced his chest swell. He wanted to say something, to tell her how
much it meant to hold her close--what she meant to him. But the moment ended when her teeth
grazed his earlobe while she ran her open mouth along his neck and face. Once more his body was
inundated with intense longing.

“Ross,” she hissed. Her fingers scratched down his back. The other hand deftly unbuttoned his
trousers then slipped inside, caressing the hard length that now strained against his boxer briefs.

He closed his eyes and tried his best to keep his overwhelming urges under control. He put his hand
over hers in encouragement then rolled them to the side so they could both explore each other more
fully. Her hand remained down his pants while one of his snaked down her backside. With the other
hand he traced the swell of her breasts before putting his mouth to her enticing nipples.

*Repeatedly the male dove will rub his bill in the feathers behind the secondary wing coverts and on
either flank near the sacral vertebrae, where there are nerve ends whose stimulation aids in mating.
The female, as excitation increases, will execute the same movement.*

*For fuck’s sake, not now, Carne!* She grew angry that she wasn’t better able to control her thoughts.
Yet at Ross’s touch, her mind was spinning. She clutched his head to her breast and moaned in
assent.

“Demelza, good god, I want you,” he breathed.

“Yes, Ross, yes...” Demelza whispered, almost pleading with him as she shifted to lay on her back.
She felt her whole being—not just her body—open up to him, like a flower searching for the sun.

Just then Prudie switched off the music in the kitchen and with the sudden quiet, came an awareness of how loud they had had become—their kisses and groans, the sound of skin on skin. A cold draft came up through the cracks in the floorboards reminding them where they were.

And exactly what were they doing, snogging like over-sexed teenagers? Recklessly pushing the boundaries to see how far they could go without really looking ahead? Slowly undressing each other, reveling in the thrill of knowing someone was in the other room—even if it was Prudie and not a disapproving parent?

As if on cue, Prudie knocked.

“Mister Ross? ‘Scuse me but supper ’ll be ready ‘n five minutes,” she called but thankfully didn’t try to open the door.

“Not now, Prudie, we’ll eat later,” Ross replied gruffly, then he caught just a flicker of disappointment on Demelza’s face.

“Are you a hungry?” he asked, trying to find a more tender tone for her than what he had just used with Prudie.

“Well...” Demelza hesitated to say more. She had hardly eaten anything at lunch which was now hours behind them, and since then they’d had quite a bit of physical exertion. It was hardly surprising that she felt famished.

“You are, aren’t you? If you like, we can…”

“No Ross, let’s stay as we are. I’ll be fine.” She tried desperately to backpedal. If they just stayed there on the sheepskin allowing their desire to unfold, she could forget all the other complications that awaited them. She didn’t want to ever leave that room or his arms.

“Demelza...please allow me to at least feed you.”

‘Culmination of billing activity is in the feeding of the female by the male. Courtship feeding is a prevalent habit among many species of birds.’ Demelza closed her eyes, desperate to push Carrington’s narrative from her mind for good.

“Okay,” she said softly. “But first please just...” She didn’t finish. As she pressed against him he instinctively wrapped his strong arms around her again. She kept her eyes closed and buried her face in his chest.

‘Maybe it’s better this way, Ross concluded now that his thinking was just a bit clearer. If they waited for Prudie to leave them alone for the evening, they could more leisurely, and more comfortably, make love in his bed instead of on the hard library floor. And he sensibly remembered that any condoms he had were upstairs as well.

But Ross also felt that he wanted to talk to Demelza first, before they took things any further. But to say what? He wasn’t exactly sure.

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Just like on the drive back from the cliffs, there was a strange silence between Ross and Demelza at the table. Both were suddenly afraid of what the other might say, what they surely were thinking.
Prudie proudly plunked a steaming baking dish in front of them followed by a bottle of red wine, then she waddled off with a sly smile.

Demelza tentatively began to serve him a dish of what appeared to be soupy lasagna. Ross poured wine for them both then took two long gulps from his glass. He had hoped it might give him courage to speak.

“Thank you,” he said.

He watched her hands while she moved about the table. Tonight her fingernails were broken in places from when she’d desperately gripped the jagged rock earlier that afternoon; these were the same nails that scored his back just moments before. He thought of those hands enlaced in his while lying together in the library and also while dancing at Trenwith. Weeks ago they had been elegantly manicured but he preferred them this way. That Demelza, though breathtakingly stunning, was an illusion. This Demelza was real.

And she was his. Maybe not for long, but at least in that very moment. With both passion and tenderness, he could hold her in his arms, he could touch her and he could talk to her. And this Demelza would whisper his name and touch him back.

Ross reached across the table for her hand and held it fast. He almost did not dare to meet her gaze but when he heard her exhale a long, slow breath he looked into the blue eyes that shone with warmth and desire.

Demelza understood he was beckoning her and came around to sit next to him. Once again she rested her head on his shoulder. Being close to him, to feel his warmth and smell his scent, was familiar to her now. Content, she closed her eyes as if experiencing the most pleasant dream. But a sudden realisation shot through her, one that she tried to shut out. She opened her eyes and gently stroked his beautiful yet serious face.

She kissed him slowly, wanting to hide forever in his glossy beard and his strong embrace.

But when she finally pulled away, they both knew.

It was as if all the air had suddenly been sucked out of the room. They could ignore it no longer.

“This isn’t going to happen, is it, Demelza?” he asked softly.

“Ross,” she began, surprised he’d been able to read her heart and put it into words.

“I know. I know... you can’t,” he said solemnly.

“It's not that I don't want to but...” she protested.

“You’re with Dwight,” he said gruffly. “I understand.”

“No, Ross! You don’t understand,” she cried. “No, this --between us-- it’s... right. Don’t you feel that? I just need to speak to Dwight first before we...”

“So you'll come back to me?” He looked at her with the dark, scared eyes of a young boy. All the confidence, the bravado she’d seen the past few weeks was gone. Maybe it wasn’t fear but vulnerability she saw now-- his heart was laid bare before her.

“Oh Ross! Of course,” she whispered and kissed his hand still entwined with her own.
Notes: I am once again grateful to this wonderful source that gave me the details of how mourning doves get it on. All billing & courtship descriptions come from Howe Elliot McClure's 1941 publication (page 84) https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=14649&context=rtd
They had finished their dinner, reluctantly and out of a sense of obligation. Any hunger Demelza felt earlier had long since evaporated, leaving only an uncomfortable knot in her stomach. Prudie’s bland lasagna had been too hot in some parts and not thoroughly heated in others. But neither she nor Ross had said a word in complaint. Nor did they really taste the wine, which was a notable vintage from the cellar Prudie had taken upon herself to serve.

They sat quietly, side by side as the dining room grew dimmer. Occasionally one reached over and touched the other’s hand-- some were light touches, others more desperate squeezes. There was nothing to say. But the old clock on the mantel ticked loudly, reminding them that their time together was indeed finite.

And when they could delay it no longer, Ross made a move from the table without clearing up, and muttered that it was time to drive her home.

“Yes, of course,” Demelza said softly and followed him into the hallway. The ancient flagstone floor provided an extra chill to match the unwelcome feeling that was creeping into her heart. She couldn’t bear to leave Nampara and hated how things had played out--how they had to play out. It wasn’t what she wanted. Yet she knew leaving now was the right thing to do.

Just then Prudie, who had managed to make herself scarce during dinner, came shuffling out in a bother holding Ross’s mobile in her palm as though it might bite her.

“Mister Ross. This thing’s been buzzing over and over. I think someone needs to reach you,” she chided.

“It’s Tonkin,” he said looking at the number. “I’d better...I’ll be quick,” he said apologetically.

“It’s okay, Ross, take your time,” Demelza said, greedy for one last reprieve. She knew it was a delusion but grasped it nonetheless.

She decided to step outside in the cool evening while she waited for Ross to attend to his call. The rain had stopped, leaving the air feeling wet and fresh. Garrick ran circles around her legs then bolted off full speed, barking frantically. She followed him across the yard but when he darted through a low gap in the stone wall, she stopped. He was growling fiercely at something but she could see nothing and knew better than to wander off after a black dog in the dark.

She was turned around a few times in the muddy gloom beyond the front yard before she finally spotted the weak light illuminating the door and carefully made her way back. To her surprise she found Ross outside on the front step waiting for her. He was leaning under the eave, smoking a cigarette.

“There you are. I was hoping you hadn’t left on your own,” he laughed. She thought she detected a little nervousness in his voice.

“No, Garrick seemed to be upset by something beyond the shrubs over that wall there. He’s run off but it’s so dark and I couldn’t see where he went.”

“I’m glad you had the sense not to try to follow him,” he said. “I wasn’t kidding about old mine shafts.”

“Will he be alright, on his own?” she asked, coming up next to him. She contemplated sitting down
on the step but saw it glistened wet from the rain.

“It probably was a rabbit going under some gorse bush. He’ll be back sooner or later.”

“I didn't know you smoked, Ross,” she said and hoped it sounded like an observation and not a judgement. She remembered the night they collided at Trenwith she’d seen him smoking before they entered the marquis.

“An old habit mostly discarded. But I still reach for a cigarette in stressful times.”

*So this is stressful,* she thought. *Bur what was it about being at Trenwith that had caused him stress?*

“Demelza…” he began. “Today was....”

“Is this the part where you tell me it was a mistake or was wonderful?”

He looked at her in alarm. He hadn’t expected her response to be so bald, so open. He realised his mouth gaped in surprise, the cigarette almost fell from his lips.

She raised a questioning brow then reached over and took the cigarette from his lips.

“Don’t even say it was a wonderful mistake,” she replied, taking a long drag.

Carefully she blew a smoke ring and saw that he was impressed. “Enjoyed no sooner but despísèd straight?” she added.

“No, not despised. Never despised.” He shook his head and reached to take his cigarette back. “But while bliss... could it not still lead to woe?” he said, adding to her Shakespeare reference.

*Does he really have no hope for us?* she wondered.

“Come, Ross, let’s go,” she said and took his hand in hers.

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It was less than fifteen minutes later that they pulled up to the engine house. The Defender was, as expected, nowhere to be seen. Ross switched off the Peugeot and looked at her. She almost closed her eyes thinking he would kiss her again but instead he took her hand in his. First he pulled it to his lips, then he folded it close to his heart.

“Oh…” she gasped, caught off guard by this tender, yet sad, gesture.

*This can’t be good bye. It just can’t be. I have to take the lead.*

Somehow she found the strength to speak.

“Ross...until...let's agree not to ring each other or email or text. It’s just too complicated and if Dwight were to…” It was tremendously difficult to finish the sentence. She could already imagine she’d long to hear Ross’s voice. And if he thought to send her another poem? But the risk was too great.

Ross nodded his head—he understood.

“But you’ll send word? I mean, once you’ve spoken to Dwight?” he asked.

“Yes, but it has to come from me, Ross. Please promise me you won’t say anything to him first, no
matter what the situation,” she pleaded.

“Of course, Demelza.”

She smiled at him then quickly opened her door and got out. She didn't dare to look back but somehow was sure he would be watching her until she’d gotten safely inside.

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When Demelza entered the engine house it was dark and quiet. She knew she was alone and while this was initially a relief, she immediately felt guilty for having thought that.

She considered pouring herself a glass of single malt but what she needed more was a hot shower before she crawled into her empty bed. Her muscles were so sore and she was surprised to find that she had more than a few bruises on her shoulder and leg where she’d slammed against the rock wall earlier. The climb up the cliff seemed ages ago.

Sleep came easily for her but several hours later she heard a noise that stirred her from her rest. At first she was frightened, then realised someone had switched on a light. An intruder wouldn’t do that, would they?

She crept half way down the stairs and exhaled loudly when she saw Dwight sitting in one of the chairs before the cold hearth.

“Dwight! Oh, I’m that relieved it’s you!” she sighed. “I thought you were a...never mind,” she laughed. It sounded so foolish now.

“Hey you,” he said, his voice hoarse and sleepy. “Did you see many birds?”

*Does he know about Ross? Can he read it on me?* she wondered.

“Yes, quite a few but then the weather changed. Did you get back just now?”

“But you enjoyed yourself? I’m glad-- you seemed to be dreading it earlier.”

_No, he doesn’t suspect anything. And if I don't say something now, this is the moment I become untruthful. Now my lies begin. _

She swallowed hard and moved closer to where he sat.

“Dwight,” she began but as she stepped out of the shadow she saw his ashen face illuminated in the dim lamp light.

He was upset, maybe even near tears-- she’d never seen him this way before. All she could think was that something tragic must have happened, someone must have died. Or was it…?

_Oh god! What have I done?_

“Dwight? What is it?” she pleaded, kneeling at his side.

“What it always is, Demelza. Another setback for us...for CEA,” he replied, his voice shaking.

“CEA?” she asked, trying to disguise the relief in her voice. Then she saw this was still something serious. “Oh Dwight, they’ll be other jobs. Let’s just walk away from this one. I’ll talk to Verity, with her connections we’re bound to get back on our feet again.”
“It's not just the Warleggan business, I got this notice today.” He opened his mobile and handed it over so she could read the email.

Perching next to him, she scanned through the message--it was quite long--trying to make sense of what it said.

“What does this mean, Dwight?”

“All our hired lab equipment will be hauled away next week, with little explanation. Kinesis--the firm that had given us such a favourable rate just one month ago-- is now recalling it all. Suddenly there are ‘complications’ and even if they could renew the lease--which they can’t or at least they won’t--the rate would be higher. But there also is another client to whom they’ve already promised the equipment. It makes little sense.”

“Fucking hell! Can they do that?” she asked.

“Fucking hell is right, and yes they can,” he replied.

“Couldn't we hire from elsewhere? Or use an outside lab?”

“We can book lab time with a private firm but it will be inefficient and expensive, and I’m hesitant to go further into any debt. You know I took out a small business loan to get set up here. Mostly for equipment and travel expenses, figuring we’d get reimbursed by now and even if we didn't, we’d have time to pay it off later. And there’s still other things to account for, that were destroyed in the break-in, like my laptop. I doubt we’d ever get any real insurance settlement for that and we certainly won’t until the police are done investigating the crime…”

“But what equipment are they recalling?” she asked trying to keep up. “Everything?”

“The important and big stuff--the drying oven, the Eckman dredge, and the spectrophotometer. Then the smaller things--psychrometers, clinometers--those all start to add up too though. We’ll still have the microscopes--those were on loan from Kevin along with the Defender and I don't see him needing them back anytime soon.”

Dwight had borrowed some minor field gear, as well as the car, from an old school friend who’d just separated from his wife. Kevin had been so distraught by the suddenness of the breakup that he left everything behind--work, flat, car-- and went on an extended holiday to Australia to “find himself.” It had worked in Dwight’s favour but from time to time, he and Demelza had both felt a bit guilty about taking advantage of Kevin’s misfortune.

“I’m sorry I keep saying we --this is my problem, Demelza, not yours. I’m just glad we haven’t made our partnership official yet so you're not legally liable for any of this.”

*Their partnership.*

A lump formed in her throat.

“So Demelza, here we have been waiting for a job with no guaranteed income to speak of except the pittance they're bound to pay us eventually for expenses, but there’s the rub--if we do actually get the job, we’ll have no equipment with which to do it. So either way we have…”

“No business. Oh Dwight, what do we do?”

At this he looked at her, his dark grey eyes had grown wet. Was it relief she wasn’t abandoning him? She tried to read him.
“I don’t know. I don’t know anything except that I need you right now,” he said.

She was alarmed at how fragile he sounded.

“Of course,” she said and snuggled close to him on the chair.

Almost automatically she gave a light but lingering kiss him on his neck. If she hadn’t been so panicked by the content of his words she’d have heard that he was appealing to her as a friend, for the most chaste of comforts, not for sex.

He sat up and looked her in the eye, somewhat apologetically.

“I’m sorry, Melz, I’m not...I mean as a lover, I’m hardly in the best form right now. I don’t think I can... Is it okay if we just...” he stammered.

“Of course,” she repeated.

“I just want you to hold me.”

“Oh Dwight,” she whispered and taking him in her arms, she laid his head against her chest.

In that moment, she could feel felt his pain so keenly and she would have done just about anything to soothe him.

Anything she meant to say to him tonight would just have to keep.
Demelza exited the roundabout at Shorelanesend and continued southwest towards Truro, without any enthusiasm— and without a plan. The interior of the Defender felt overly warm today; the window gave just a moment of resistance as she struggled to wind it down to let in some fresh air. She’d been feeling less than charmed by their borrowed vehicle lately. It was loud, it’s upholstery tattered and smelly, and the past few times she’d gone to start it after a heavy rain, she found the ignition sluggish. Soon it would be the only equipment CEA still had in their possession so she knew she should at least be grateful for that. Then again, it would be just their luck if its owner reemerged unexpectedly to reclaim it as well.

But she was grateful for to be moving, to be doing something after being agitated and restless for the past few days. Being outdoors looking for nests near the sea, as had been her intention, reminded her of Ross and was out of the question, at least until she resolved things with Dwight. But sequestering herself inside the laboratory scouring written reports, made her think of Dwight, and the growing guilt and shame she felt about him made focusing impossible. She just had to find another course of action, to move things forward for them all.

So without consulting Dwight, she’d headed to the CPE Environmental Group office in Truro. Her aim was to talk to whomever had actually filed the original impact assessment of Warleggan Industries’ proposed expansion, the report that was at odds with the one completed earlier for the mining consortium. It was that person who apparently had alerted all parties to the conflicting conclusions and Demelza suspected there just had to be a story of how that had unfolded. She hadn’t exactly worked out what she would say when she got there, but plunged on nonetheless.

Where do they keep their lab and storage space? What kind of equipment do they own outright after being in business so long? she wondered.

“Erm…Hello?”

Demelza heard the sound of a foot tapping behind her and turned, swallowing hard.

“May I speak with your receptionist?” she asked brightly.

“Why?” A large woman with a stretched red face and puffy hair responded. She didn't seem used to drop-in traffic.

“Well, I’m…” Demelza wasn’t sure why she hesitated giving her name but she continued on, trying not to sound nervous; she hadn't expected resistance upfront. “I work for Cornwall Ecological Associates, the firm that has been asked to complete a new impact assessment for the mining consortium and Warleggan Industries. I was hoping to speak with whomever had filed the previous
reports. I thought your receptionist might be able to tell me…”

“You mean Noelle? No, she’s only been here a few months--she don't know anything,” the woman said and zipped up her navy fleece gilet as though she was bracing against the cold, even though the room was rather stuffy and airless. The fleece was embroidered with the company name so Demelza guessed she was also an employee, but of what rank she couldn’t tell.

*It would be fun to get something like that with CEA on it for Dwight,* she thought. *Oh yes, with what money?* This was becoming a familiar refrain for her.

“And you? Are you the…” Demelza tried prying a little, thinking this woman might be an office manager or something of the sort who might have the information she needed.

“Katie’s gone,” the woman said simply. “That's who you'd want to talk to but she don’t work here anymore. Sorry I can't help,” she said and turned away, making it clear she wasn’t really sorry nor did she have any intention of even trying to help.

Demelza looked past the puffy woman, to an overly pale girl in the back of the room pouring tea into a chipped mug.

*That just may be Noelle, the current receptionist,* she thought but got the impression the girl probably wouldn't know any details about old assessments. Still, she might know where Katie went. Or maybe even how to reach Stephen Carrington.

Disappointed, but growing more and more used to this constant feeling of frustration, Demelza gave a polite ‘thank you’ before she went back out to her car. She sat for a moment, reluctant to turn the ignition and return to the engine house; she'd come all this way, she didn't want to give up yet. Besides, she had no other ideas of what she would do next if she left.

She desperately felt she had to do something to help Dwight professionally. Especially since any day now, she would most likely be destroying their personal relationship.

Her mobile buzzed with a text from Caroline, shaking her from her gloomy thoughts.

*‘Is that the blue beast I see across the street? You free?’* it read.

Demelza laughed aloud and was just about to reply when she heard a tap on the window.

*Good god, even Caroline’s knocking is elegant.*

She yanked the door open and leapt out to greet her friend.

“Caroline, how’d you know it was me and not Dwight?”

“Your flaming red hair is a bit recognisable, Demelza. Even from fifty yards away. Besides I had rung Dwight earlier to see if I could expect him at my townhouse later and he rather grumpily reported he was at home--alone-- preparing for a meeting or something.”

“Yes, he is,” she said. “But I'm glad to see you! I was just about to feel sorry for myself for having a fruitless adventure when you came.”

“Adventure? That sounds fun but fruitless? That’s depressing. Come let's talk over a bite. There's the most adorable vintage tea room--Morwenna’s--not far from here.”

Demelza stuffed her camera and laptop into the rucksack lying on the passenger seat and grabbed it
up. The rear gate of the Defender hadn’t been locking lately and she didn’t want to chance that her only valuable possessions would go missing were they left behind.

Just then she spotted Noelle leaving CPE Environmental Group and walking into a less-than-adorable cafe across the road.

“Caroline, I wonder if instead you might be up for a sort of secret mission. It would be doing me the greatest of favours….

She explained her idea quickly to Caroline, who instantly gave a most guileful smile.

“Oh indeed. Please rely on me to mine whatever information you seek, Demelza.”

“Well please do. I’m not sure I’ll be much help here,” Demelza said in a low voice. “I’m pretty miserable at lying.”

“Whereas I am skilled at the art of deception--mild deception anyway, especially with myself. The secret,” she said, “is to keep it simple. Don’t get caught up in an elaborate tale, we need to get her to do all the talking.”

They entered the cafe after Noelle had already placed her order and was heading back to a table with a dry looking sandwich. The girl immediately pulled out her mobile and based on her animated swiping, raised brows, and occasional giggles, looked to be engaged in some sort of game.

“How shall we do this?” Demelza whispered. “I mean, she looks like she wants to be alone.”

But Caroline merely winked and hastily ordered two bottled blackcurrant smoothies. Demelza would have prefered an espresso or a hot cup of tea but had to admit this was quicker. The two closed in on their prey without further delay.

“Oh excuse me, I just happened to see your jacket. Do you really work for CPE Environmental Group?” Caroline asked Noelle, settling at table next to hers. Its formica top was grimy and scattered with crumbs that Demelza discreetly wiped away with her forearm.

“Isn’t it wonderful to know your work is so important? That what you do matters so much? I mean to support conservation efforts…” Caroline went on.

“Well I’m just the receptionist and really just started working there,” Noelle said, but she flashed a genuine smile at Caroline’s words, giving the impression the girl had never been told she mattered before. “I’m Noelle, by the way,” she said. It looked as though she was contemplating holding out her hand then lost her nerve.

“Lovely, Noelle. I’m Caroline and this is my friend, Demelza.”

Demelza was surprised Caroline had offered up their real names but she had said it was important to keep the lies simple. A fake name would be too easy to trip up.

“Well Noelle, maybe you can help us,” Caroline continued. “We are in town for the day and thought we’d look up old friends at CPE but alas they no longer work there. Isn’t it sad when you lose track of someone you were once close to?” Caroline went on. “It’s just been so long, hasn't it?” she asked Demelza.

“Yes, it has been.” Demelza smiled back through clenched teeth. It was only a small lie but she felt herself blush all the same. She’d always had a lousy poker face. But this was something she’d need to get better at if she were to continue her deceit at home.
So far Demelza hadn’t had to say anything terribly untruthful to Dwight—that might make her crumble on the spot instead of breaking the news to him gently, when the time was right, as was her plan. There had been a few awkward moments when she worried she’d need to come up with a reason to put him off in their bed, and wasn’t sure how to proceed. But she had just gotten her period, and this month it had made her feel like complete rubbish, so she spent the past few nights curled up with a hot water bottle. It provided a convenient—and honest—excuse that he didn’t question. Besides, this recent setback with their equipment supplier had taken a notable physical toll on Dwight. Most nights he dozed off in a chair downstairs, then was completely exhausted when he finally dragged himself to bed. He didn’t seem to have any interest then in seeking any comfort with her and fell asleep almost as soon as he hit the pillow. Demelza found herself both relieved and saddened by this.

“Who were your friends?” Noelle asked Caroline. “I’m not sure I’d know anyone you’d know.” She hadn’t meant it rudely but was merely acknowledging the elegance and sophistication of Caroline, and by extension Demelza. Demelza wasn’t exactly cutting a polished figure in her jeans and rain jacket but she did at least present like a confident adult.

“You might have known Katie...” Caroline said, taking the a chance that Katie had been a younger girl too.

“Oh Katie Thomas? Yes, we were at school together!”

“And Stephen Carrington?” Demelza asked, biting her lip.

“You know, it’s so odd you should ask about him!” Noelle looked excited to share whatever information she was holding on to. “Because someone called about a month ago asking after him!”

That must have been Dwight, Demelza thought.

"But the thing is-- there's absolutely no record of Stephen Carrington’s work at all-- and it’s as though he never really existed at CPE. The database lists only his name and dates of employment. His entire employment file is missing from the cabinet too."

“Oh, a mystery!” Caroline said with a bright smile and raised brow.

“Strange for someone who worked there for almost…” Demelza paused hoping Noelle would take the bait.

“Fifteen years. I know!” Noelle finished for her.

Demelza was proud she’d gotten that detail out of her but then realised it was a fact that was easily verified elsewhere.

“If he’s your friend how is it you lost track of him? Were you close?” Noelle asked, taking a bite of her tuna sandwich.

“Well, I mostly...I just know...” Demelza stammered. Noelle was right—it didn’t make sense. Her lie was already unraveling.

“Oh Demelza and Stephen go way back,” Caroline interjected breezily. At this Demelza decided to let Caroline work alone for a few moments and excused herself to go to the ladies.

As she walked across the cafe, she looked back to see Caroline take Noelle’s hand in hers, apparently admiring the girl’s bejeweled manicure.
She’s good, Demelza thought.

She decided to wait it out in the ladies as long as she could bear it. This way Caroline could do her magic alone with Noelle, without Demelza tripping up or putting her foot in her mouth. Actually the toilet stall was clean and quiet, so she didn’t mind it so much and used the time to check her mobile. A few work related texts from Dwight, almost written in a cryptic shorthand -- ‘hydrology report from 30th--sand or veg refuge?’ and ‘amph survey data in with application?’ As she expected, there were none from Ross.

When she reemerged five minutes later the place was nearly deserted.

“Where’s Noelle?” Demelza asked when she saw Caroline was alone.

“She had to go back to the office but I have intel, as they say,” Caroline smiled slyly. “Not on Carrington but Katie. I think we can find her with just a little more sleuthing. She’s been staying in London.”

“In London? How can that help us? Tracking down a girl in London, surname Thomas, who likely doesn’t even have a permanent address?” Demelza lamented, slumping back into her chair.

“Oh, but we have a mighty trail of breadcrumbs to follow. Noelle mentioned Katie is staying with a sister who only recently moved there herself. She couldn’t recall the sister’s name but she’s just married a Portuguese fellow who imports luxury cars. I imagine a quick scan of the local papers for weddings would reveal what we seek. Either that or we start searching for a new car for you in London. A Lamborghini maybe?”

“You are quite brilliant at this, you know,” Demelza admitted. “Perhaps you’re in the wrong line of work, Caroline?”

“On the contrary, Demelza. It’s my business to know everything about everyone so this is merely routine. By the way, I gave her your contact information in case she comes across anything juicy in the office regarding Stephen Carrington.”

“But wouldn’t that anger her boss? I think I met her--at least I think she was the boss-- and she was a bit, well, less than eager to help. I’d rather not land Noelle in any hot water if she’s only just gotten the job,” Demelza fretted.

Had the woman been deliberately withholding information or was she just unfriendly? Demelza wondered.

“Oh, that’s sorted. I told Noelle it was a secret mission and encouraged her to keep it quiet from her colleagues. She was thrilled to cooperate--I get the impression she isn’t overly fond of Joan."

“Joan? You got her boss’s name too? I’m surprised you didn’t get her shoe size or NHS number!” Demelza laughed.

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It was another dark and moonless night and even though the engine house was back to being overly warm, Demelza felt a chill run through her bones that kept her awake. Clutching her hot water bottle tighter to her, she did her best to remain still beside Dwight while her mind raced from one troubling thought to another.

She had been trying not to think of another warm body she’d only recently known. But it was hard to push Ross from her mind when her other senses did not always fully cooperate. Often she couldn’t
catch her breath and her stomach was perpetually twisted in a knot. At times she felt she could still smell Ross on her skin.

It was quite late when her mobile began insistently buzzing on the bedside table and she considered ignoring it. But in the end, her curiosity at who might be calling got the better of her and she welcomed the distraction from her restless musings.

Before she rose, she looked over at Dwight and felt a pain deep in her gut. He normally slept on his belly, stretched out across the whole width of the bed like a child, yet tonight he was curled in a tight ball, his back to her.

*Even in his sleep he is distressed,* she thought.

Quietly she grabbed the mobile and stepped into the dark hallway so she wouldn’t wake him.

“Erm... Demelza? This is Noelle,” a voice whispered on the other end of the line.

“Noelle? From CPE? Oh, hello!” Demelza perked up at once. She hadn't been hopeful that Noelle would actually provide them with anything useful and certainly didn't expect to hear from her so soon—or so late at night.

*Something must be amiss.*

“Oh Demelza! I didn’t know who else to call. Maybe I’m just being paranoid but there’s been a car sitting outside our house all evening and it’s still there now.”

Demelza’s blood ran cold.

“A car? Can you describe it?”

“It’s an ugly yellow sporty one. I can’t make out the registration plates though.”

*What kind of fool would actually do a stake out in a yellow car? It has to be a mistake,* Demelza thought but still figured they shouldn’t take chances.

“Noelle, dear, I think you should ring the police. You needn’t say more than there’s some dodgy man possibly peeping around the neighbourhood. They’ll surely take you seriously if you do that. Where do you live?”

“With my mum, just east of Tresillian.”

*Out in the middle of nowhere.*

“Is your mum home now?”

“Yes, she is. She’s asleep though and don’t know nothing about this.”

“Well, lock the doors and pull the curtains. And don’t do anything else until you’ve spoken to the police. I imagine they’d send a car round to check things out. But it’s most likely nothing, Noelle, and easily explained.”

“Thank you, Demelza. Like I said, I didn't know who else to call, but you just have such an honest face, I thought I could trust you,” she said and rang off.

*An honest face.* The words smarted.
It’s most likely nothing, Demelza thought to herself but all the same, padded downstairs to check that the front door of the engine house was firmly locked.

Chapter End Notes

There really is a Morwenna’s Vintage Tea Room in Truro!
Hens and Cocks

London-- Three Years Earlier

“Oh good god, Helen’s going to be sick!” Demelza cried and led the teetering bride-to-be over to the side of the busy road, where she immediately began to vomit.

“Hold her hair! Hold her hair!” Sophia shouted frantically, while shuffling over in her stiletto heels to join her sister and Demelza.

But Demelza had already grabbed great handfuls of Helen’s blonde tresses--just recently highlighted for her upcoming big day--and held them at a safe distance. The sick splashed up from the gutter and Demelza instinctively stepped back, inadvertently tugging Helen’s head as she did so. Helen’s hair remained safe but her new pink shoes were not so lucky.

A few men walked by and laughed, a few women sneered. Demelza ignored them. The warm spring breeze awakened countless unpleasant smells in the road; fresh ones conjured only that night mixed with layers of the city’s finely aged filth. For once Demelza wished it would rain.

For fuck’s sake, please don’t vomit on me, she thought, but smiled a sweet and caring smile that apparently was enough to cause Helen to start sobbing.

“Oh god, oh god, what am I doing?” Helen cried.

“Yes, what are you doing?” their other friend Charlotte asked. Charlotte was not amused by this latest development and kept a distance from the scene at the kerb.

“You alright then, Helen?” Demelza asked, adding an extra layer of softness to make up for Charlotte’s icy quip.

The danger seemed to have passed so she crouched and allowed Helen to lean on her leg. She passed a tissue meant for the now-free-flowing tears but Helen used it instead to wipe her mouth, then handed it back. Demelza couldn’t bring herself to leave litter in the road so discreetly she tucked it in Helen’s handbag--pink with a knotted bow to match her shoes of course. She shot a pleading look to her other mates while Helen crumpled on the pavement.

“Helen, don’t sit down there! You’ll ruin your skirt,” Sophia chided.

Sophia had never really warmed to the idea of having her sister’s hen party in London. To a country girl like her, London would always be nothing but a cesspool of germs, grime, and danger. But as the indulgent older sibling and her maid of honour, Sophia felt compelled to heed Helen’s wishes and had organised some college mates to come up for a weekend. Actually it had been Helen who did most of the planning herself and she certainly wasn’t in the dark about any silly surprises to be sprung on her. She knew the schedule in advance and had even insisted on final approval of everyone's outfits for this evening’s bar crawl through Shoreditch.

“Yes well, I think the state of her skirt is the least of her worries now,” Charlotte added with a laugh, twirling a cigarette in her fingers that she didn’t dare to light quite yet.

Charlotte, Demelza, and Helen had been flatmates back in Sheffield and now that some years had passed since their uni days, it was clear they had never really had much in common. Yet a sentimental loyalty remained and apparently was enough to entice them all to reunite for the hen party. But Charlotte and Sophia had never really gotten on well, nor had they ever tried, and tonight
they had been at odds with each other from the start.

For years they had all relied on Demelza as a common denominator to bring any harmony to the group. Demelza did not relish this role but it was rare that she needed to reprise it, and so tonight she’d settled back into the peacemaker duty. Yet after only a few hours it was already growing tiresome and she now wished for something else entirely.

Demelza wasn’t sure what she wanted. Part of her would have enjoyed a quieter setting, maybe drinking a nice bottle of wine—slowly—catching up on each other’s current interests and aspirations, sharing meaningful conversation. Another part of her, the part that had been studious and disciplined these last months, sought a thrill. But this—this was satisfying neither desire. She hated feeling on display and moving briskly from one fashionable locale to another. The affected laughter, the overly thought-out attire just made her feel sad.

It might have been easier if she’d allowed herself to get as pissed as the Greenwell sisters. But for the past hour she and Charlotte had reluctantly held back in their own drink, keeping close watch on the other two. Sophia and Helen had been drinking fast and furious, throwing back wine and spirits with abandon as though they were school girls and never really been out before. Demelza wondered if Sophia drank so freely in order to forget her dislike of the city. And what was Helen trying to forget?

*I hope to god they know what they’re doing,* Demelza thought. *It must be part of their plan.*

Now it seemed that Demelza and Charlotte, both decidedly more experienced drinkers, had been wise to pace themselves. They exchanged knowing looks and braced themselves for the tears that would surely be coming next. Demelza desperately hoped she could come across as supportive and not overly judgmental, but it didn't look as though Charlotte would be able to muster up any sympathy for her drunk mate.

“Oh Demelza!” Helen wailed. “What’s gonna happen? I’ll marry Tristan and then will it all be over for me? Forever? Never, ever will I know another man *intimately?* I mean I like Tristan's *you know*... but if it’s the only *you know* I’m going to ever have again ever...”

“His... *you know?*” Demelza asked, trying to conceal a smile. Helen and Sophia both were usually so proper that Demelza hadn’t quite expected things to go there tonight, or at least not so quickly.

“Jesus! If you can’t bring yourself to say *cock* then just call it a *penis* or even a *willy,*” Charlotte muttered impatiently.

“Charlotte!” Sophia interrupted, terrified by what other rude things might be said. “Helen, my dear, it’s just nerves that are talking.”

*That and an entire bottle of prosecco,* thought Demelza and again patted Helen on the shoulder while trying to inch out of the way lest she become sick again.

“Helen, it’s a very human trait to have doubts before major decisions, in fact it’s *healthy.* But maybe it would be best to pursue these questions later when you’re more...” Demelza began gently but Sophia jumped in quickly.

“Yes, yes, Helen. This is best discussed tomorrow over brunch or even later,” Sophia added. She looked panicked—panicked that they were talking about sex publicly and that her sister’s white mini skirt now had a grey smudge across the bum from the grimy pavement. That the evening’s carefully laid plans were unraveling rapidly. That they hadn’t even played the quiz game she’d made of historical Helens and Tristans. “This was not supposed to happen!” she whimpered.
“Ladies, I think… I think we all just need to,” Sophia tried to seize control over the scene again, while Charlotte tried her best to contain further snickers.

But it was obvious to all that Helen—and most likely Sophia too—needed to go back to the flat straight away. That was, if Helen could make it without being sick in the taxi.

“She’ll be okay,” Demelza now tried to calm Sophia who was looking a bit green herself. “But she does need to go home, before this gets worse…”

“And she’ll need loads of water before she gets to bed,” Charlotte added while surreptitiously checking her mobile to see if there was another party she could still catch. This bit of advice was meant for the others; nursing Helen was clearly not on her agenda for the evening.

“Yes, let’s get her in a taxi. Aren’t you two coming…?” Sophia asked.

Charlotte had already stepped aside to take a call so that answered the question.

Demelza paused for a moment. She had been looking forward to taking a break from all her research and the endless marking of essays to get up to London for this hen party. And now she found she wasn’t really looking forward to calling it a night at 9:45 to watch the two Greenwell sisters be sick and cry about their life choices for the next few hours. What she really wanted was to not be herself for just a few hours, to escape from being the regular, predictable, responsible Demelza Carne. She bit her lip and took a chance.

“Oh well, I told you I wanted to meet with an old teacher from college, who also happens to be in town,” she tried to sound somber. “He wants to talk to me about the decline of the East Anglian turtledove…”

She didn’t even need to finish her sentence, which was only partially untrue, because it was obvious the sisters relished the idea of falling apart in private.

“Oh Demelza, you are always so serious! Well you have a key to the flat so just come home when you are done with your dissertation consult or whatever…” Sophia was already flagging down a taxi and had turned from Demelza before she finished speaking. Charlotte, off on her mobile, would clearly be gone soon too.

Demelza laughed and checked the incoming text as she watched her mates fall into the cab.

D!!!Yes!! I am at the Quiet Man now. You coming? ;)

She laughed at the multiple exclamation marks and inept attempts at emoji usage.

So he’s already drunk too, she thought.

Be there in ten minutes, don’t leave! she texted back and let out a soft squeal with anticipation of meeting up with her old friend, Dwight Enys.

The Quiet Man was hardly quiet but it did seem to be filled mostly with men that evening. In a street of smart bars, it fashioned itself as a more traditional pub, with dark polished wood, leather seats, gleaming brass—an authentic look and feel that no doubt had been conceived and styled in a corporate boardroom to appeal to tourists.
Dwight looked up from his pint and yet again allowed his eyes to dart to the door of the crowded pub. The mates he had come with were still around somewhere-- or were they? Brian had mentioned seeking out the gents but Duncan, where had he gone? It was rather loud --it was Saturday night after all-- but Dwight hadn’t really been paying close attention to his friend’s desperate commentary on everything female in the place. Yes, now he saw that Duncan was across the room playing a video quiz game with the blonde woman he’d finally gotten the booze-inspired nerve to speak to.

*Nothing like a stag do to remind you that your mates are no better than wild animals in rutting season.*

Dwight was growing disgusted to be associated with them and was glad the worst of the weekend was behind him. Another mate, Kevin, was getting married in a fortnight and had invited Dwight and others up for a last “bit of fun” as he had described it. They all arrived on Thursday and tonight, thankfully, had largely dispersed their own separate ways after days of drinking and ogling women. Now it was just Dwight and the two others. But he was hoping once Demelza arrived he’d have the excuse he needed to finally ditch them as well.

His glass was now empty but he felt conspicuous sitting alone without something to do. He was considering ordering another pint, when he heard a chorus of male voices buzzing at the door. Their hulking bodies blocked his view so he couldn't see what was transpiring as but by the loud breathing and chuckles, he suspected a woman had just entered. He was sickened by such a primal display.

*As soon as she does arrive, we’ll leave straight away. Maybe find a kebab place and catch up,* he thought to himself.

The crowd of men parted and the figure moved on, unintimidated by their animal mating gestures, clearly ignoring them even though their eyes remained trained on her body as she moved towards the bar.

She was tall and the ankle boots she was wearing made her appear taller still. She wore tight jeans and a black leather jacket over a drapey, sheer top--was it blue or silver? Her hair was partially pulled back to one side and large gold hoop earrings called attention to her face. It was a striking face with red lipstick, long black lashes, smokey eyeshadow--all the sort of makeup a woman would choose when going out.

Dwight felt his heart push against his rib cage. He tried to stand up but his leg caught on the bar stool. She reached him before he found his footing and she put her cool soft hand on the back of his neck, then kissed his cheek.

The other men who had been watching responded with disappointed groans. This woman was spoken for. They turned back to their vigil by the door, waiting to pounce on the next thing that entered.

“Demelza!” Dwight was so relieved to see her and it took a moment in his semi-drunk state to fully process how different she looked tonight compared to most other times he’d seen her over the years. He had always thought her pretty and when they were intimate had found the contours of her flesh arousing, but he’d never seen her deliberately try to be attractive with makeup or wear clothes that called attention to her body. Now up close he could see how sheer her top was. His eyes wandered down to the back lace bra visible through it and where the thin fabric clung to her stomach, he could make out the gentle indentation of her navel.

She was absolutely sexy.

“You...you look...” he tried to speak but then, horrified, realised he was acting just about as
predatory as the other grunting men in the pub.

She laughed and wiped the lipstick smudge from his cheek then took his hand in hers.

“Oh Dwight, you like? I thought I would try to dress the part. Do I look like a woman on a henny out for a bit of fun?”

“Well you don’t look nearly drunk enough. Let me get you caught up,” he laughed and ordered her a vodka and lime and another pint for himself.

“Cheers!” he said and as he leaned closer, inhaled her scent. She was wearing perfume tonight--another first. “Isn’t it a coincidence that I’m in London for a stag do and you are here for your mates as well?”

“It’s not that much of a coincidence, Dwight. We are both at an age where our friends are getting married. And it’s late May and the number of couples who sentimentally wed in June would suggest it is the most common time, in fact, for such parties to occur. And it is also reasonable to assume London of all places would be an attractive locale. So statistically speaking….”

“Good god. You sound like me,” he said.

“Oh I learned from the best!” She smiled and took a generous sip of her drink. “You know they now make apps for hen nights? Yes, Sophia had a schedule on her mobile and we were only ⅓ of the way through the pub crawl she’d mapped out. I think she was rather mortified that it turned into such a maudlin vomit fest. Good thing there weren’t more of us,” Demelza said and inspected the state of his drink. She shot him an admonishing look and he took a long gulp to keep pace with her.

“And tell me why is it called a *hen* party but a *stag* do? Why can’t we be does? No, I suppose a *doe* doesn't really work does it.  Maybe you blokes should have cock parties?”

“Uh Demelza, I think that sounds a bit rude and maybe suggests some other sort of bacchanal,” he replied. “So you’re to be a bridesmaid, huh? I’d pay to see you in a frilly dress.”

“Oh it’s not frilly. It’s navy blue and extremely tasteful because everything Helen Greenwell does must be tasteful. Nonetheless I’m not exactly looking forward to it. And you?”

“Yes my gown is tasteful as well,” he laughed at his own joke. Demelza looked at him with a gentle, humouring sort of smile.

“No, I’m lucky, Kevin and Maisie’s is a ‘destination wedding’ and while I was invited, they accept that I can’t quite make it to Santorini for lack of time and money.”

“Oh hell, find the time and the money! That sounds amazing, Dwight. Better than Somerset. Did I already mention I’m dreading it?”

While Demelza went to order another round, Dwight watched her move across the room. Whatever she said to the bartender had caused him to laugh and she put her hand on his arm as he pushed their drinks towards her. He’d never seen her flirt in public before. She seemed rather skilled.

“So always a bridesmaid and never a bride?” he asked her when she returned.

“Actually this is my first time ever being a bridesmaid so I don’t have enough data to speculate on my destiny…But truly, Dwight, *all* my school friends are getting married this year. Every last one of them. Even Charlotte has found someone as unfeeling and as cynical as she is. It’s exhausting!”
“Do you see it for yourself?” he asked earnestly.

“What?”

“See yourself as a bride ever?”

“Good god, I don’t think that way. I see the future... as a misty patch ahead with loads of different doors to open. What’s behind door #1? Or door #32? Who knows!”

“I love how your mind works,” he said and looked at her sitting across from him. She had removed her leather jacket and the wide neck of her top slipped just a bit, exposing her delicate collar bone. In the past whenever he had kissed her, he went straight for where the slender neck met the smooth shoulders. He thought of this now and without realising it, licked his lips.

“Really, Dwight? You claim to be admiring my mind but you are looking down my top!” she teased. Then she paused dramatically and, staring into his eyes, ran her finger tip along her neckline so it revealed the black lace of her bra. Then she threw her head back in a peal of laughter at her silly theatrics and continued their conversation as though nothing had happened.

Dwight had not found it silly at all.

He struggled now to keep his eyes trained on her face but they settled on her lips. Her full, wet, and uncharacteristically red lips that had left untidy marks on her glass as she drank and on his cheek when she had kissed him earlier.

“What’s funny is that I can see myself as a grandmother,” she said and dipped her finger in her drink. She brought it to her mouth to suck the lime juice, this time without any awareness of how alluring this might seem.

“What?” he asked, trying to keep up.

“Yes, isn’t that ridiculously arrogant of me to assume I won’t die young? You know get run over by a lorry, or fall off a cliff, or develop a brain tumour…”

“It’s not arrogant,” he said, glad to be back in fluid conversation with her. “If you look at the statistics it likely you won’t develop a brain tumour. Just avoid lorries and cliffs if you can,” he said trying to sound sensible.

“Believe me, I’ll try. Yes, somehow I can see grandchildren…And I think they are coming out to the country to visit with me,” she added.

“And are you knitting in a rocking chair?” he laughed.

“No, not that... maybe I’d be chopping wood. And I’ll probably want to talk to them about gulf hypoxia or soil salinity but they’ll just want to hear stories of the time a giant skua plopped on my head.”

“Did that happen?”

“Yes, it was horrid. They are massive birds so the amount of shit was unbelievable.”

“And this is your fantasy of the future, Demelza? Tell me, is there a granddad too?”

“I dunno. I can’t see him.”

“Maybe he’s inside asleep by the fire.”
“Or who knows? Perhaps there’s another gran inside… Maybe I’ll live with a whole coven of old lady ornithologists. I’m just saying there’s a lot in the future that is yet unknown. So one must keep open to many possibilities.”

She took another drink as though she was committing herself fully to that belief.

“But look… I got this lovely gift from the bride.” She pulled out a small hip flask decorated with pictures of peonies in varying shades of pinks and red. “And by lovely I, of course, mean utterly ridiculous. It’s funny too-- I can’t imagine Helen ever drinking from a flask if her life depended on it.”

“Even one so pretty?” he smiled. “Don’t hate me but I got this from Kevin…” he pulled out a small folding knife. On one side it was engraved with Thanks mate, on the other side it said Dwight. A man’s gift.

“You can have it,” he offered.

“Really?” She was genuinely excited. “Thanks mate,” she laughed. “I never did replace the pocket knife I lost in Snowdonia years ago. Only we must trade, Dwight.”

“It’s a deal.”

“What would you say to one last round here?” She asked and as she alighted from her stool, she bobbed for a moment on the heels that were just a bit higher than what she was used to. Hand splayed, she grabbed his leg to steady herself. After she had walked away he could still feel the heat coursing through his thigh where seconds ago her palm had been.

“You’re back,” he said when she returned, and he flashed the uncertain smile he used when flirting with her. He suspected he was wobbling a bit on his stool too. Another round was probably not the wisest of moves.

“Oh, but Dwight, we still have hours ahead of us and so much to explore,” she replied slyly. Was she containing a laugh? He couldn’t tell. He watched her mouth with intent fascination.

“Say it again, Demelza,” he said impulsively.

“Say what?” she smiled and narrowed her eyes trying to suss out his game.

“Hen and….” he prompted her.

“Stag?”

“Nope.”

“Oh, you mean… cock?”

“Mmm,” he smiled and closed his eyes.

“Yes, Dwight?”

“Demelza…” he said. He saw that he had just lit a match while sitting only a few feet from a powderkeg.

“You like it when I talk about cocks?” She leaned closer and the elegant but strong hand returned to his thigh. “Do you want me to talk about your cock, Dwight?” she whispered.
He traced his finger up her cheek and then slowly across her lips.

“Where are you staying tonight, Demelza?” he asked.

“The Greenwell sisters have their aunt’s flat in Chelsea to themselves. She’s on business somewhere—Beijing I believe?” She explained matter of factly and took a long drink from her glass. She seemed to turn the seduction banter on and off at will.

“I’ve a hotel room. Of my own,” he countered.

“Are you inviting me there?”

“Yes.” He leaned back slightly to better read her response.

Staring into his eyes again, she unscrewed the floral flask sitting on the table between them. Then with tremendous attention to her task, she poured the remainder of her drink into the narrow opening at the top, just a bit dribbled down the side. She raised it and licked a bead of cold vodka with a slow, determined tongue.

“Well in that case, shall we go now, Dwight? Because I really want you to…” Now she leaned forward and whispered the next two words in his ear.

He’d certainly heard her say ‘fuck’ before—plenty of times in fact— but only as an expletive and never like that—as a request. Not in all the times they’d been together, as playful or as heated as they might have been. He grasped her wrist, shocked by the keenness of his arousal. She wriggled her fingers free and traced them along his palm then intertwined them in his own and squeezed.

“I think… I should like to get you back without delay,” he stammered.

“Oh?” She tilted her head coyly.

“We’re getting a taxi,” Dwight declared, and forgetting to say goodbye to his mates who were still somewhere in the pub, led Demelza out into the bustling London night.

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The taxi ride from Old Street to Sussex Gardens took forever and if there was a route with the most road work or traffic congestion, their driver had certainly found it. Perhaps expecting a bit of a show from his passengers, he kept his eyes fixed on them through his rear view mirror. But if that were the case, he would find himself disappointed, for although Dwight’s hand remained up the back of Demelza’s top and he occasionally pecked her neck, they both felt too self-conscious to actually do much snogging in the back of the cab.

But once they were off the hotel lift and safely in Dwight’s room, Demelza kissed him with an open mouthed, unyielding kiss that was like a starting pistol at a race. She pushed him hard against the closed door and began to lift up his shirt.

He peeled her jacket from her and moved to kiss her neck but she escaped from his grasp and slid down his body. Dwight was certain the entire hotel could hear the sound of his trousers being unzipped, announcing to all what she was about to do. As she crouched in front of him, he looked over her head and saw lights from a window opposite. Despite the staggering pleasure he was already experiencing, he had a lucid moment and reached to switch off the lights so they were not quite so on display.

“Come,” he whispered. He steered her towards the bed but she immediately took control again and
sat him firmly at the edge then knelt before him. Her knowing hands continued to undress him while at the same time she resumed her urgent mission.

“Melz,” he groaned and threaded his fingers through her soft, familiar hair. Another moan escaped him, this time signaling he was ready to cede control. But then moments later when he was close to an ecstasy that threatened to overwhelm him, he suddenly wanted to hear her voice. And so calling on the greatest of willpower, he freed himself from her clutches and guided her up on the bed beside him.

“Talk to me,” he whispered, as she removed the last of her own garments. She was just about to unfasten the black bra when he reached to stop her. “No, leave that on,” he said.

Wet lipped and wide eyed, she stared him down but did as she was told.

“Oh? Is this what you like, Dwight?” she purred and ran her fingers along the lace, tracing her own curves. It had been a playful, contrived gesture when she did it at the bar earlier but it seemed genuine to Dwight now.

He accepted her invitation and with his teeth greedily grazed first the lace edging and then the soft flesh that swelled over its top. His hands moved up and down her back, determined to touch as much of her skin as he could.

“Tell me what you want,” Dwight said without lifting his head from her breasts.

So in a low and husky voice that was unfamiliar to him, she detailed her dark and never before spoken desires. And while her obedient lover followed the orders given him, this new Demelza narrated their every move in his ear, using words that were not her own, as they both sought pleasure and oblivion.

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“Usually we chat a bit more before we hit the sheets. This was a first,” Demelza laughed. She had her head nestled on Dwight’s belly and looked up to see his eyes were closed, his breathing grown steady.

Whatever whim she had had earlier to become someone else for the evening had since evaporated. Now she wanted nothing more than to be her real self lying next to her very real friend.

“Dwight?” she said softly.

“Yes, yes,” he muttered sleepily and stroked her hair. “Go on, my little hen,” he teased.

“Oh good god!” She sat up alarmed. “Is that what you think? That I’m squawking?”

“No, no… never, Demelza,” Dwight opened both eyes.

“I mean it’s a hen night because we don’t stop clucking, do we? How ridiculous. I’m never doing another henny unless it’s called something else,” she declared.

He gave a crooked smile.

“You just thought this now, Melz?”

“And I repeat--it’s just not fair you get to be a stag! All dignified and solitary,” she huffed.

“Those are the very words I think of when I think of you, you know,” he said, and he wasn’t teasing.
“It’s worth noting,” she went on, “that with most birds it is the male that does the squawking when trying to attract a mate, not the female.”

Yes, I saw that the past few nights with the lads, Dwight thought.

“Even the skua?” he asked and gently pulled her down to him so that her face was next to his. His hand moved back to her head and he twisted strands of her hair between his fingers. He was tired but didn’t want to stop touching her.

“Yes, Dwight. Even the skua. Did you know they practice polyandry?”

“The skua?” he asked trying to keep up. “Polyandry? Does that appeal to you?”

“No, it sounds like a lot of work,” she replied.

“It’s supposed to be the opposite. You know two blokes attending to one female.”

“I suppose it could be rather practical in nature,” she mused. “But in humans it would no doubt result in twice the emotional drama, twice as many egos to attend to, twice the smelly socks to pick up…”

“Hey, I always pick up my things. You are the one who just flings her belongings wherever she pleases,” he laughed. Sure enough, except for her bra which she still was wearing, her clothes were strewn across the small room just where she had shed them hours earlier.

“Do you want me to tidy up then?” she asked and started to rise from the bed. She knew he was teasing but wanted to call his bluff.

“I think you you should stay the night,” he interrupted.

“Yes?”

“Because I’m tired,” he explained.

“And…”?

“And if I know you, you won’t want to pay for a taxi to Helen’s flat and will insist on taking the Tube. But then I won’t feel right about you riding alone in the wee hours of the morning so I’ll want to come with you…”

“You’re right, I’m not shelling out another 30 quid. And you’ve been known to be a tad chivalrous at times, Dwight…” she agreed and laid back down next to him.

“But I’m rather spent right now --thanks to you--and would prefer to just lie here in this uncomfortable hotel bed with you next to me. So will you grant me the favour…”

“So if I stayed if would be out of consideration for you?”

“Yes,” he said and nuzzled his face into her shoulder, pulling the covers up around them tighter, knowing she wouldn’t say no.

“Well, if it means you and I can have a leisurely breakfast and get properly caught up tomorrow, then I’m willing to stay. A favour for you, Dwight,” she said and kissed the top of his head. She looked at the lights from across the way that snuck in through the window, even though the curtains had been pulled shut. “You know what this place needs? One of those flashing neon signs outside the window that says Hotel.”
“Like in old movies? Is it that seedy?” he asked.

“No, it’s perfectly fine, Dwight. And very clean if that’s your worry.”

“Someday, Demelza, we’ll meet up in a luxurious five star hotel. Or better yet, in a villa on Santorini,” he muttered.

“That sounds lovely. We can ride horses on the beach together,” she said softly and closed her eyes too.

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The next morning they slept later than was usual for either of them and woke, unsurprisingly, to find the drink of the previous night had indeed taken its toll. Dwight was certain he’d never be able to lift his leaden head from the pillow but Demelza, who always seemed to know exactly the best cures for a hangover, suggested they venture out in the fresh drizzle for a greasy fry-up.

Instead they instead found a quiet Korean place just around the corner and soon were staring down two massive bowls of steaming kimchi soup.

“Trust me, Dwight. It’s the best medicine for what ails you. This may be the one useful thing I learned from my father.”

“Your father taught you that jjigae works for hangovers?” he laughed.

“No, not this specifically. But you need a little protein, something greasy, something salty, or something sour. This hits most of those categories,” she explained. She poked reverently at a lovely slice of pork hiding under the kimchi with her silver chopstick. “I learned by trial and error. My father would get vexed if I served him the wrong breakfast after he’d been out with his mates.”

She stopped there. Even though Tom Carne had been the very reason they first spoke outside of lecture years ago, she didn't like to talk to Dwight much about her cruel and neglectful father, knowing how much it upset him. Even now, when she dared to look up, she saw Dwight’s eyes had turned the shade of grey they took on when he was troubled.

But she had been correct and the soup was precisely what they needed, so they tucked in without feeling the need to speak. Suddenly Dwight broke the silence, whispering across the table to her.

“Uh... Demelza.” Dwight looked embarrassed. “Do you by any chance have a scarf or something similar back at Helen’s flat?”

“Dwight? Why?” she asked with a curious smile.

“You seem to have, well I think I gave you a bit of a love bite. On your neck near your collarbone there,” he admitted sheepishly.

“A hickey?!” She let out a cackle of laughter and lifted the chrome serviette dispenser to try to see her reflection. “Indeed you did, Dwight. I don’t think I’ve ever had one before, not even when I was at school. I think I shall wear it with some pride and not conceal it.”

“Demelza, I’m so sorry... I don't know what got into me.”

“Really, Dwight. I had no idea a little dirty talk would turn you on so much,” she replied.

“I’m not sure I knew that either,” he laughed. “I’m glad you’re a good sport about it all. It
doesn't hurt?” he asked and reached out gently to touch it.

“No, it doesn't,” she reassured him and put her hand over his.

“What will your prim and proper mates think?” he asked, feeling more and more ashamed.

“That I met a handsome fellow and we performed unspeakable acts.”

“Unspeakable acts?”

“Yes, well I'm not going to speak of them,” she winked at him. “You know, I did text them last night and told them I had met a hot man and was going back to his hotel with him. But I'm not sure they actually believed me and just assumed I was attending a late night book group or something wholesome. They think I'm a scholarly prude and they imagine you are some fusty old professor with a receding hairline, a pipe, and a tweed coat. They probably thought you and I read conservation field journals all night.”

“Well, in truth we might feel a bit better this morning if had we done that,” he laughed.

“Oh is it that bad, Dwight? Maybe some ginger tea then?” She was worried now--he did look a bit green--and hoped he wouldn't be sick on the drive back to Bristol with Brian.

“No, Melz,” he said. “I have no regrets about the way I spent last night.”

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Later that afternoon while Demelza was on her way back to Cambridge, she felt waves of exhaustion roll through her as the train moved steadily on its tracks. It had been an eventful weekend after all and she hadn't realised just how much steam she needed to release. She leaned her weary head on the window and knew she'd be asleep within moments. But before she let go, she caught her reflection and saw her mussed hair and faded makeup. She laughed aloud and thought of the mark on neck, quite certain there would be matching ones on her breasts. She hadn't mentioned those to Dwight; she hadn't wanted to embarrass him further.

But she too had no regrets.

She recalled bits of what they had spoken of the previous night. She had been speaking the truth when she told Dwight she didn't have firm plans for the future nor could she see any definitive path ahead of her. She didn't really want to be alone forever but didn't mind it now. What did that mean then? When would things change? She couldn't say.

But somehow she did know that she would never ride horses on the beach in Greece with Dwight. That just wasn't going to be their path. And she wondered then, if this might have been the last time she would ever sleep with him. How would they know when that part of their relationship was finally at a close? Would it be mutual and clear to them both? Or would there be resentment, regret? Or would they laugh it off as they had the love bites?

I'll do whatever I can to stay his friend. I must never hurt him, she thought to herself.
Despite the return of the rain, Demelza still went out for a grueling run every day. She was running faster and farther too, although she was not quite sure how much distance she covered each time. Recently she had taken to following the paths north of the engine house, avoiding the familiar areas to the south—away from the wood near Trenwith and the coves and cliffs closer to Nampara. She knew what she was doing. She was trying to run away—from her troubles and from the situation she’d created that wasn’t getting any easier with each passing day.

Soon she might have another means of escape. The official offer from Chicago had come through and the research position at the Field Museum was hers if she wanted it. A few months ago this would have been her dream come true. Now she wasn’t sure. Compared to what she could be doing here, working with a collection of dead specimens seemed suddenly dull and unappealing. Yet might it not be best for everyone if she accepted? It would certainly be the easiest. Dwight would understand why she had to leave and would never resent her for seizing the opportunity. Of course he’d be miserable and alone as he sorted out the business with Warleggan, but if he never learned about her and Ross, she could at least avoid breaking his heart.

But then there was Ross. Could she bear to leave him? She didn’t know. When she thought about it, her own heart seemed to stop beating, her breath became laboured.

She longed for the way things were a few months before, when she gloriously felt nothing. Not really dead inside, just placid, even-keeled, mistress of herself, satisfied with the little things life threw her way. No heart-rending attachments and no one else to consider. Now with this deep well of feelings—and this intense longing—she had never felt so miserable.

And while Demelza raced against the wind trying to put more distance between herself and her emotions, Ross soberly tramped around the yard of Nampara busying himself with tasks long neglected. A stone wall needed mending, a barn door was loose on its hinges. He could hire someone to attend to these but he felt that the only way to stay sane now was through physical labour.

How could she have let more than a week go by? Each day without word from Demelza was destroying him; he wanted nothing more than to get in his car and burst into the engine house to ask her where they stood, to demand they resolve this then and there. But of course he didn’t—he promised her he’d let her sort it out and he too lamented that Dwight would be hurt no matter what.

Shouldn’t he feel worse about Dwight? What kind of friend was he? Ross felt the return of a self-hatred—a feeling once familiar that he had not experienced for some time. But now... he was beginning to think he was no better than his father. How was it he had described him just recently? Old Joshua preferred his women attached. Was that why Ross wanted Demelza? Because she was an unattainable prize, a challenge? And was besting Dwight part of the thrill?

Ross recalled with a shudder of disgust the first time he really came to understand Joshua as a man, not just as his father. Ross had been a boy—thirteen maybe—and had been searching about the house for his father one afternoon. The library door had been locked so Ross assumed Joshua was busy at work and wouldn’t want to be disturbed. Ross then went out to the yard—what had he been chasing? A baby goat had gotten loose, that was it, and as he tried to capture it, he happened to notice a gap in the curtains to the library window. He hadn’t really meant to peer in but did nonetheless.
There on the library floor before the hearth was his father entwined with another body. They were both naked and with so much exposed flesh, and it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began. No, Ross must have been fourteen because he remembered making a rather detached observation that at just the very beginnings of his puberty, he already had more body hair than his father.

Ross knew what he was seeing—he knew it academically, for he was already versed in the mechanics of sexual reproduction both from school and from cursory talks with his father. He also knew it viscerally for he had lived on a farm and understood the nature of animals. Yet this was the first time he had married the two understandings. And unlike his classmates and his cousin Francis, young Ross had never sought out any pornography, so this was the first time he had actually seen two people in the act of love.

Only it wasn’t that—it wasn’t love making but something more raw and carnal. His father’s rhythmic driving was fast and furious. Ross could sense there was something forbidden and wrong with it all, so covertly and hastily sought. And when his father put his greedy hands to the woman’s ample breasts, she reared her head back in a moan so that Ross could make out her face. It was Mrs. Teague, their neighbour. And she happened to be very much married to Mr. Teague, who probably would not at all be happy to learn Joshua Poldark was shagging his wife.

Far more disturbed than curious, young Ross moved away from the window at once lest he be spotted, and never spoke to anyone about what he saw. And from that day forward he gave his father a wide berth around the place. He was rather certain Mrs. Teague didn’t come back again but he knew there were others. Ross stopped trying to read the gleam—or the fury—in the eyes of the neighbourhood ladies when his father’s name was mentioned. He just assumed Joshua had slept with most of them.

What had his father been seeking—or avoiding—in his desperate coupling with all those unattainable women?

*Oh good god! It had been on that very sheepskin hadn’t it?* Ross spat in disgust.

So this was what he had become?

No! It wasn’t that way now. His need for Demelza wasn’t wrong. Of course, he desired Demelza but what he really wanted, what he missed these last days, was her company. He wanted to talk to her, to hear her voice, to listen to her stories.

*Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine...*

But not just the despair. It was more than that. He missed her quietly walking beside him or sitting in front of the fire. And more than anything, he longed to once again watch the joy and light that danced in her eyes.

He resisted no more and picked up his mobile.

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“Demelza, we are in luck. I have some intelligence for you. You remember the missing receptionist from CPE Environmental Group, Katie Thomas? I found her sister and I spoke to her! Not Katie, but the sister…” Caroline said with excitement as she burst through the door of the engine house.

It was Caroline’s first visit there and by the quick glance around the place, followed by an almost imperceptible nod, Demelza sensed she approved of the decor. Of course she would—the engine
house renovation had been Verity’s design.


“Well first there was this,” Caroline began to read from her mobile. “Selina and João Andorinha were married on December 2nd at St Merryn Church followed by a reception at the Glendorgal Hotel, Newquay. The bride wore an ivory gown with dramatic taffeta high-collar and elegantly draped trumpet beaded bodice with back button detail and chapel train --I’m sorry but that sounds dreadful. Wait, you’ll appreciate this-- The newlyweds released neither balloons nor rice in consideration for the environment.”

“Brilliant!”

“Oh, but there’s more! The bride is a private music teacher and the groom is a sales associate with Sutton Bespoke Motors...well, we already know all about his business,” Caroline said and looked up from her mobile. She was clearly quite proud of her research. “So I rang this Selina Andorinha née Thomas, and asked if she was still giving music lessons--as though I weren’t aware she no longer lived in Cornwall. And then I asked her, if by any chance, she was related to Katie Thomas.”

Demelza marveled at how bold but simple Caroline’s approach had been and doubted she could have been that successful. Then again her specialty was understanding birds, not people. Caroline’s talents at reading others--and listening carefully to both what was said and unsaid--was impressive. Could Caroline read her that well? She wondered.

“And Selina said yes, Katie was her sister and was actually staying with her right now in London. And so I acted so surprised…’London? Really? You don’t say?’ But then I asked why did she leave so suddenly without saying goodbye to anyone at Jenna’s Salon?’ Caroline sat herself down in one of the chairs by the fire and paused to take the cup of tea Demelza handed her.

“What? I’m lost...who is Jenna? And how did you get Selina's number in the first place?” Demelza laughed and sat across from her.

“Oh sorry. I forgot to mention that part. Jenna Clarke--the woman who did the bride’s hair and makeup was mentioned in the wedding write up so I took a chance. And it paid off. It was Jenna who gave me Selina’s number and then, when I rang her in London, I may have suggested I was a stylist who worked with Jenna…”

“This is unbelievable…”

“Oh mind you, Demelza, it was mere suggestion. I never actually lied,” Caroline added in case Demelza was genuinely worried about being deceitful. “But Selina is still very bitter so it all just came right out with very little prompting. Who wants your little sister living on your sofa when you’re newly married? Plus they’ve had to engage a nurse to care for their mum back in Truro while Katie is away--mum’s been rather ill, you see. Selina told me the whole story--or at least the part we want to know--and it all makes sense.”

“Does it?”

“Katie had uncovered a costly mistake at CPE Environmental Group, then naively reported it, so she’d been sent packing. But Selina also made it clear that Katie had been told she wasn't to talk about it. Apparently it didn't stop Selina from spilling her guts to me though--she didn’t seem to be taking the threats seriously…” Caroline said and sipped her tea.

“Threats? To Katie?”
“To the whole family. *Implied* threats, I suppose.” Caroline tried assuage Demelza’s worries. “Selina didn’t have names of exactly who had issued them—believe me, I asked—and as I said, she didn’t seem to take them seriously herself. So Katie’s just in London until things blow over. Katie’s got a boyfriend back in Truro that she’s desperate to get back to.”

*Threats? Maybe what Noelle had phoned me about the other night had some merit after all,* Demelza thought.

“Oh, Caroline! I’m not sure what we can do, I mean unless we tell the authorities.” Demelza bit her lip in despair. “But it’s not really our part to report threats to the Thomas family if they haven’t done so themselves, is it? Or who knows—maybe they have? But in any case, I’d better tell Dwight.” It wasn’t lost on her that there were now distinct categories of things she should tell Dwight and things she wouldn’t.

In that moment, as they sat in the tidy little cottage drinking tea, Demelza was again struck by Caroline’s extraordinary friendship. She’d done so much for her and for Dwight and what had she expected in return?

*No, Carne, that’s just what friends do. They just give without any expectation of it being returned. Or have you forgotten how to be a real friend?* she chastised herself.

Caroline looked at her as though she was reading Demelza’s troubled thoughts.

“If you don’t mind me asking, is there something bothering you, Demelza? I mean something else?” she asked.

Demelza was caught off guard but was grateful that at least Caroline hadn’t asked if someone else was the trouble. Demelza took a sip to give herself a moment to think.

It would be easy to tell her about Ross in that moment, and Demelza felt confident Caroline wouldn’t judge or even tease. She’d understand the turmoil and the dilemma. What a relief it would be to share the burden with someone! And who knew? Maybe Caroline would even have some sage advice. But no, she had asked Ross not to speak of it to anyone, it would be unfair for her not to do the same. She swallowed hard.

“Well poor Dwight—and CEA—have had a significant financial set back…” she began. If she didn’t dare tell Caroline about her romantic entanglement with Ross, she could still tell her about the equipment recall. That was part of the story anyway, and certainly caused enough woe on its own.

“That sounds dreadful, my dear,” Caroline said when she heard the details. She seemed sincere and even personally injured—or at least insulted—by such a setback. “Is it the sort of problem one can throw any money at and make it go away?”

“Well, yes but that’s the problem, really. We haven’t got any and Dwight refuses to take out further loans. What we need is a grant. I suppose instead of chasing down Stephen Carrington, I should be researching grant applications,” Demelza lamented.

She was going to ask Caroline what she thought their next move might be with the Thomas sisters, when her mobile buzzed. She meant to only glance at it but her mouth fell open when she spied the sender.

“Hello?... Demelza? Based on your expression just now, I believe you’d better check that,” Caroline winked.

“Okay,” Demelza said softly and opened the text from Ross.
Once again, there was no greeting, no signature. She should really have expected that of him now. Then again it was a text, not an email. Still it was almost cryptic in its wording-- *I’ll be at Tehidy Stable tomorrow at 4* --revealing nothing of the sender’s thoughts or feelings.

But what did it mean? Was it an invitation? She thought so, but why hadn’t he explicitly asked her to come or why not phone instead? They’d agreed nothing in writing yet he texted anyway. Was it a mark of desperation? Or was she just reading too much into this? She knit her brow as she weighed how to respond.

She couldn’t lie to herself. The idea of seeing Ross again made her breathless. But wasn’t it asking for trouble? Oh god! What if when she told Dwight--and she’d have to tell him, she wouldn’t lie--he wanted to join them? That would be simply impossible; the tension would kill her instantly.

“Good news, I hope?” Caroline smiled.

“Ross Poldark wants me to ride with him tomorrow, I think,” Demelza explained, trying to keep her voice flat and impassive.


“Oh, are you going to join us?” Now Demelza tried to sound enthusiastic and not disappointed. Then again, it might be perfect to have Caroline there as a sort of chaperone.

“No, I’m lending you something to wear.”

“Did I show you up last time I rode with you?” Demelza laughed.

“Hardly,” Caroline said. “But I need to have you worshipped by all who set eyes on you.”

“Oh I don’t think I’d like that…” Demelza said at once.

“My dear we both know it happens whether you like it or not,” Caroline said.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Debbie Horsfield for a few lines of borrowed dialogue from S4 ep 7 & also to Mary Oliver for a snippet of “Wild Geese” (Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine…).
Almost immediately after Ross had sent his text to Demelza, he heard from Verity.

“Oh Ross, I’m so pleased I caught you. I was hoping you might come see us sometime soon? I’m at Trenwith for a few days,” his cousin began.

Ross sensed at once that something wasn’t quite right. While they often suspected Aunt Agatha’s complaints came more from her temperament than from actual ailments, Verity wasn’t one to take chances and answered her aunt’s every call without question. She’d been up to see the old woman just this weekend and now she was already back on a Tuesday--midweek visits were becoming more and more frequent for her.

“That’s rich, he thought. Someone calling on me, of all people, to lighten their mood.

“I’ll be right over,” he said.

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Ross had considered walking over to Trenwith for yet another physical outlet to drive away his restive mood. But in the end, he took his car thinking that once his family obligations were fulfilled, he really should make an appearance at Grace today. His work at the quarry never ended and whatever he didn’t attend to soon, would only come back to haunt him later--tonight, tomorrow, even on the weekend. He was used to working long hours and usually didn’t notice or complain. And yet today he’d felt little inspiration. This was new feeling for him.

He had promised Demelza he wouldn't say a word to Dwight, who he’d managed to avoid seeing in person, but he began to feel desperate to unburden himself of this disquiet and confusion. Verity had always served as a trusted confidante, both in his youth and in his adult years. Perhaps after he sufficiently visited with Aunt Agatha, he might get Verity alone and ask her advice. Advice on what? How to further betray an old friend whose very business was already in danger from their association?

Good god, perhaps both Dwight and Demelza would be better off if I were gone from their lives.

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Elizabeth Warleggan swung a left from Lemon Street to Boscawen Street and grew mildly annoyed at the afternoon traffic in Truro. She was already annoyed that she had to go up to Trenwith today to attend some estate business that couldn’t be addressed remotely. At least Verity Poldark would be present to act as a buffer between her and the abrasive old woman who lived there permanently. In truth she’d hoped that she wouldn't have to see anyone at all, but could just speak directly with Tom Harry, their head of security, sign whatever papers needed signing, and be off.

But the drive wasn’t a long one and her new Evoque was comfortable enough so she knew she shouldn’t really complain. The car had been a recent gift from her husband, George. She thought it a bit silly--she hardly needed a Range Rover in Truro and most days found it difficult to park. Still she
knew George was fond of his and it seemed important to him that their cars form a matched set.

George had definite opinions about cars. He liked bold colours; the Evoque he drove was Firenze Red. And over the years, he had grown committed to the idea that all their vehicles should be colour-coded. Elizabeth's cars had all been white, George's red, and he insisted on brighter colours--ones she actually considered rather garish--for the staff he employed.

He'd once fancied blue as “her” colour. Early in their marriage he had surprised her with a new BMW in Orient Blue. She was sophisticated enough to dislike the name and had enough taste to dislike the flashy metallic colour. But she was appreciative of the gesture nonetheless, so she tactfully suggested that black or white might be a good colour for her next car. Sure enough when the new Mercedes arrived on her birthday, it was Polar White. And this latest one from George, the Evoque, was Fuji White.

Elizabeth liked to think she hadn't been spoiled, that she fully appreciated each gift from him and that she didn't expect them. In fact, she felt certain her expectations had not been altered much all these years living with George and his opulence.

But she had grown used to being satisfied. It had been a long time--over fifteen years--since she’d last experienced any disappointment in a gift from someone who supposedly loved her.

Ross Poldark had given her a ring when they first were engaged--could one really call it an engagement? It was more an impulsive move after a brief, fiery affair. And one certainly wouldn't have called that an engagement ring. The stone had been barely larger than a chip of diamond. She remembered wondering why Ross had even bothered? Yes, they were young and at that time he had little money, but if he couldn't get a proper ring, or lower himself to ask his father for assistance in the matter, why buy her anything at all? It had bordered on insult.

What had disturbed her most was that Ross hadn't even apologised. He must have known it wasn’t adequate but never acknowledged that nor seemed to consider how it might make her feel. No, he left all the bad feelings and ill will lie with her instead of just owning up to the fact that what he could give her wasn't enough. She should have known then that they were on diverging paths. Well, that was long behind her and she’d since learned what it meant to build a successful marriage.

She’d never been happier, or at least never more satisfied, than she was as Mrs. George Warleggan. She and George had the same purpose, the same goals, were traveling on the same trajectory. They were a team and had accomplished so much in their time together.

And yet…

Lately Elizabeth could not shake the feeling that George had been hiding something. Not lying exactly, just keeping something to himself, perhaps even to protect her. And whatever it was, she felt confident it wasn’t about her, and it certainly was not another woman. She could tell. She trusted him in a way she never trusted anyone else her whole life, even those she’d loved.

As she drove on, her mind wandered to her children. Just that morning she’d sent a text to her eldest son, Geoffrey Charles, and was hoping he’d deign to reply within the week. He was away at school but it wouldn’t be terribly long before summer holidays; they’d need to solidify their plans. George didn’t really like Geoffrey Charles to stay long with them in Truro, and in truth neither did Geoffrey Charles himself. They both made their views very clear to all parties. But George didn’t like it when Geoffrey Charles stayed away from them--with his Trenwith relatives--either. Elizabeth suspected George felt somewhat threatened by another Poldark presence in the ancient family home. She never put this into words and certainly would never accuse George of feeling insecure around the Poldarks after so many years. Of course the Trenwith estate would be Geoffrey Charles’s in just about a
decade but no one--other than Aunt Agatha--ever reminded George of that pesky detail.

Elizabeth then thought about her youngest, Valentine. She’d need to watch her time carefully so she could be back in Truro later that afternoon to pick him up from his fencing lesson. He was still so young and rather clumsy but he had begged and begged to start, and finally she gave in. Fencing was such a noble pastime and might just offer him a spot of discipline. She certainly hadn’t really pressed Valentine hard in that regard. Elizabeth supposed she indulged Valentine in his behaviour to make up for the overwhelming constraints she had felt her whole life.

And George, well George gave Valentine things because that was what he thought had been limited in his youth. Although Elizabeth wasn’t so sure she agreed with him on that score for whenever George talked about his own childhood, it was clear that as his family was on rise financially, they always gave him whatever he wanted. New toys, flash guitars for the three weeks or so he fancied himself a rocker, all the expensive sneakers and clothes a teenager would want. And then when he was old enough, it had been cars of course, followed by real estate. Her own family had always expressed their wealth in that understated way old families do--expensive things yes, but they had to be quality ones and ones not meant to be ostentatious, just discreetly and silently present. If one had to talk about possessions it showed what one really lacked. Taste, class, breeding.

As she drove the last leg, she hoped the muddy country road wouldn't splash too much on the white car, although it really wouldn’t matter for long if it had. The white car was always kept clean by the staff George employed. No need to say a word--it would automatically be wiped down when she got home.

Lately Elizabeth had felt they had more staff than ever in their home in Truro. She let George hire who he saw fit and certainly wouldn’t complain that so many of the more nettlesome details in their day to day lives were handled by someone else.

She felt the difference when they stayed at at Trenwith. Unless they were visiting for a few days, there was no cook and very few cleaning staff. And there were never any gardening or grounds staff anymore. And yet George always seemed to maintain so many security staff in both Truro and at Trenwith--even when the Warleggans were not in residence.

She’d been thinking that maybe it would be pleasant to be more alone as a family, especially in Truro. Perhaps just a bit more private family time there--she certainly didn't expect any privacy at Trenwith. Of late George’s man, his solicitor and advisor Tankard, seemed to always be around. He even went on holiday with them last spring when they went to St. Lucia. Of course it had been under the pretext of business, but it bothered Elizabeth that neither George nor Tankard had questioned whether it was really necessary.

She’d need to speak to George about this. Either he’d explain why it was necessary, and she’d accept his reasons, or he’d heed her request. She liked that their interactions could be so straightforward, with no games.

In the last few minutes of the drive, her body began to grow a bit stiff. She’d played tennis with her friend, Ruth, the day before--perhaps she had overdone it. Or was it tension at the prospect of spending an afternoon with the Trenwith Poldarks? Maybe she could cut her business short and go for a swim in the lap pool they’d installed in the lowest level of the old house. It was a chilly day but the pool was heated and would surely be soothing--especially since her visit would no doubt include at least one stressful interaction with Agatha Poldark. Elizabeth and Agatha had reached a sort of truce years ago and treated each other with a cool respect. Still there were times the old woman could not resist a barb or two. It had been a part of her nature for over ninety years and she was unlikely to start restraining herself now.
Slowly the Evoque crunched over the gravel drive outside Trenwith. Instead of stopping at the visitor’s carpark or leaving her car at the gate house to be attended by the staff, out of habit she swung around to find a spot in the rear of the house.

But before she parked, she saw the grey Peugeot already by the rear door and felt her stomach drop. A stressful Poldark interaction was most likely unavoidable now.

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When Ross arrived at Trenwith at once he felt a chill seep up from the floors and enter his bones; it seemed to be a permanent condition of both the house and its inhabitants. He was met with the customary shrugs and grunts as Aunt Agatha pretended to be put out by his arrival. It had long been her habit; of course she could never express her gratitude nor her pleasure, not even to those she purported to love the most. After allowing Ross to kiss her cold, dry cheek, she shuffled along towards her favourite chair by the fire.

It was then Ross saw she wasn’t wearing her usual black alligator loafers, but a pair of oversized men’s slippers.

“It’s her blood pressure that’s causing the swelling. She needs more exercise for one thing but she won’t go out for walks on the grounds anymore,” Verity explained to him in a whisper.

“Ross, so nice of you to come ‘round to see us at Trenwith,” the old woman said caustically. “This place may be like a tomb but we’re still all alive you know, despite the cobwebs, and vermin, and …”

“Aunt, forgive me…” Ross began.

“Although maybe you’d like to see me join the rest of the Old Poldarks? In the graveyard behind the Church in Sawle?” she went on.

Ross could see she was in rare form today. While Agatha frequently liked to make others feel guilty for their role in her neglect, she was usually more artful in her wording. And she didn’t idly make jokes about her own death.

“What about the pool?” he asked Verity in what he thought was a lowered voice.

“She won’t touch it, because George had it installed of course, although aqua therapy would be ideal for her,” Verity replied.

“And her nurse? Isn't she any help?”

“Her lady’s companion, you mean?” Verity laughed. “We’re not allowed to call them nurses, you see. She doesn’t like to be reminded she isn’t in top form. And anyway which one? The newest nurse left just last week....”

“They don't seem to last long, do they?” he admitted.

“Are we surprised they might not feel compelled to stay at a job where they are berated for hours on end? Aunt Agatha's complaint is that they aren’t clever enough...and I can't say she is wrong there, but it’s difficult to find someone who is her…”

“Her match,” Ross finished for her. “I know. And the blood pressure? Is her medication not working?”
“I think it needs adjusting. But she is resisting seeing her GP. That’s why I’ve come up. To see if I can budge her.”

“Budge me? Good luck!” Aunt Agatha snapped. “And nonsense. I’m perfectly fit and I can hear every word you are saying, by the way. There’s certainly nothing wrong with my ears, you know.”

“Aunt…”

Just then one of the Trenwith security staff marched into the room. Ross had met him before. His name was Tom Harry, a gruff local fellow known for his brawn and his temper—apparently those were qualities enough to recommend him to work for George. Ross had also recalled Harry had been on the police force at one point—a PC maybe? What would have made him give that up for private security work? He’d have to ask Sergeant Zacky Martin—he’d surely know.

“Miss Poldark!” Harry called out. He was apparently wishing to speak to Verity but both the Miss Poldarks turned to face him.

“And what’s he doing here, bursting in without even an apology?” Agatha asked.

“I don’t know but I don’t like it,” Ross muttered and instinctively—protectively—put his hand on the back of Aunt Agatha’s chair.

Verity was the only one to keep her head and immediately spoke politely to diffuse the situation.

“Yes, Mr. Harry? What is it I can do for you?”

“It’s your ‘visitor.’ He didn’t sign in at the front gate.”

“That’s because I didn’t enter through the front gate,” Ross said dryly.

“Well accordin’ to Mr. Warleggan, no one enters the Trenwith property without registerin’ with me or one of my staff.” He puffed his chest out, apparently wanting to emphasize that he had others under him.

“Surely you know who I am?” Ross laughed lightly.

“Everyone signs in,” the man repeated. “Everyone.”

Verity, looked away quickly, embarrassed.

“Don’t tell me you seriously had Verity sign in?” Ross shook his head. “In her own home?”

“Ross…it’s not…please don’t…” Verity said softly.

“She don’t live here. And neither do you. So family or not, don’t matter. And if you’d like to be able to come back ever again, I suggest you’d…” Harry went on boldly.

“As long as I’m alive and drawing breath, my nephew Ross Poldark is welcome in this house!”

“Well that might not be for long…” the man muttered loud enough for both Agatha and Ross to hear.

“Well perhaps I’d better have a word with Mr. Warleggan then! This inhospitable attitude towards my aunt—who was born in this very house—is unacceptable.” Ross’s tone had grown dark. Anyone who knew him well—as his family most certainly did—could tell when his patience had dissolved and his explosive temper was nearly detonated.
“Ross! You’ll excite Aunt Agatha,” Verity whispered. “She can’t have these sorts of upsets. It’s not good for her blood pressure.”

“Never you mind, little Verity. No Warleggan lackey is going to give me stroke. Don’t hold back on my account, Ross!” Agatha jeered.

“Good god! What’s all this about a stroke?” Elizabeth appeared suddenly through the doorway behind Harry. She began to rush towards Agatha’s chair in alarm but when she registered who was standing beside it, she halted at once.

“Ross,” she nodded politely.

It was disturbing to Ross that she still put up such a formal front when they met. Just what was it she needed to work so hard to guard?

“Did you make her sign in? Hmmf! I thought not!” Agatha grunted. She was not about to hide her feelings that Elizabeth was the true interloper in the room.

“What is going on Harry?” Elizabeth demanded.

“Mr. Warleggan was clear, Ma’am. He said at a time of heightened security, we needed to take precautions everywhere and especially…”

“Heightened security? Exactly what ‘threats’ is he worried about?” Elizabeth asked.

“Just that there’s folks who are aimin’ to undermine his business and overstep their…” Harry tried to recite the exact lines George Warleggan had fed him.

“You can tell George that he has really taken his animosity towards me and Grace Quarry too far. Until recently his actions have only been directed at me. But now...to antagonise my family? The insult to Verity, the very caretaker of this estate? And to an old woman…” Ross began.

“And to children!” Aunt Agatha chimed in.

“Children?” Elizabeth laughed dismissively as though she’d had enough Poldark drama for one lifetime. “What has George done to harm any children?”

“Sending young Geoffrey Charles away to school, I’d say,” Agatha added sourly.

“Hardly a torture, Agatha! He actually prefers the company of boys his own age to that of his mother. He told me so himself,” Elizabeth replied coolly.

“And that pleases you? To have him away? Or is that just what you tell yourself so you can go along with George’s whims and feel no guilt?” Ross wasn’t sure why he had asked that. It was a bit more hostile than he’d been with Elizabeth in ages but her quick need to defend George had gotten under his skin.

“Well Ross, since you live alone and have no children, you’re not one to truly understand any of this, are you?” Elizabeth’s eyes sparkled with anger. “And while you may be Geoffrey Charles’s relative, you are not his parent nor are you charged with his care, nor have you ever…”

“Yes, yes. I have no quarrel with you, Elizabeth. But do tell George that if he does anything to upset my aunt’s health-- deliberately or incidentally--he will wish he had never been born,” Ross said.

“Is that a threat?” Elizabeth asked stepping forward.
“Sounds like it to me, Ma’am!” Harry, taking that as the signal he’d been eagerly awaiting, began to march across the room. His meaty fists weren’t raised exactly, but they certainly were visible.

“Oh calm down you giant fool. I’ll come with you and sign your damned registry, just leave this family in peace!” Ross barked.

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“I need some identification then,” Harry said, looking at his clipboard once he and Ross were out at the gatehouse.

“Identification?! Are you bloody serious?” Ross asked.

“Okay just your vehicle registration number will do.” Harry suddenly had the sense not to push this man too far. Reluctantly he handed over a pen then took a step backwards, as though Ross might turn it as some sort of weapon.

What had started as a drizzle was now picking up in its pace and Ross was glad he hadn't walked over after all. Then again the three mile walk back to Nampara, even in the rain, might alleviate the tension--and now rage--that simmered inside him. He considered reaching for a cigarette but he’d left the near empty pack in his car. Ross turned up his collar, and although he was decidedly not a religious man, prayed that the rain would stop and not interfere with his plans to ride the next day.

“Anything else? Retinal scan? Finger prints? DNA swab?” Ross sneered, as he shoved the clipboard back to Harry, then turned back to the house.

Yes, Elizabeth still knew how to sling her arrows. Her comment about Ross living alone was especially well aimed. The prospect of future children had been a major reason their marriage broke up. Well, it wasn't the only reason she had left him. She had also disapproved of his beard, his friends, his drinking--and most importantly-- his bank account.

Ross had told her he wanted to start a family--not even necessarily right away but just someday--and she had claimed she did not. Not then, not ever. Looking back it seemed something they should have discussed before they got married but foolishly, hadn’t. He tried his best to accept her decision and never brought it up again, but it still hung like a specter, haunting their relationship. And then things just went downhill from there.

Of course once they'd split and Elizabeth married Ross’s own cousin Francis, she changed her mind entirely and was pregnant just months into her new marriage. And since then she’d had another child--this time with George. So it hadn’t actually been children she didn’t want--it had been children with Ross.

Without meaning to connect so many dots in his head, Ross immediately thought of Demelza. He had come to Trenwith today with the hope of talking about his current love dilemma with Verity. Now he realised how little satisfaction that would bring him. The only person who could ease his spirits and answer his questions was Demelza herself.

Tomorrow could not come soon enough.
Every Angel is Terrible

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

On the day she was to meet Ross, Demelza dressed with a little more deliberate care than she normally did. Her long-neglected cosmetic bag was unearthed, and while she half expected to find cobwebs inside it, there was an Elle King concert ticket stub from the previous autumn. It made her wonder just how long mascara would keep before it went bad.

And although riding was sport, she renounced her favourite athletic bra and instead chose a dove-grey lace one that still fit comfortably, but made her feel a bit more special underneath. She didn’t have any conscious plans to undress at the stable but instead told herself that a blouse as beautiful as the delicate lawn Caroline had lent her, demanded something fine underneath.

The blouse was lovely with small pintuck pleats and an elegant drape. It looked smashing but Demelza believed it probably looked even better on Caroline, who was taller and more slender than she was. Demelza had also been lent riding trousers and was relieved they too, while very form fitting, managed to work on her body. The inseam was a bit long, but Demelza could just tuck the bottoms into the gorgeous leather boots she’d also been given for the day.

The boots were really unlike anything she’d ever worn. The leather was so fine yet sturdy, butter-smooth and unblemished in any way. Even the stitching was a work of art and no doubt had been done by hand. Demelza laughed thinking these were probably a least favourite, soon-to-be-discarded pair if Caroline had lent them to her. And CEA could probably buy a new drying oven for the cost of these boots.

Just what would it be like to have that kind of money at your disposal?

Demelza didn’t often think in those terms, not for years really. She supposed she would have had a chance to live that life if she’d stayed with Hugh, her investment banker experiment back in Liverpool. He would have put her through school, bought her all the lab equipment she needed, as well as a new car and all the bespoke riding boots she wanted. But probably by now he’d also be expecting something significant in return. Would they be married with little investment bankers on the way? And would Hugh have allowed her to wander the globe following birds or be content as she set up in Cornwall for weeks on end to help out an old friend? Probably not.

She had no regrets there. A life with Hugh would have been more lonely than one spent on her own.

But you’re not alone, Carne, are you? That’s exactly your problem now. And you’re pretty lonely after all. You still don’t know how to be a ‘we’--and certainly not with two men at the same time.

As she had felt before the outing to Kellow’s Ladder, Demelza was conflicted at seeing Ross. She could not deny she looked forward to it, but she also sensed the beginnings of deep fear, a sort of amazing terror she thought she’d barely be able to endure. And she was as confused about his intentions as ever.

The day before, when Demelza had texted that yes, she would meet him at the stables, Ross had replied at once.

‘Is Dwight coming too?’

This had thrown her. Why did he ask if Dwight could come too? Was Ross inviting him? Didn’t he
want to see her alone? Maybe this whole situation didn't mean as much to Ross as it did to her--after all, what had he actually said to her? She ran through it all in her head, every word he had spoken in the cave and then back at Nampara.

Ross had said he wanted her but it was Demelza that made the leap about belonging together, about building a relationship. He said he wanted her to come back but--oh god--had she misunderstood and jumped the gun? Maybe for him it was always just about sex? And now with such a lapse in hearing from her, had he decided she wasn’t worth the wait and just moved on to the next desirable body?

“I’ve ruined everything,” she whispered.

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Dwight sat at the scrubbed oak table in the engine house as the afternoon light moved slowly across the room. He should probably light a lamp but they’d be leaving soon so maybe he wouldn’t bother. His focus had been wavering all day and he kept coming back to the same question. What had he done wrong to deserve the bad breaks he’d recently suffered? Consciously, his whole life he had followed rules, he never made waves. Sure he had his fun now and then--he wasn’t a Puritan--but he hadn’t taken risks and never made enemies. So why this misfortune then? Why him?

Are you really such an idiot that you can’t recognise the ‘just world fallacy’? he scoffed. Bad things happen to people everyday, no matter if they deserve it or not. If a student of his had used such undisciplined thinking, he’d have pointed it out with gentle tolerance. He had no such patience with himself.

He took a swill of coffee that Demelza had made for them earlier and found to his chagrin, that it had long since grown cold. Dwight preferred Demelza’s coffee to any other he had around the world. She always managed to get it just right even though, rather unscientifically, she refused to measure. Smooth, dark, and rich. Never bitter. Now he’d neglected her efforts and wasted a perfect cup. Just like he’d been neglecting her this past week or so. He’d have to try harder.

Well, this waiting and brooding would be over soon enough. He had one meeting with Pearce tonight in advance of the Ethics Board review on Friday. After that, they’d either pack up and leave the north coast for good, or dig into some real work. Exactly how they’d do such work without any equipment though still weighed heavy on his mind.

He had never felt so stuck. He hated this almost hypometabolic state, the sort of suspended animation he currently was experiencing, yet he dreaded the future as well. He almost wished he was someone who found more solace in drink, something he could turn to to help him forget his woes. He had only his work and that was proving to be be quite an inadequate distraction.

Dwight also wished he could just throw all his worries to the wind and join Demelza and Ross at the stables for a ride today. He hadn’t been able to accompany them on their adventure at the cliffs, it would be nice to do something all together. But he really couldn’t--he had hours of work ahead of him just to prepare for the meeting with Pearce, which was in itself preparation for Friday. He had hated to disappoint Demelza and noted what he read as distress on her face when he told her she’d have to meet Ross solo.

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Dwight was still staring into his coffee cup when Demelza came downstairs. She too looked distracted.

“Hey there,” he tried to be light in his tone. “You almost ready to go? I’m still sorry I can’t come
along but I can keep my promise to drive you. I wish there was a way I could leave you the car since I’ll be gone overnight…”

“It’s okay. You take it. I can get a ride home,” she said. She’d been trying hard not to think of what might happen after she met Ross at the stables. She truly didn’t have any set ideas of what to expect and felt a bit superstitious about even speculating, as though if she named her desires, she’d only be disappointed.

“Take the laptop too,” she said with a weak smile. “If I feel compelled to do any work later, there are plenty of printed reports I can look over.”

“Well, maybe don’t do too much work, Demelza,” Dwight said. “Perhaps you should just wait until Friday to see what happens to us. I’d hate for you to get into something deep only to be disappointed in the end.”

His words rung in her ears.

Into something deep, she thought. If only you knew.

“Oh yes, disappointed…” she said almost sarcastically but Dwight hadn’t been listening. She thought about what he had just reminded her--Friday was only a few days away. By then they’d have some answers--but would she know what to do after that?

In that moment, Demelza decided not to tell Dwight about the threats to the Thomas family--at least not just yet. Why add one more thing to distract him? If the board ruled in their favour, then on Friday she could pass on all she’d learned. If they didn’t, then it would hardly matter, would it? And she wasn’t keeping secrets, she was just once again deliberate in what she would share and when.

“What smart riding clothes,” Dwight said trying hard to move out of his own gloom and pay her the attention he had been sparing with lately.

“Oh…” she swallowed hard. “On loan from Caroline, of course.”

Everything is on loan from Caroline, she thought--then hoped Ross no longer was.

They’d never discussed his relationship with Caroline but Demelza felt oddly confident that the current Penvenen-Poldark attachment was just a friendship. Ross had been so sincere in not wanting to hurt Dwight, and agreeing to limit any deception, there was no way he’d have been stringing Caroline along at the same time he was with her. Then she felt awash with shame. She had been deceiving Dwight for days but suddenly was worried she was being played by Ross and Caroline.

All three have been nothing but kind to me and I deserve none of them, she thought.

Dwight looked again at Demelza lost in thought, as she gathered her things to leave. He thought she seemed different, on edge.

She’s wearing eyeliner, he noticed. That’s new.

But it was something else. She had a look about her, a mood he couldn’t quite discern. She was agitated, anxious, dark--hard. And she looked determined. Yes, there was something else, an evasiveness in her eyes he couldn’t read.

It would never occur to him that she was feeling guilty--and terrified--at seeing Ross Poldark again.
Ross had gotten to the stable early and found himself pacing the stalls. Just like his horse, Seamus, he was restless at being confined, itchy to get moving.

The imposing black steed pricked his ears and whinnied to get Ross’s attention.

“You’re right boy. This will never do. Let's get you out and warmed up,” he said, stroking the horse’s face gently. Even though it had been weeks since Ross had found time to ride, Seamus got plenty of good exercise daily from the stable staff and was hardly neglected. Still Ross felt guilty today and vowed to be attentive to what Seamus was telling him he needed.

“You want to race, don’t you?” Ross said to the horse with laugh. Yes, it would be exhilarating to race with Demelza. He suspected she was borrowing Caroline’s horse Belle and he knew Belle to be quite fast. He could imagine Demelza would love speed and might even win if they really were to go head to head. He longed to give her what she wanted.

But not today. He’d already put her in danger at the cave and didn’t want that to be a habit each time he saw her. But mostly Ross wanted to talk to her, so they’d need to find a secluded part of the trail and walk the horses, not run.

Ross took Seamus for a few more turns around the paddock before he saw the familiar blue Defender pull into the carpark. Even from a distance he could tell it was Dwight in the driver’s seat—and then he saw Demelza lean over to kiss him before she exited the car.

Ross felt the life drain from him and a darkness moved through, clouding him, like ink being added to clear water.

Demelza stepped out of the car and he thought she too had a dark look to her.

_I’ve taken something pure and spoiled it. I’ve ruined her._

He turned Seamus towards the path that led into the woods and called to one of the stable girls exercising a small but spirited young pony.

“Tell Dr. Carne that Seamus could wait no longer. I’m riding on but I’ll meet her ahead on the trail.”

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Demelza walked tentatively into the stables where she was met with a pink cheeked boy in his late teens.

“You must be Dr. Carne,” he said with a wide grin. “Let me take you to Belle.” He seemed proud to be charged with the Penvenen horse and when they got to Belle’s stall, Demelza saw why.

Caroline’s chestnut horse was just what Demelza would have imagined and not unlike her mistress—sleek gorgeous, and strong. Belle apparently didn’t like to be kept waiting, and poked her head out of the stall door, snorting impatiently.

“Well yes, Madam,” Demelza laughed, “We’d better get you saddled up straightway.”

Demelza had been disappointed to learn Ross had ridden on without her but such an unsociable move didn’t surprise her. She really couldn't predict anything Ross Poldark would do, could she?

It was expected to rain later that evening and Demelza—along with everyone in Cornwall—was hoping it wouldn’t start earlier. She decided to watch Belle to see what she was telling her—surely the horse would sense if a storm was brewing. The riding trail was a bit muddy as it crossed the gentle
fields closer to the stable and had recently been strewn with straw so no hooves would slip. But once under the leafy shelter of the wood, it was considerably drier.

Belle had not taken her far when Demelza spotted Ross astride his stallion waiting for them. A shaft of bright light from the afternoon sun had snuck through the trees above and illuminated him such that, even from yards away, she could see the shine of his dark eyes.

“Oh Ross,” she whispered to herself and urged Belle on closer.

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“I thought you might not come,” he said solemnly without greeting her in any other way. He just wanted to look at her, to take her all in, but instead turned Seamus back around and set the pace for their walk.

“I thought you’d left without me,” she tried to banter. That had always worked for them in the past—to start off a conversation with some light teasing. She smiled but when she looked to his grey face, she knew such an approach would fall flat today.

The air in the wood was cool and fresh. At times she was close enough beside him that when the breeze shifted, she thought he could smell the faint trace of cigarette smoke on his jacket.

If he’s been smoking does that mean he finds this stressful? she thought. Isn’t that what he had said to her back at Nampara? Am I stressful?

They walked on together silently, the only sounds were the rhythmic clopping and the occasion restive snorts of the horses.

How can she be so casual, so lighthearted? Ross wondered as he stole a glance at Demelza’s seemingly composed face. Isn’t she troubled at all?

“As you no doubt have noticed, Dwight couldn’t make it,” she said at last. She thought it might have been a mistake to say his name but she wanted to push Ross to see if he had truly wanted Dwight to join them. “He’s off to see Pearce, yet again.”

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Ross said nothing.
“Oh I see, Ross,” she began softly. She wanted to keep the tone measured but she knew it was hopeless. She could not conceal her distress and indignation. “And to think this whole time I thought you were committed to honesty. But you’re not concerned with that, or Dwight’s pain—and certainly never mine. All you are thinking about is what you want to possess body and soul. Is that it Ross? Your ego is bruised because you haven't gotten your way?"

She was actually crying now. If he had known her longer he’d understand that she only ever came to tears when she was angry. Pain or disappointment she held in and shared with no one--that was something she’d learned as a little girl.

“Demelza...” he said. It came out impatiently, again chastising as if she were an impetuous child--and not at all what he intended.

“No, Ross. You clearly don’t understand and it’s not my duty to help you. I’m riding on now, but I’d prefer to be alone. Don’t follow me.” She turned her horse around and cantered off along the path.

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Demelza headed straight for the stables and was thankful they hadn’t yet gone deeper down the wooded path where she might lose her bearings. Reluctantly, after she dismounted, she handed Belle to the waiting groom who led the horse off before she could object.

Well, now what are you going to do, Carne? She practically spat on the ground, she was still so riled, as angry at herself as she was with Ross. The adrenaline that coursed through her during their argument had not yet abated. Now she saw it was foolish to have come back, that instead she should have ridden on ahead of Ross. At least that way she could have worked off these troubling feelings.

She found herself weaving back and forth in the muddy yard outside the barn, like a horse that hadn’t been properly cooled down. Suddenly she grew desperate to get away, to flee.

That’s what you always do, you coward.

Asking Dwight of come pick her up was absolutely out of the question. Maybe she could reach Caroline? Again she considered telling Caroline everything--she desperately needed advice. There were so few people she could trust who might be able to understand. This was exactly the sort of situation that only months before she could have brought to Dwight. He always understood and never judged.

The tears were now flowing steadily as she leaned against the dusty stable wall. A sob that was only partially stifled, escaped her mouth and startled even her. It was a dark sorrow that seemed to come from somewhere deep within.

How could Ross have been so cold to me?

She wiped her eyes and took a deep breath to steady herself, then pulled out her mobile.

“Oh I’d love to come meet you, Demelza, but this is awkward, isn’t it? I’m in my car now driving to Truro with your Dr. Enys. He’s to stay over at my townhouse again and I offered him a ride into town,” Caroline said, sounding genuinely troubled that she couldn’t be of assistance.

“Oh that’s so kind of you,” Demelza said at once trying to hide the wobble in her voice. And kind of Dwight to leave me the Defender after all, she thought. “I’m sorry to have asked. But no worries, I can get a taxi.”

“Nonsense. I’ll ring my assistant and she’ll pick you up in heartbeat,” Caroline said and rang off.
It was almost a full hour later when Ross arrived at the barn with Seamus. He hadn’t ridden him hard after Demelza left them, and instead had walked slowly for some time under the pretext that he was merely allowing the horse to cool down. But in truth he was delaying his return. He wanted to give Demelza space and not intrude on her lest she be lingering in the stalls herself—and as long as he kept moving he could avoid facing how truly disastrous this meeting had been.

One of the Tehidy grooms met him at the stable to give him a hand. Ross allowed him to take the tack but was insistent he wanted to care for the horse himself. Ross wanted to think but not be alone. Perhaps Seamus would provide him with just the right company.

He took his time with the horse, speaking to him a low voice, rinsing him, rubbing him down, and brushing gently. The wind began to howl. In adjacent stalls some of the horses pawed nervously at the ground, but Seamus allowed Ross to stroke his face and was soothed by his knowing touch.

“Ssh...ssh,” he whispered softly.

Ross was angry at himself. He should have gone after Demelza when she rode off, even though she bade him not to. Of course he saw her distress and had noticed the tears. This was new—Demelza had always been so steady. It should have been him that was strong for both of them, asking what she needed, not relying on her to help him. Now he had pushed her away. It hadn’t occurred to him before that she’d need his help, or that she needed him at all. How could he have been such a idiot?

Yes, he could have followed her, taken her in his arms, stroked her face, and absorbed her hurt. The comfort he could have given her!

“She needs tenderness, Seamus. She can break too,” Ross said in his low voice, as he continued to soothe the horse. “What she must think of me?”

All the moments they were together, had he just across as a lascivious arse?

Of course if Ross had really stopped to recount the whole scene at Kellow’s Ladder properly, he would have seen how attentive and considerate he’d been with her then. Yet he had been so overcome with his desire for her that day, both at the cave and back at Nampara. And afterwards all he could recall was the sea-swell inside him that he’d had to fight so hard to contain. Now he felt he should have taken more time with her, let her know how much she meant to him—instead of scaring her off in his desperation to make love to her.

He could stand it no more, and pulled out his mobile. They had agreed to put nothing in writing but he couldn’t leave things like this. Maybe not a text this time but an email, explaining why he had been so scared? For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we are barely able to endure, and it amazes us so...

No, he could hardly send her verse from Rilke without saying more first.

‘Demelza, that was unfair of me. It won’t happen again.’ He added ‘Please ring me’ to the email then deleted all of that. Of course he wanted her to phone him, but maybe to ask sounded again like he was only concerned with his own desires. He didn’t want to put pressure on her to do anything she didn’t want to do. If he could see her, or even just speak to her, he would have said more.

I’ve been such a fool. And good god, I miss her already.

In the end he kept his message to her short—just three words—essential ones of what was in his heart. She needed to know.
Chapter End Notes

“For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror which we are barely able to endure, and it amazes us so, because it serenely disdains to destroy us. Every angel is terrible.”

Excerpt from Rainer Maria Rilke, Duino Elegies
Fucking hell, Dwight! Why did you have to leave again? I could actually use your help now!

While in reality she was still angry with Ross, Demelza was now also annoyed with Dwight. And immediately she recognised that being miffed with Dwight was merely a ploy to alleviate some of the other feelings she was trying to suppress. So irritation quickly turned to guilt; she had no reason to be cross with him. Of course Dwight wasn’t perfect and he had his own worries--like now when he was entrenched in his business in Truro--so no, he didn't always think of her. But what partner does?

Pull yourself together, Carne.

Demelza saw the familiar metallic-blue Focus as it pulled into the carpark of the stable, and at once grew embarrassed. The idea that she might be abusing Caroline’s generosity by using her assistant as a taxi service was horrifying, but she was anxious to get away as quickly as she could, lest she saw Ross again. When she got into the passenger seat next to Emma, she still felt flooded with adrenaline, anger, and frustration.

“Thank you so much,” she began, trying not to sound breathless and agitated.

“Had a good ride, Dr. Demelza?” Emma asked, looking her riding outfit up and down.

“You can just call me Demelza,” she said, trying to evade the question. “You sound like Prudie--that’s Ross Poldark's housekeeper,” she explained and hoped she hadn't blushed as she mentioned Ross’s name. Had Emma noticed the Peugeot parked at the stable when she picked her up? What had Caroline told her?

“Are you friends with him? With Ross Poldark?”

“Yes I am,” she said simply, then quickly added.“He’s been Dwight’s mate forever.”

“Ross Poldark and my father, they consider themselves friends too. Old Joshua, that was his dad, and mine were close, though I can't for the life of me guess why.”

Ross said everyone knew his father, Demelza thought.

The rain had started again so Emma quickly raised the windows. Mist seeped up from the warm earth and shrouded the road ahead of them. To the right was a wood, to the left an ancient stone wall but something about the air made Demelza think they were closer to the sea.

“Do you know the way to the engine house?” she asked politely, not recognising the route Emma had begun.

“No worries, I know the backroads like… like the back of my hand, I suppose! Lived here my whole life and I’m always driving clients of Caroline around so I know the fastest ways of getting places--and also the most scenic drives.”

“Well this is lovely, so thank you, but please take whichever is most convenient for you.”

“Sometimes,” Emma continued, “if Caroline finds a client a right arsehole, she’ll ask me to take them
the ‘special’ way-- longest, most traffic, with stretches of uneven pavement, whatever makes it the least pleasant! Those are fun!”

Demelza laughed at this. “Will I be able to tell what Caroline thinks of me based on our journey?” she teased.

“I wouldn’t dare lead you astray. Caroline would have my neck. She thinks highly of you.”

“Oh? It’s mutual, I assure you. Have you been working with her long?” Demelza asked.

“Oh no, just for a little over a year. I took some time off from school and Caroline was nice enough to give me this job. I’m planning on going back in the autumn--I’m studying law.”

“Law? That’s great!” Demelza hoped she didn’t sound overly surprised or even condescending. She knew how it felt to have too few people offering genuine encouragement.

“Yeah, I especially want to represent the invisible and the broken people. Sex workers, victims of human trafficking, victims of domestic abuse, refugees...I know, not what you'd think of a girl whose most called upon skill is taping boobs together and applying mascara,” she laughed.

“No, no, I didn't think that at all. And who the hell am I to judge anyone, least of all anyone I’ve just met? Those people that you mention, Emma, they need someone with your fire. I expect you’ll be exceptional.”

“Thank you,” Emma said and silently smiled for a few moments before she spoke again. “Did you always know you wanted to be a brilliant ornithologist?”

“I wouldn’t say I’m brilliant…”

“Caroline says you are.”

“Well, that’s very kind of her,” Demelza hemmed.

Does Caroline really know anything about me or is it important to her to think I’m brilliant? Demelza thought cynically for a moment, then shook her head in disbelief. She had no reason to doubt Caroline’s faith in her.

“I always knew I wanted to be out in nature but I had no idea I could make money from it,” Demelza began and then laughed at the absurdity of what she had just said. “But I suppose since we’re not really making any money now, perhaps you should ask someone else for career advice,” she added.

“Did you have the...well, were your family supportive? With so much school, I mean, if you don’t mind me askin’?” Suddenly a bit of the rich Cornish tones seemed to slip into Emma’s speech as though a wall had come down.

“No, sadly they weren’t. My father had no idea what to make of me. But I was lucky and by the time I was in school, I’d somehow decided I didn’t need his approval. Are your family…?”

“Nae. From time to time, when ‘e remembers I exist, my father thinks ‘e’s singing my praises but bleddy hell, what ‘e thinks is important! That I work with posh folk and go to fancy parties--even though I’m there because I’m workin’! And ‘e thinks it’s most important that I’m pretty so I’ll ‘catch a good ‘usband’.”

“Maybe I was lucky my father never thought much of my looks,” Demelza laughed but reached over to touch Emma’s shoulder sympathetically. It flashed through her mind that she couldn’t fathom how
Ross could be friends with such a man as Mr. Tregirls.

The wind picked up and around them trees, both young and old, swayed perilously. Leafy branches littered the road, some large enough that Emma had to skillfully swerve to avoid. They turned into the drive of the engine house feeling as though they’d just navigated an obstacle course.

“Emma, will you come in for a cup of tea...or something stronger?” Demelza asked. She was suddenly longed for company and did not want to be alone for fear her own thoughts and feelings might catch up with her. She hoped she didn’t look desperate and thought maybe she’d caught a flicker of sympathy on Emma’s face before she spoke.

“Sure, I have some time. Why not?” Emma said and followed her into the empty engine house.

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Dwight balanced Demelza’s laptop on his knees while he also flipped through a small notebook looking through the notations he’d made earlier. He was once again grateful that Demelza had lent him the laptop since his had been destroyed in the break-in some weeks ago. Today had been the day she went riding with Ross Poldark so she wouldn’t really be needing it.

And once again he was sitting in Caroline’s living room in Truro, preparing for a meeting with his solicitor Pearce. The furniture in the smart room was all upholstered with plush velvets in jewel tones—a bold and stylish look—but the walls were white and the rug was pale, so it all balanced out in a not-too-jarring space. Still, it had a very different vibe than the quaint and rustic engine house by the sea. Could he be comfortable living in a place like this?

Dwight would have liked to rest his laptop on the large white coffee table but it was nearly covered with stacks and stacks of massive art books.

_For show, no doubt_, Dwight thought dismissively. Then he noticed a bookmark peeking out of the Chuck Close monograph on top of one such pile.

Dwight put aside the laptop and reached for the book; in the opening essay he saw it filled with annotations scrawled along the margin in purple ink: ‘Refuting idea that advanced artists can’t do portraits’ and ‘Is it the optical apparatus of beholder that completes picture?’

_So Caroline was in the midst of actually reading this? And again I was wrong about her_, he chastised himself.

Dwight certainly would never write in such a dear book but supposed that didn’t much matter to someone with money. He also noted her handwriting had a casual cheerfulness to it. A confidence maybe? Perhaps he was reading far too much into just a few lines of scribbled text.

_And just when did I get so damn judgmental?_

He went back to the summary of the Habitat Regulation Assessment process, the document he was supposed to be reading for Pearce, but was further distracted by the soft ping of an email notification popping up. He ignored it, as he did any of the others that had come over the screen from names he didn't know. He was not about to pry and start reading Demelza’s mail. He trusted her and she clearly trusted him, or she wouldn’t have lent him her laptop. And he knew Demelza could still get her emails on her mobile, so he wasn’t denying her access to her correspondence by commandeering her computer.

_She has a right to a life outside of CEA_, he reminded himself. A life he hadn’t asked her about much lately, though, had he?
He scrolled on and continued his reading, trying as usual, to avoid any discomfort—or any feelings at all really—by immersing himself in his work.

‘Any parties undertaking HRAs should be familiar with and abide by Part 7 of the current Non-Financial Schedule of Delegation relating to the approvals required under the Habitats Regulations 2017…”

But now he wished he’d sat down with Demelza to go through these regulations. She was always quick to cut through all the extraneous information and get to the meat. Pearce didn’t care about the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act—he just wanted an estimate of how long their work would take and how much it would cost.

So why hadn’t he asked Demelza for help? Was he avoiding working with her? Was he so ashamed that he had dragged her into this whole mess with Warleggan that now his own stubborn pride drove him to plod on alone?

Maybe she can at least have an enjoyable holiday while she’s still here and just forget all about this debacle, he thought. I do hope her ride went well.

Just then another notification popped up—this time from Ross Poldark. Dwight was pleased that Ross and Demelza were seeming to make some progress in their friendship since earlier he’d sensed some tension whenever he mentioned Ross’s name. Dwight hoped she wasn’t blaming Ross for their current predicament. But weren’t Ross and Demelza supposed to be together at Tehidy Stable? Why would Ross be emailing her now?

The message from Ross was short enough—just three words—that its full text came across in the banner, and so without meaning to Dwight, read it in its entirety.

How curious, Dwight noted. I wonder what Ross means by that? Was this even intended for Demelza or someone else?

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Oh Dwight! I do wish you were here! Demelza thought again when she moved about the empty engine house. I could use your company. She tried to shake herself out of her dark mood and turned her attention back to her guest sitting at the oak table.

Demelza pulled a bottle of wine from the rack and set two glasses in front of Emma. Then she rummaged in the kitchen and found a fresh loaf of bread, a wedge of gruyere cheese and some grapes. It made for a nice impromptu spread she needn’t be ashamed of.

“Cheers,” Emma took a sip from her glass and looked around the cosy cottage. “So may I ask, Demelza, if you aren’t makin’ any money how do you…”

“Live? Ha! That’s a good question. Mostly off the kindness of friends.”

She knew Dwight emptied his savings to get the business started. He’d had a little inheritance from his parents, really not much at all, and had also taken out a loan. His continued discussions with her about becoming a partner in CEA seemed more and more a fairy tale. She had no assets other than a name that carried little professional weight and certainly wouldn’t lend anything to the deal. And now it seemed they were soon to have no business to speak of at all.

“Dwight has been a supportive employer but he won’t be able to keep me on if we’ve no further jobs. Verity Poldark, our landlady, seems determined to keep us fed. She keeps dropping off charmingly arranged baskets of food she just happened to come across at the market and she’s been
surreptitiously refilling the wine rack, thinking we won’t notice. And then Caroline...well, Caroline seems to be responsible for the very shirt on my back!” Demelza laughed. “So how did I end up with such wonderful friends and do I deserve them, you may ask?”

“Everyone deserves wonderful friends, Demelza,” Emma said earnestly. “And I’m sure you do plenty fer ‘em in return.”

Do I? she wondered.

“Well I need to do more and fast, especially for Dwight. Our latest setback is that our hired lab equipment will be hauled away next week, recalled out of the blue by the firm that had given us a favourable rate just one month ago. Suddenly there are ‘complications’--the initial rate was a mistake in the first place, they always had another client lined after us promised the equipment, Dwight’s credit rating is suddenly not as strong...so no single reason but a lot of...”

“Rubbish, if you ask me!” Emma said with furrowed brows. “Isn’t there anythin’ you can do?”

“Hobble along as best we can without the major equipment, which is easy if we don’t have any jobs. But if we actually get the job—which is exactly the thing we have been waiting for—then we need the big stuff for sure. We can book lab time with a private firm but it will be inefficient and expensive. So we are stuck, I’m afraid, between a rock and a hard place.”

“Do you think there’s...well that there’s deliberate malice behind it all? I mean is someone, a third party, pullin’ the strings here?”

“Oh Emma! I do think that, but I can’t prove anything. And I’m beginning to sound like a conspiracy theorist. Why would anyone bother to target a tiny little ecological firm? Perhaps we’re just unlucky.”

“Maybe your luck is due to change, Demelza?” Emma tried to reassure her.

“I hope so,” she sighed.

“Do you mind if I check my messages? I’m supposed to track some shipments we sent out--see if they’ve been received, you know.”

“Not all all. I should probably do the same--check the latest bad news. Do you want another glass?” Demelza asked as she reached for her own mobile.

There was nothing from Dwight but there was one other message, this time an email--from Ross.

‘I am sorry.’

She quickly switched her mobile off and caught her breath, hoping Emma hadn’t noticed her panicked expression. The earth had moved under feet and was still threatening to pull her under.

“I’d better not. And I’m afraid it’s turnin’ into a proper storm out there. I should probably be goin’,” Emma laughed.

“Me too,” Demelza replied and found herself rising to her feet before she knew what she was doing.

The trip to Nampara from the engine house seemed to take forever. As she traveled southward, Demelza drove slower and with greater care than usual since visibility was greatly impaired by the
sheets of rain hammering the Defender’s bonnet. The old wipers hardly helped; they valiantly squeezed and slapped, leaving an arc of grimy smears on the windscreen. It was still early in the evening but charcoal-grey clouds hung low in the sky blocking the beginnings of any sunset and casting gloom all along the coast.

The wind blew fiercely and again, trees were tested all around her. The old ones shook their proud canopies in protest and the young ones bowed dangerously low. She’d need to be watchful for fallen boughs. Thankfully there were none--the road shone a sleek black under the beams of the headlamps and her path ahead remained clear.

She felt she couldn’t breathe and turned up the fan which blasted air in her face that was neither warm nor cold. It smelled vaguely of exhaust and petrol, adding to the growing sense of nausea in her gut.

“Oh Ross,” she whispered rhythmically, over and over, in a voice so low it was almost a moan. Each time she said the name it was laden with more feeling--more meaning--than she could ever put into words.

And what was she feeling? Resignation, desperation, need, desire.

When she finally pulled into the drive at Nampara, she feared Ross wasn’t even home. There were no visible lights coming from the windows and she did not see his Peugeot anywhere. She suspected one of the grey stone outbuildings might be a garage but she couldn’t be sure. From the outside, the whole place had a cold, abandoned look to it, as though all life had been extinguished. She hesitated to turn off the car in the dark drive.

Ahead of her, a recently planted young ash rustled in the yard by the house; she’d never noticed it before. Its new leaves were saturated from the driving rain yet in the sudden spotlight from the Defender’s lamp beams, they shimmered a silver-gold. It remained upright in the tempest, proudly beckoning Demelza forward.

‘The serpent dare not be so bolde as to touch the morning and evening shadowes of the ash tree.’

Now the line made her laugh. She switched off the engine and stepped out into the deluge.

Oh, she had no fear of any serpent tonight.

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Ross answered the door after only one ring of the bell.

He was barefoot, wearing jeans and that soft blue button-up shirt she’d seen him in before. His hair was standing on end, as though he’d just run his hands through it in exasperation or exhaustion. He stared at her with tired eyes.

“Why are you here? Did you speak to Dwight?” He blinked dumbly but didn't move to invite her in.

“No, I didn’t speak to him. Believe me, Ross, I would have but he wasn't home. He’s gone to Truro for the night.”

She watched the bewilderment that washed over him. In that moment she knew how to read his face--a face that previously she had found inscrutable--and knew what he was thinking even when he himself did not. She stood on his stoop, patiently, as the rain continued to splash down around her and the wind whistled in her ear. Her hair was plastered to her face, her blouse was now soaked and the outline of her lacey bra was visible through the wet white lawn. She didn't need a mirror to know
the mascara she had impulsively applied earlier in the day would be smudged. Raindrops streamed into her eyes that--unbothered-- she blinked away.

Still, she stood like the young ash--shimmering, bright, and unyielding.

“But I’m here now, Ross, in this moment, and and I’m not going anywhere. And I know you will not turn me out,” she said, and this time smiled a quiet and honest smile. “I know what you want too.”

She saw his expression change from confusion to comprehension and without saying a word, he grabbed her by the arm and pulled her quickly inside.

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Demelza found herself wrapped in a blanket by the fire, a glass of something golden brown in her hand. Ross hadn’t said much but busily attended to both the blaze in the hearth and to her. He seemed moved by her pitiful state.

“Even in May you shouldn’t be out walking in the rain. Too long in wet clothes can be dangerous,” he said in a low voice without looking at her. “You’re soaked through. Drink that.”

Demelza smiled to herself--she’d come to know that tone. He wasn’t really scolding her but was clumsily expressing his concern.

*He’s scared.*

“I didn’t walk but yes, I am soaked through.” She hadn’t realised how chilled she had gotten from just a few minutes in the rain.

Somewhere behind her a clock ticked and to her left, the fresh kindling Ross had added to the fire snapped friskily. In the hallway Garrick’s nails clicked on the flagstone as he paced, worried by the howling wind.

“This is lovely,” she said, taking a sip from her glass. Whatever it was had come from a locked cabinet so she doubted this was everyday whisky.

“Highland Park. Dark Origins,” he said coming back towards the chair where she sat.

“Sounds ominous,” she said quietly and watched him move closer. *And appropriate,* she thought.

“The original owner of the distillery apparently was a smuggler,” he explained.

*So it was here in Cornwall. At one point everyone, even ordinary folk, were pirates or smugglers,* she was going to reply. but then saw this wasn’t really a time for conversation.

Yet she wasn’t anxious--it would all unfold as it should. Ross would come to her when he was ready and she needn’t coax him.

And he did.

Silently he knelt at her feet. Without looking her in the eye, he took her free hand and apparently alarmed by how cold it was, pressed it between his to warm.

She swallowed and fought to catch her breath. To feel his touch again--even if only on her hand--made her tremble. He may as well have been holding her heart. She put down her glass and offered him the other hand too.
This time he brought it to his mouth and blew on it softly. It was so tender a gesture, but he still wasn’t looking at her face.

Then one by one, he slowly slid off her boots. Expertly he gripped and then, ever so slightly, twisted the damp leather that was determined to cling to her calves. And once the boots were off, his hands—strong but gentle—continued to caress her legs and rub her toes. But Caroline’s boots had held up well and Demelza’s feet had remained snug and dry.

Inside her the warming grew but it was no longer just from the drink. She felt herself come alive with desire. She remembered this feeling.

“Ross,” she said.

Still clutching her legs, Ross laid his head in her lap and closed his eyes.

“Demelza,” he whispered. “You came back to me.”

_I never left_, she thought.

“Oh Ross,” she said softly and lacing her fingers in his hair, drew him up to her.

Chapter End Notes

For more on Chuck Close https://www.theartstory.org/artist-close-chuck-artworks.htm
"It’s not a Helen Frankenthaler, if that’s what you were thinking."

Caroline had come up behind Dwight unexpectedly as he stood before the large painting that occupied nearly the entire south wall of the living room.

The work was almost four meters high, and very striking. The background was mostly a white wash, but it had some interesting grainy textures here and there. The main figures at the center of the composition were done in vivid emeralds and purples, the sweeping design abstract but organic. What caught Dwight’s eye was the way in which the paint was thickly pooled and saturated in some areas, then so diluted in others that the weave of the canvas was discernible through the coloured forms.

“I can assure I wasn’t,” Dwight said, with a bit of embarrassment. He knew enough from his school days to be familiar with Frankenthaler’s name but not enough to actually recall her body of work.

“But to be fair, this was the artist’s Frankenthaler-inspired phase. She was open with me about that and never tried to deny how much she borrowed from her sources,” Caroline continued.

“The artist? Do you know her?” Dwight asked, turning away from the painting to look at Caroline.

This evening her hair was pulled back in a sleek ponytail and she was dressed in much more casual clothing than he’d seen her in before—jeans and a black tunic. Her feet were bare and Dwight smiled when he saw her toenails lacquered a matte orange. Somehow they seemed to work with the color scheme of the painting and the room.

“I should say so. She’s my mother,” Caroline said, and handed Dwight a glass of wine without asking him if he wanted it. It was a dry Riesling and while he would have preferred something red, he tasted at once this was a nice vintage and took another sip.

“Your mother is an artist?” he asked.

“Was. She died when I was young,” she answered and sat on a plush green chair opposite the sofa. She made the slightest gesture that Dwight interpreted as a signal he should sit as well.

He sat and looked for a spot on the crowded coffee table to perch his glass. Finding none, he continued holding it instead.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t know,” he said.

“What? Because I don’t wear a badge that says ‘Spoiled orphan child raised by her bachelor uncles’?” she laughed.

“No, of course not,” he looked into his glass, testing whether he felt awkward or not. He decided he didn’t. There was something genuine in the way Caroline had just laughed—she wasn’t trying to be coy or keep him at a distance. Perhaps she really wanted to talk to him.

“But don’t feel sorry for me. I have no complaints—I wanted for nothing and was given all sorts of opportunities throughout my entire life. That’s more than we can say for most of the wretched world, right?” she said, tucking her flawless feet under her.

“Yes,” Dwight said, watching her face. He saw she had more to say.
“Hers was a tragic death, though. My mother had been so sad for years and years after my father died, you see. Then she’d finally found love again with my stepfather. But they were killed in a car accident in Rome shortly after they were married and she never got a chance to live out that new chapter. This was one of her later paintings. I think I can see the life coming back into her. But perhaps I’m not objective enough to read into it properly.”

Dwight looked over his shoulder at the painting again.

“I can see that. It is very vibrant,” he said. “But there’s a depth. I mean it’s not shallow...does that make sense? I don’t know anything about art...” he added.

“That is indeed an astute observation. You are quite perceptive, Dr. Enys,” she smiled. “My mother would be rather furious to see that this painting matches the decor so well. She’d insist I move it elsewhere, so it might be more jarring. She so enjoyed confrontation. But I swear the coordinating colour scheme was truly an accident. I had the sofa and chairs first and this painting has only recently come out of storage.”

“She left it to you?” Dwight asked gently.

“Yes, along with all her unsold work--and a lot of money,” she laughed. “But this one was always my favourite. For years I had stubbornly tried to fit such an unwieldy canvas in my student rooms--my flatmates all hated me for that. Finally I gave in and stored it at my uncle’s but, I must admit, it does work well here, doesn’t it?”

“Perhaps knowing you’d hang it eventually, you chose the rooms specifically for the painting--subconsciously, I mean?” Dwight offered with a smile.

“Perhaps I did.”

“This place is lovely, Caroline. In case I haven’t properly expressed my gratitude,” Dwight said and regretted how formal he sounded. He’d meant it though. Having a place to stay in town these past few weeks had made all the difference to him.

“It has been a treat to be able to help in any way I can,” she said with a polite nod--a gracious and practiced response to compliments. Clearly she was used to them.

“Caroline, may I ask...why are you helping us?” he asked suddenly.

She took a long drink from her glass then ran her finger along the top. It made a gentle chime that grew louder as she traced around the wet rim several times--no doubt a quality glass. Then she laughed again.

“I won’t hide that I don’t care for George Warleggan’s arrogance, so that does fuel my motivation somewhat. And Ross Poldark is a friend. But mostly because it’s the right thing to do. Is that so hard to understand or to expect from a person like me?”

“And just who is a person like you? Perhaps I have misjudged you,” he said, looking directly at her.

“Or haven’t judged me at all--only what you think you know of me based on surface observations. And you call yourself a scientist?” she laughed.

And with that she sprang to her feet and exited the room, leaving Dwight alone with his notebooks and laptop once again.

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Caroline placed the small parcel on the kitchen work surface and without opening it, gave a sniff of disgust. A bit of blood had soaked through the outer white paper wrapping.

Well, it wasn’t meant to be palatable to her.

She moved about the immaculate kitchen looking for the right size pot to begin her task but found, to her surprise, that she was distracted.

Why did she find that man sitting on her sofa so compelling? Perhaps because Dwight Enys was so unlike anyone else she knew. He didn’t play games or flirt or try to bring attention to himself. He was honest, straightforward…and yet…not dull at all.

And he was so dedicated to his ideals. Not just ideals in the abstract...she had loads of friends who supported charitable causes but Dwight was really working at it, day in and out. In fact, he never seemed to stop working. Well, she was serious about her job too but her work looked and felt different than his.

Without meaning to, she thought about the flop of hair that fell across his forehead when he bent over his reading or how he bit his lip as he carefully typed out his notes. She suspected he rarely made typos. Was it that iron discipline that she found so intriguing—a challenge to see if she could break through?

She laughed at herself, which was the only thing she could do. She was being utterly ridiculous. She had dozens of texts on her mobile she hadn’t yet responded to and about three times as many emails. Her attentions were clearly needed elsewhere, so why was she spending so much time helping CEA? And why did Dwight and Demelza both fascinate her?

And why did she have a hard time accepting Dwight and Demelza were really romantic partners?

She knew Dwight and Demelza had known each other long and that accounted for much of the closeness, the warm familiarity with one another that they projected. But just how long in the making was this relationship? She knew that Dwight hadn’t slept with Demelza whilst she was his student. Demelza had been very insistent when explaining their past to Caroline and Verity—it seemed important to her that they know that.

But still, it must have been difficult for Demelza back then. Caroline could imagine Dwight’s smoldering attractiveness coming across in lecture. It would have been hard not to be drawn him—to seek out an excuse to visit his office perhaps? Was that why she’d stayed in ecological conservation?

Or had it been the other way—was it Demelza’s electric sensuality, evident even when she wore waders and anoraks, that had caught Dwight’s attention? Had he watched her backside as she left the room or found himself aroused just smelling the scent of her shampoo if she accidentally brushed against him?

How delightfully torturous it might have been for them both all those years until they finally gave in to their urges.

And since they had become equals. Dwight was still older than Demelza but seemed to rely on her—and not just professionally—in a way that made it clear the gap had long since closed. What makes people grow together—or apart?

Caroline resolved that the next time she saw Demelza, she’d force her to come clean on how deep the attachment was. If they were truly together in a committed relationship, not just a casual fling of convenience, then Caroline would endeavour to put more distance between herself and Dwight.
Perhaps she’d even go back to London until CEA had finished their work in Cornwall. It just wasn’t a complication she needed right now.

But if…

Caroline sensed there was much Demelza hadn’t shared--perhaps she had been afraid to. And if she and Dwight weren’t in love--and if Ross Poldark was occupying Demelza’s imagination as of late--well then, perhaps Caroline might employ a different approach towards Dwight Enys.
Outside Nampara the tempest raged on, shaking trees and battering the house, but as Ross and Demelza clung tightly to each other in the big mahogany bed, they found a sea of calm. Her hair splashed across him, her cheek rested on his chest in a spot just over his heart that seemed designed to cradle her head. His arms crossed her back, holding her fast to him, as though she might float away if he dared to loosen his embrace. There they stayed for some time, silent but very much together.

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It had been hours before that Ross first undressed her.

It was cooler upstairs and Demelza had shivered uncontrollably upon entering the bedroom. Ross had offered to build a fire in the hearth opposite the bed, but she suspected it wasn’t just the chill of the room that caused her to tremble, so she told him she didn’t want any more delays. Still he had taken his time as he removed her wet clothes and hung them carefully over a chair to dry. Then he deftly slipped out of his own and joined her under the sheets.

But before his bare body touched hers, he first put his hand to her face and in return, she reached for his.

She looked into his eyes as she had before he kissed her that day in the cave. Again they were dark but this time there was no fear. They still shone with a youthful vulnerability yet in that moment they also seemed to carry some ancient wisdom. They drew her to him and she was powerless to resist.

He held her face while he kissed her—a kiss so deep and powerful, there was no mistaking the passion that coursed through his entire body and demanded to be released.

And just as she had plotted in her imagination weeks before, Demelza clasped her body to his, wrapping her legs around him. But this was not a dream. Ross was very real, and so was she, and this night they were not to be separated.

Their open mouths greedily sought one another as he pressed his weight into her. His broad hand reached behind her, clutching her body closer to his so there was no space between them at all.

And so they had continued on the journey they’d already begun long ago.

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The cruel wind howled as it passed through the empty yard outside the house. It seemed to be calling to them—taunting them—reminding them of the furious world outside the Nampara bedroom.

Ross finally found the strength to ask the question he had been avoiding all night.

“Do you have to go back to the engine house?” he whispered, his voice hoarse from lack of use.

Won’t he be missing you? is what he really wanted to know. He knew he would, if he were Dwight. Possessively, he put his hand on her hip.
“No. There’s no one there tonight,” she said softly. She understood that speaking of Dwight—of saying his name—was something neither of them were ready for quite yet.

“Demelza, I’m sorry this isn’t what you wanted…” Ross began.

“Not what I wanted? Ross?” She sat up, alarmed. “Good god, how I wanted this! Wanted you.” She gripped his hand tightly.

“But I know how important it was for you to be…honest about us. You know what I mean. This isn’t how you planned it to be.”

“I think, Ross…” she began. “We are being honest. With ourselves. Pretending this wasn’t happening—that wasn’t being true to anyone. We can’t hide from it…from this.”

“Demelza, however I’ve wronged you, whatever mistakes I’ve made in the past, let me make amends.”

“Amends? Oh Ross, there’s no need for that,” she said, and gently kissed his lips.

“Demelza, when you left me at the stables today, you were so angry. I’d never…well, I spend so much time alone and when I’m at work, I just bellow out orders and only worry about my own concerns. I haven't argued with someone—someone I care about—in a very long time. It was one of the most frightening things I’d encountered in years.”

“Oh, Ross! You can't let that frighten you. There's bound to be other quarrels—there has to be, if it’s...if we’re real. I too, am used to being alone and if something or someone doesn't suit me, I usually just leave. But I’m not going anywhere. You and I, we both have our likes and dislikes, and they won’t always align. We have to be ready for that.”

“I thought I’d ruined you, brought the dark into your world.”

“No, Ross, you’ve ruined nothing. And don't you think this world we are making,” she said, gesturing to the space around them without unlacing her fingers from his, “is worth fighting for?”

“Yes,” he said, looking into her bright eyes. They seemed to light the dark room and moved him to smile.

Ross thought about the sonnet they’d both spoken of weeks before:

\[
\text{Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;}\\
\text{A bliss in proof and proved, a very woe;}\\
\text{Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.}
\]

No, it wasn’t just the having. And it wasn’t a dream. It was what came next that proposed real joy, and also promised bliss.

Ross looked with tenderness on the woman close beside him. And in that moment he dared to consider what she might be feeling.

After they had made love, she’d woven her fingers in his, placed her arms alongside his, pressed her foot against him—sensing how they measured up together. She kissed him again, then once more—each time softly, affectionately. There was no fury or hunger that drove her, yet it was a continuation of their coming together. Ross was familiar enough with post-coital body language to know what she
was telling him. Now that the drive to find release was over, something else had begun.

She had given him her body and now she was giving him her love.

Chapter End Notes

The title of this chapter comes from the Kokoschka painting of the same name (sometimes referred to as The Tempest) It is an amazing expressionist piece, and worth checking out.

https://arthive.com/oskarkokoschka/works/339067~Bride_of_the_wind

Also some wee bits of dialogue are from Winston Graham’s Poldark: A Novel of Cornwall, where our beloved Demelza & Ross begin.
Eveing at Truro

Dwight was back at his laptop when he caught the first whiff of what he thought might be smoke. He sat up and sniffed again, just as the smoke detector in Caroline’s kitchen began to beep loudly.

“Caroline?” he called, but was on his feet hurriedly towards the kitchen without waiting for a response.

An empty pot on the cooktop was smoking. Caroline was nowhere to be seen.

“Caroline?” he called again.

Seeing no flames only smoke, Dwight rushed the pot to the sink and turned on the tap. The running water hissed angrily as it made contact with the hot pot but cooled everything down quickly; the smoke was soon replaced with billows of steam. He flicked on the exhaust fan over the range and looked to see which windows he could open to let out the remaining smoke.

Finally Caroline came in.

“Oh bother! Did I do that?” she asked over the loud screeching of the alarm. “Can we disconnect the battery until the smoke is cleared? It is terrifying Horace.”

Dwight turned from the window and saw she was holding a small pug under her arm. The dog was shaking with fright and began its own high pitched howl to match the shrill alarm.

“You’ve had a dog here this whole time?” he asked.

“Yes, but I’d better go put him back to bed. I’ll help you in just a moment,” she said briskly. “Come, my darling. There is nothing to worry about. Our dear Dr. Enys has saved us from any real danger,” she whispered in the dog’s ear.

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By the time Caroline came back into the kitchen empty handed, the alarm was silent, and most of the smoke was cleared.

She quickly surveyed the damage and nodded approvingly at Dwight’s efforts to make things right.

“I noticed this other pot was filled with water—perhaps you were meaning to boil that? You seemed to have merely turned on the wrong hob and overheated an empty pot instead. An easy mistake to make,” Dwight said reassuringly.

“A rookie mistake you mean,” she said. “You’d never believe I’d attended one of the best cooking schools in Paris, would you?”

“Oh, I hadn’t meant to imply you didn’t know how to…” he stammered.

“Didn’t know how to boil water? Seriously, every heiress needs to know how to prepare a seven course French meal even if she has no intention of ever doing so herself,” she said and took the offending pot from the sink and walked it towards the bin.

“What are you doing?” he asked in surprise.

“What does it look like?” she replied, stepping on the lever.
“Let me see it,” he said.

She watched bewildered, as he took the pot from her.

“Yes, I believe you can just use some bicarbonate of soda to scour out the char. See? It’s not ruined at all,” he said.

“Simply amazing,” she replied, but doubted she’d actually spend any time heeding his advice.

“It’s a trick Demelza taught me,” he said.

Demelza had spoken now and then about her upbringing so Caroline doubted she’d had a kind housekeeper or even a concerned auntie to teach her such a feat of kitchen thrift. This must have been one more way Demelza was self-taught. For a moment, Caroline envied all of Demelza’s practical skill. Caroline also had had no one to teach her but she also had lacked the need to learn it at all.

“Poor Horace must have his butcher scraps raw now, I suppose,” she said, and reluctantly unwrapped the parcel of meat she’d left out on the work surface. No doubt the dog would be impatient to have his supper soon and she was certainly impatient to put this embarrassing culinary misadventure behind her.

“Horace is your dog? And you were cooking for him?” Dwight asked, once again trying not to sound judgemental.

“Yes, my darling pug. He loathes Truro so I keep him in the country when I can, but after a while he misses me. So on occasion he has to suffer and come along to town.”

“Dogs would enjoy the countryside more I imagine. Running about, no need to be carried so much,” he said.

“Horace doesn’t really run but sometimes he enjoys sitting on the lawn at Kilawarren. He has asthma and while Truro isn’t exactly bustling, he gets wheezy sometimes.”

“Kilawarren?” Dwight asked, trying to keep up. He disliked when names of people or places were casually slipped into conversation as though everyone surely knew them. He also wondered how a dog came down with asthma.

“My country estate,” she explained. “It’s not terribly far from here. I spend my time equally there, here, and in London—although I admit I haven’t been to London much lately. I suppose I’m due for a change and will go again shortly.”

“I believe our time in Cornwall is most likely coming to an end too,” Dwight said looking back into the sink.


“And what have you heard?” he asked.

“That you have a big day on Friday but nothing is decided until then. And as much as you might believe there are forces moving against you, it is just as likely that you have forces—unbeknownst to you—working on your behalf. So there is still plenty of hope for our environmental superhero.”

“I wish I shared your optimism, that I could be as convinced as you are,” he said grimly. He really did want to believe. “I suppose I hadn’t realised until now how much I will miss Cornwall if I have
to leave,” he added.

“Well then, either way--if you stay or if you are to go away--you must make time for some fun in your beloved Cornwall. Tell me, Dr. Enys, since the gala at Trenwith have you done anything even vaguely social?”

Dwight didn't know how to answer. Any free time had been spent with Demelza these many weeks and while he had no regrets about how they passed their time together, he didn't want to discuss it with Caroline. This was feeling uncomfortable and he couldn't quite put his finger on why.

“I have been burying myself in my work, I’m afraid. There are people counting on me…” he tried to explain.

“And are they not also counting on Dr. Carne? And yet she can be spared to ride or dine with the neighbours or scale cliffs…”

Caroline didn't mention that all these recent outings had been with Ross Poldark. But that hadn’t been a secret so surely it mustn’t be a concern to Dwight.

“Well the climb was actually to spot nesting birds in the cliffs, so it wasn’t unrelated to her work with CEA. Are you telling me I should be less agreeable to my employees and demand they work longer hours as well?” He tried laughing but still felt a bit tense.

“No, I’m merely suggesting you should apply the same standards to yourself that you do to your friends. Tell me, Dr. Enys, do you ride?”

“Yes, I do but…” he began.

“Then you should come riding with me sometime. Besides my Belle, who I board at Tehidy Stables so she gets proper attention, we do still keep a few horses at Kilawarren. We can ride there, if you’d like. Or perhaps even ride on the beach, if the mild weather ever returns.”

It had been a long time since Dwight had done any riding, and even longer since he’d ridden on a beach. The experience seemed so distant, so foreign--to feel the wind in one’s face, the power of a horse underneath one’s legs--to be so free? He almost gasped just thinking about it. When was the last time he had been unfettered and untroubled? Too long.

“I think I’d like that,” he said. And as he spoke, he wasn’t bogged down thinking about when or how or what might happen on Friday. He just wanted to be reminded of how it felt to be carefree. And as he accepted this vague invitation, he was surprised to find he could smile without any hesitation.
Demelza woke around two AM to find the bed bathed in a pale grey light that at first she mistook as coming from a streetlight, but in fact was the waning gibbous moon shining softly outside Ross’s bedroom window. She felt a chill but her clothes were nowhere within reach so instead she moved closer to the warm body next to her under the duvet.

Ross was lying on his back, his mouth open slightly, his breathing heavy, rhythmic, and as she rested on her side, she looked at him for a moment, then could resist touching him no longer. She suspected her hands were cold so she kept them to herself and instead put her lips first to one arm limp at his side, then to his bare chest—soft gentle kisses, not meant to rouse him. She moved her head closer to his and listened to him inhale.

She felt a sort of lucid bewilderment. She was fully aware of her surroundings, where she was and why she was there, so she was not disoriented. It was just so out of the ordinary, like something important had shifted. The delicate light that shone on the man next to her made the scene seem ethereal.

Yes, he was close now—a partner, and most certainly no longer a stranger. They had moved over that line into the extraordinary territory of risk and trust, exhilaration and tenderness. He hadn’t known her long but he’d made her feel like he knew her well, or at least wanted to, and she understood there was no going back.

She’d come to learn his touch was strong but tempered. And in bed his pace with her had been slow, like the first time he kissed her in the cave. Not like someone who was teasing or tentatively holding back, but someone who had confidence—confidence that he knew what he wanted was there to be had, and knew he was in no danger of losing it. He seemed to enjoy patiently exploring every nook of her body in sensual anticipation, reading her expertly inch by inch. It didn’t take long for Demelza to match his tempo, and become an equal driver as they shared their love.

Now, hours later, she watched him sleep, warm and naked, beside her.

He exhaled, then suddenly raised his hand to stroke her hair. Only one eye open, he smiled.

“Hey, you,” he said, his voice low but gentle. “What are you doing awake?” He leaned his face down towards hers slightly and she shifted to meet his lips.

“I can’t seem to get enough of you, Ross,” she gasped breathlessly. She knew it sounded hopelessly trite but it was true. She pressed her body against him and took his hand in hers, moving it from her head down to where her back met her bottom.

Now both his eyes were open and fixed on hers.

“Is that so? Then don’t stop trying,” he whispered. “There seems to be a lot of me here for you, Demelza.”

Fully awake now, he gave her a ravenous look then rolled her on her back.

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The next time Demelza awoke she was alone. Her watch was the only thing she was still wearing
from the night before and she glanced at its face--8:30. She smelled the rich aroma of wood smoke and heard the licking of flames on logs in the fireplace across the room.

Ross had built her a fire after all.

The room was lighter and warmer now, but she could tell it was a gloomy, rainy Thursday morning outside. From the bed she could see the raindrops first settle on the window pane then steadily get dragged down by the wind. She snuggled under the duvet for a moment and, with smile, once again took in her surroundings.

Finally she found the strength to stir herself and reached for a t-shirt lying at the foot of the bed; it would have to do for now. Once out of the bedroom, the smell of wood smoke was replaced with that of fresh coffee and she heard Ross moving about downstairs.

Demelza didn’t know where they were headed but knew she trusted Ross. Trusted them. She tried to put her finger on why she felt as sure as she did. Ross had a sort of sincerity, or maybe it was a stubborn enthusiasm. She suspected when he made his mind up about something he did not give up lightly.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” he said as she entered the kitchen. “Coffee is just about ready.” He was barefoot again, in just a t-shirt and a pair of jeans, that seemed to highlight his physique.

Last night her hands had certainly felt his body but now her eyes lingered as she saw it in the light of the day. She wondered if he spent a lot of time at the gym or played sport or was just naturally fit, as some people were blessed to be. But she also thought it didn’t matter that much to her; she liked Ross for other reasons besides his looks. Being with him, she felt herself to be whole in a way that until now, she hadn’t realised she’d been lacking.

“Mmm, thanks,” she said coming up next to him and leaning against the work surface. He stepped closer and kissed her on the head, then wrapped a tendril of her hair around his finger.

“You enjoyed yourself last night?” he asked, then gave a coy smile. He knew the answer.

She looked at him. He was a man of many moods and she was finding she liked them all. His stormy troubled side, his playful boyish chuckle, his slow amorous touch that left her breathless.

He let out a laugh then poured her a cup from the cafetiere, adding a bit of milk with a flourish and a wink.

“Oh, that looks perfect....” she began. “Did you guess I take milk?” Demelza realised she didn’t know how he liked his and watched carefully as he left his black. “For some reason, that’s how I expected you’d take your coffee, Ross.”

“Demelza, we have moved way beyond preferences for coffee,” he said, looking her in the eye with a mock seriousness.

She hoped she wasn’t blushing thinking about the other things he now knew she liked, and sat down at the table.

“That looks good on you by the way,” he said pointing to his t-shirt that reached just the top of her thighs, barely covering her bum.

“It smells like you. Why do I like that so much?” she said, pulling it up to her nose to inhale. “It must be an animal thing, you know, to cover your own smell with the smell of another so predators can’t track you down.”
“Predator? Am I a predator?” he asked, coming towards her with a spirited glint in his narrowed eyes. He crouched next to her and ran his hands along her bare thighs, then put his lips to her skin. She tried not to giggle and as his hands moved up and down her legs, the sensation became less a tickle and instead a different sort of thrill.

“You’re a runner?” he asked, looking up at her suddenly, a sportive grin spread on his face. He traced his thumbs along the insides of her thighs and the curves of her hamstrings.

“Um, yes I am, I mean I do...run,” she laughed, caught off guard by such a seemingly casual question in the midst of such intense caresses. She was beginning to recognise this was part of his routine; he’d fluctuate between seriousness and joking, even in moments of physical intimacy. She liked that he seemed to enjoy being with her and as dark as he could seem at times, he didn’t always take himself too seriously. But what she didn't yet realise was she was the very cause of this new mood of his.

“We need to run together,” he said, planting another kiss on her leg.

She resisted throwing her head back in a moan and tried to answer him.

“You...run...too, Ross?” She laced her fingers through his thick curls. She had come to learn he liked it when she tugged just a bit.

“Yes, I’ve been into distance lately,” he said. “I ran a half marathon last fall, that wasn’t too brutal. And you? Distance or speed?”

“I...it’s not like I race, I run mostly to stay fit, to…” she stammered. She really could not keep up a conversation with his beard grazing her bare lap.

“Well, maybe I can get you to slow down, pace yourself. Think about what’s waiting in the distance.”

“Ok…” she sighed. She wasn’t thinking about running but about the sexy dark haired man kneeling beside her. She bent over and pulling him towards her, kissed him.

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“Demelza, I’m not sure what sort of impression I made on you last night,” Ross said. They were back in his bed, listening to the rain that still beat against the windows. Once more her head was nestled on his chest. He stroked her hair and then her back.

“Oh Ross, impression?” At this she laughed thinking of his weight pressing her into his mattress.

“I mean--what I feel for you--I want you to know, it isn't just physical,” he said, pulling her up so her face was now level with his. He wanted to look her in the eye.

“I know,” she said with a soft smile. “I think I’ve always known.” She kissed him and rested on her elbow. Her hair spilled across his chest again.

“Even when I dumped my drink down your dress?” He cocked his head and traced his finger down her bare breast.

“Oh, was that deliberate? You seemed to blame me at the time,” she reminded him.

“Aha, but my plan was foiled. I was supposed to be the one to undress you after that.” His tongue darted playfully out between his lips. Demelza recalled that expression from the first time they spoke,
shortly after he had spilled vodka on her borrowed couture gown.

“I thought you said a minute ago this wasn’t physical?” she laughed.

“I said not just physical,” he said with a low sort of murmur--more a purr than a grunt--and sportively pulled her back down beneath him.

“Stay with me, Demelza,” Ross then whispered as he kissed her gently on the ear.

“That’s what you said last night. I need to leave sometime,” Demelza laughed. She wasn’t sure why she said that. She felt in no rush to leave his arms or his bed.

“No, I mean today. Spend the day with me, don’t rush off.” He turned her face gently towards him so he could look her in the eyes again. “I’ll take you home this afternoon.”

“I have my car, don’t forget--I can drive myself. But don't you have to work?”

“No,” he said simply. Ross had a rather disciplined work ethic and until recently had rarely used being the boss to his advantage. If ever there was a time to indulge himself and let go just a little, it was now. The quarry would manage fine without him for another day.

“You’re not growing tired of me?” she asked.

“Good god. Hardly,” he said. “But if you have other plans...”

“Only a ton of reports to read,” she began.

“Listen, I’ll bet if you went back now you’d have a hard time concentrating, so it would be a waste...” he said confidently.

“Oh really? Because I’d be too busy thinking about you?” she laughed.

“Well, about me...and about me and you...together. Here in my bed.”

“And together in the kitchen?” she added with a wicked smile.

“And all the other places we haven’t yet been together,” he went on, now nuzzling her cheek with his nose and beard. “So stay with me and at least the time will be productive. For us both.”

“Okay. I can’t argue with that logic. I will need to go at some point but I’ll come back and when I do I’ll stay as long as it pleases you.” She kissed him over and over now. Short but powerful kisses, promises of what else was to come.

“Then you’ll never leave?” he said with a most tender smile.

“If that pleases you, Ross,” she whispered.

*I’ll never leave.*
Demelza sneezed three times in rapid succession then immediately laughed in embarrassment.

“I told you’d catch cold out in the rain,” Ross said tenderly--there was no chiding in his tone this time.

“Nonsense. I’m fine but I should warn you, I do that. I never seem to just sneeze once,” she said. “You need to know these things about me.”

“An utterly charming trait.” He wrapped one of hers curl around his fingers and then watched it unspring when released.

“One I inherited from my father, and it was not in the least bit charming when he did it,” she replied.

He leapt from the bed and rummaged through a drawer until he found what he was seeking.

“Here.” He handed her a fine cotton handkerchief embroidered with delicate flowers and the initials GVP.

She put it to her nose--it smelled of lavender.

“Oh,” she gasped without realising it. “Ross, was this your…”

“My mother’s? Yes. She was Grace. The quarry is named after her.” He slid back in next to her and put his hand to her smooth, bare belly. He liked to feel it when she breathed but especially when she laughed.

“And the V?” Demelza asked.

“Vennor.”

“Oh? Does that account for the ‘V’ in Ross V. Poldark? Vennor?”

“Yes,” he said. “I hated it when I was a boy. I wanted a regular middle name like Michael or Brian. But I quite like it now.”

“Me too. It’s so noble and mysterious.”

“You know there’s so much I don’t know about you, Dr. Demelza Carne,” he said.

“Well I don’t have middle name so don’t get too excited,” she joked.

“Ok...what about your mum’s name or your favourite colour?” he asked, pulling her towards him with one arm, while resting his head on his other elbow.

“She was also Demelza, Demelza Lyon,” she explained.

“Lyon? Oh that suits you.” His hand was once again strumming up and down her back.

“And my favourite colour? Really?”
Her face was so close to his, he thought he could count her eyelashes. He rubbed his beard against her lips until they opened, then he kissed them softly.

“Really.”

“Well it’s pink,” she said.

“Somehow I would have expected green from you,” he mused.

“No, it’s pink. But not just any pink, mind you. It has to be a delicate petal pink or the pink you find on the inside of a seashell. The pink of a girl’s ballet skirt--the little wrap ones they wear at class.”

“Ballet pink?” he offered.

“Yes, it was what I wanted more than anything as a little girl--to dance ballet and dress in the most delicate skirts and soft leotards. I so envied my classmates who did.”

“But there was no dance?” he asked gently. Now he reached up and stroked her hair, pushing it away from her brow.

“No. No time, no money, no one thinking of what the Carne kids should be doing to keep busy. But I learned over time to do other things--exciting things like climbing and hiking--so I have no regrets. But to to this day I still have an attachment to the colour pink.”

“I’ll have to take you to the ballet someday and see if it excites you as much as those terns did the other day.”

*Someday.*

There it was--he had done it without thinking. A casual mention of a someday--a future--and of course, she’d be there with him.

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“Ross!” Demelza said looking up at the framed print hanging above the bed. She hadn’t noticed it before but then again, she’d had some pretty compelling distractions.

“What is it?” he asked, lazily but purposefully kissing her fingers. He hadn’t unlaced his hand from hers for some time now. Then he noted the excitement in her voice and looked up with a smile.

“The warblers! It’s the same print--or a similar one--that I have in my room at the engine house,” she said. She pushed from her mind that she had moved it with her to the room she’d been sharing with Dwight.

“Is that what those are? Warblers? It’s from Verity--almost anything decorative in the house was her doing. I believe she had said it belonged to our grandmother. They must have been part of a matched set.”

“Oh,” Demelza said dreamily. “Only mine are summer warblers and yours are…” She moved to get a closer look. There was fine script below the illustration but she was more interested in the morphology of the birds themselves. She started to sit up but he pulled her back flat on the bed and tightened his grip on her hand, laughing.

“Stay, ruby-breasted warbler, stay,

And let me see thy sparkling eye,
Oh brush not yet the pearl-strung spray
Nor bow thy pretty head to fly."

“Oh?” she laughed.

He leaned down and kissed her then peeled himself away and with a smile, and continued. His brow was arched as he exaggerated his struggle to recall more.

“Stay while I tell thee, fluttering thing,
That thou of love an emblem art…”

“Yes, Ross?” she smiled coyly.

“Yes! patient plume thy little wing,
Whilst I my thoughts to thee impart.”

“Mmm,” she said softly this time and looked at his dark eyes as they danced with delight. She saw that at least in that moment, Ross was happy and he was happy to be with her. She put a finger to his lips, to feel them move as he spoke.

“Something something something….I can’t quite recall,” he said cheerfully.

“Oh Ross, I’m quite impressed but somehow I think you know that. You seem to have a whole font of verse at your fingertips. Is that just a ploy to seduce the ladies?” she teased.

“Actually it did start that way…I was rubbish at learning anything until my father suggested that one value of memorising my poetry like a good school boy would be to woo women. I was an awkward enough lad that it seemed my only shot.”

“What?” She erupted with laughter and with her one free hand, hit him gently on the shoulder. He still hadn’t let go of her other hand and once again brought it to his lips. He gave a low growl and pretended to bite it.

“I can hardly imagine you as awkward, Ross,” she said, raising a skeptical brow.

“I assure you I was. But I also assure you I have never recited lines to a woman in my bed before,” he said.

“Never, Ross? Am I really to believe that?”

“Yes,” he said, then planted his open mouth on her neck.

She let out a soft moan and ran her fingers up and down his spine several times. Finally she seemed unable to resist any longer and used her might to shift him, and all his weight, on top of her. He nestled his strong body between her legs and with his lips began to work his way up from her neck to her jaw and then to her mouth.

Suddenly he ripped his lips from hers and pressed himself up again. Closing his eyes in concentration, he spoke again.

“And when bleak storms resistless rove,
And ev'ry rural bliss destroy,
Nought comforts then the leafless grove
But thy soft note — its only joy —
E'en so the words of love beguile
When pleasure's tree no flower bears,
And draw a soft endearing smile
Amid the gloom of grief and tears."

He opened his eyes and looked down at her beneath him.

She was still, her eyelids half closed, her mouth parted slightly. Soft breaths came from her lips—lips red and raw from hours of kissing. He settled beside her so his head was level with hers on the pillow.

“I think that's most of it, save a few lines from the middle. But those wouldn’t interest you—just more bits about love.” This time he winked.

Now it was her turn to bring his hand to her lips.

“Oh Ross,” she sighed. “Well I can assure you no one has ever recited Keats to me in bed before. So I suppose I have your father to thank.”

“Please don’t thank my father while you are in bed with me.”

“You’re the one who brought him up. Would you rather talk about your mother?”

He let out a roaring laugh that came deep from his belly and shook the whole bed. He pulled her close again and pinched her bottom. She giggled and pinched him back then settled back against his chest.

“But you knew it was Keats?” he asked, impressed.

“I know a little about poetry. But tell me, Ross, are all poems about birds sad? They always seem to speak of leaving or loss. Is that all birds remind us of?”

He was quiet for a moment.

“No...no, they are not,” he said and jumped up from the bed, finally letting go of her hand.

“Ross?” she asked.

Still naked, he walked across the room and began examining the bookshelf against the wall by the door.

“Ross? What are you doing?” She was laughing even harder now. The sight of him, bare skinned, with his beautiful chiseled backside facing her as he casually perused the bookshelf was too humourous.

“I’ll be right back,” he said without turning around—or dressing—and left the room.

“Ross! Where are…”
“The library. I’ll be but a moment.”

“But what if Prudie comes back home…” she cried.

“She won’t!” he called back to her and made his way down the stairs.

He returned a few minutes later proudly brandishing a book of Mary Oliver poetry. He made no attempts to hide his nakedness and moved slowly--knowingly--back towards the bed. She shifted to make room for him then enfolded her body to his so there was no space between them.

He gave her a quick kiss then leaning on one elbow, softly began to read from the hardcover volume.

“You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.”

There was no playfulness in his voice now, just the rich tones of love, fully formed. He’d spoken no louder than a whisper, as though she was the only one those words had ever been meant for.

“See? It’s not sad,” he said. “That’s you, Demelza...when you were a girl and first saw the curlew. You found your place in the family of things.” He stroked her cheek with two fingers and with his eyes smiled at her--a smile that looked as fragile as vapour about to disperse. His mouth trembled.

She saw behind those dark eyes there was a raging flood of emotions that was threatening to overpower him.
“Oh Ross.” It was all she could say, and barely managed that without choking on her own heart, which she could no longer believe was located in her chest.

*My Ross, my dear sweet Ross,* she thought.

And looking into his eyes she had no doubt what she was feeling. All night and all morning she had been letting the soft animal of her body love what it loved. Not just her body, but her whole being. Now she found she could say nothing and only gasped, pressing her face into his chest and clinging to him as if she were drowning.

He wrapped his arms—strong but gentle—around her and enveloped her in his warmth. They stayed that way without saying a word, but speaking to each other through breath, until once again sleep took them both.

Chapter End Notes

For more Keats poems and full text of “Stay, Ruby-breasted Warbler” see http://ota.ox.ac.uk/text/3259.html

Also quoted was the wonderful Mary Oliver. I wrote this chapter months ago, but Mary Oliver just died on January 17th, shortly before I posted this update. Here is a video of the poet herself reading “Wild Geese.” It is simply breathtaking.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lv_4xmh_WtE
Caroline moved quietly down the dim hallway. She had left Horace snoring in his basket but no other signs of life could be heard these early hours in the sleepy townhouse.

She went straight to the kitchen and saw Dwight had done the washing up after she’d gone to bed. Even the pot she’d wanted to bin had been scrubbed until it gleamed.

*Of course he did.*

The evening before, after the incident that had set off the smoke alarm, she had braved the rain and gotten some Thai takeaway for them both. She managed to convince Dwight to take a break from his work long enough to share some Tom Yum, green curry, and pleasant conversation with her--at least she had found it to be pleasant.

*Yes, but what did he make of it?* she wondered. Dwight Enys played his cards so close to his chest and rarely revealed if he was enjoying himself.

But he had laughed a few times and listened with interest while she told him tales of her latest clients. He talked about his work--both his current endeavours but also the post in Bristol he’d left behind. Curiously, he didn’t mention Demelza. Caroline had wondered why that was.

And when he thought she wasn’t looking, he’d slipped a small piece of chicken to Horace. This came after he admonished her earlier for spoiling the dog. She wasn’t troubled that he might be a hypocrite--this instead signaled he was human. And if he had a soft spot for her dog, well, how could she not be charmed by that?

Caroline drank two glasses of water as was her early morning beauty ritual and considered turning on the kettle but decided instead to see if her guest was awake yet. Surely he’d have set an alarm for himself--she suspected Dwight Enys hadn’t overslept in decades.

The door to the spare bedroom was ajar so Caroline pushed it gently and stepped inside just enough to peer at the man sleeping in the single bed by the wall. The room was quiet, even Dwight’s breathing was hushed, barely audible. He was wrapped tightly in the duvet, lying on his stomach, clutching the pillow tightly to him.

“Melz?” he mumbled without opening his eyes. “Babe, is that you?”

Caroline softly backed out of the room without saying a word. He grunted then apparently slipped back into his dreams, not noticing she had ever been there at all.

Unsettled and maybe even disappointed, she went into the bath adjacent to his room to collect herself. She was surprised to see how flushed she appeared when she caught her own reflection. She held her hands under the running tap, allowing the water to splash over her wrists and cool her core temperature.

On impulse she opened Dwight’s leather kit which sat on the back of the toilet.

It wasn’t terribly full. A toothbrush, an electric shaver, a small tin of some sort of skin balm. It wasn’t a label she recognised--maybe something organic and cruelty-free he’d picked up locally from a market or a small shop? She thought that might be his style. She unscrewed it and sniffed--citrus and rosemary. Fresh but...manly? Yes, that was his smell.
The whole kit reminded her of him. It was precise, pared down. There was nothing extraneous in it--yet as she had determined the previous night, Dwight Enys wasn’t simple. He was just focused. It was as though he knew where he was going and didn’t let any distractions get in his way. She liked that about him--and felt comforted by his clarity.

*Whereas everything about my life is superfluous,* she thought, snapping the case shut. *And besides Dwight Enys’s passions and attentions lay elsewhere.*

Caroline returned to her room and dressed quickly, lifting a sleepy Horace into his carrier. And without waiting for Dwight to wake, she left the townhouse and headed straight for her car.

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When Demelza woke from their warm afternoon slumber, Ross was awake beside her watching her. She looked up into his dark eyes then stroked his face with her hand.

“What is it Ross? You….you’re not happy?”

“No…I am happy. Demelza. And it’s because I know a new happiness that I’m troubled. Knowing now how complete I feel with you, knowing I can't have you…”

“No, Ross,” she said, sitting up and taking his hands in hers. “That’s not the way it should be...we belong together. We will be together.”

“Are you saying...you’ll leave Dwight?”

“Well, I won’t be moving out of the engine house entirely just back to my room down the hall but yes, of course, I’ll tell him about us. I told you I would, I told you I’d be back,” she tried to reassure him.

Why should he believe her though? She’d already said this once before.

“Demelza…”

“He’ll understand. I do think he will…”

Ross didn’t seem convinced that he would but said no more. Then Demelza remembered something else she thought Ross should know.

“There’s something I want to tell you, Ross. Don’t tell Dwight but I’ve been looking for Stephen Carrington, the original ecologist who did your assessment. I don’t believe his conflicting reports were merely mistakes but done on purpose, and I want to know why.”

“Don’t tell Dwight? Why? Demelza, don't you think there’s been enough…”

“Enough secrets? You mean from Dwight?”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn't have…."

“I agree with you but….he’ll try to talk me out of it. He’ll say it’s hopeless--I know him. But there's something there, I just know it, Ross. I can’t explain but I have to do this…”

“I understand. I do. And I won’t say a word,” he said.

*Anyway how likely is Dwight to ever speak to me again?* Ross wondered.
“Tell me what will you do?” he asked her.

“That, I don't know…”
Despite the temporary sense of optimism he had borrowed from Caroline Penvenen, Dwight returned from his meeting in Truro with Pearce with little hope for Friday. Pearce had tried to explain—without coming out and explicitly stating it—that in the past, the ethics review board’s rulings had appeared to be rather arbitrary, with little evidence of rhyme nor reason that he could discern. In other words, Pearce could not really advise him on what to prepare nor what to expect.

*What a joke!* Dwight thought. Every ethicist he’d ever known had been measured and rational—was it possible George had this board in his pocket? Hadn’t Ross assured him George wouldn’t do anything illegal?

Dwight went straight to the lab beyond the cottage to start preparing his remarks for tomorrow. Their future would now be down to just how well he articulated their case. Reluctantly, he sat down at the table and opened the laptop but saw at once he was without inspiration and had no idea where to start. If Demelza were here, they could brainstorm and bounce ideas off each other. Maybe he should look to some of the reports Demelza had pulled to find some compelling data.

*_It’s a story, not data, that we need, you fool!*_

He scanned through some of the files they’d downloaded but stopped when he saw one he hadn’t recognised by its title. The author’s name seem vaguely familiar but he couldn’t exactly place why. On impulse he opened it.

‘Some writers have stated that male doves will often court females other than their own partners, and that some males have been known to have more than one mate. No direct evidence of mourning doves remaining paired more than one year in the wild has been obtained.’

Why was Demelza reading an old study of Cornwall mourning doves?

*Because she loves Cornwall and because she loves birds, you idiot.*

He was done prying. He closed the PDF and decided instead to check out the digital terrain models they’d created over five weeks earlier. When it all began.

*What had been our inspiration then?*

But before he opened the models, an email popped up addressed to both he and Demelza from some someone he didn’t recognise. Who were the RayVen Foundation and what did they want from CEA?

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Demelza blinked in the sunlight as the Defender made its way north towards the engine house. The rain had stopped sometime mid-afternoon but she and Ross hadn’t noticed; they’d hardly left his bedroom until she reluctantly dressed to go home. She was surprised to find the sky so blue but the road was still littered with leaves and branches throughout her drive.

*_Such is the aftermath of a storm_* , she thought. *Even if the clouds are all gone, there’ll be reminders of a force that once raged uncontested.* Yes, a force beyond her control had been very much on her
mind these last twenty four hours.

Love. She could name it now without fear.

She thought about what someone had said to her many years ago--love was something “outside of
the head.” Those had been Dwight’s words in fact. Had she really scoffed at the idea back then?

“Oh Dwight,” she said softly, but there wasn’t any bitter despair in her voice now, just a sort of
warm sadness--compassion for her dearest friend.

She had loved Dwight and still did. With her head, and with the heart in its own way, and while she
certainly felt it below the waist when they were physical, she could see it had been a choice to a
certain extent--a calculated decision, executed coolly, after they had both weighed the risks and
rewards.

But loving Ross? That was different. That changed her, like the reordering of her cells. It ran through
her blood and she couldn't say where his love for her stopped and hers for him began.

And for the first time in a long while, Demelza wasn’t afraid to want something, and to want it with
all her heart. Not just what she needed to survive moment to moment, or something to entertain a
passing fancy. She saw herself deep in this, now of course, but also in the future. Sitting in the old
leather chairs by the Nampara fireside talking about the everyday with Ross. Wrapping herself
around his body in the dark. Being a ‘we’. This partnership was bigger than her, bigger than the sum
of their parts.

And for the first time in her life she really wondered if--someday--it might even be more than just the
two of them. With Ross could there be...a family?

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“Dwight?” Demelza called as she entered the engine house. Her heart was pounding in anticipation
of the conversation that lay ahead of her. She called his name again and still heard no answer.

Where could he be? she wondered then realised that she had been taking Dwight’s presence for
granted. Of course he had his own business, his own schedule--just like she had hers. Why would
she think he was just waiting around for her when she hadn’t even been home all night?

Even though it was late afternoon, she started some coffee then went upstairs to change her clothes.
She had taken a shower at Nampara but still felt she could smell Ross on her--where he’d run his
fingers through her hair, where his lips had been on hers, where the back of his hand had grazed her
top. She’d never be rid of his scent and she didn’t want to be. Already she ached with longing for
him though they’d been apart less than twenty minutes.

She glanced out the bathroom window and saw a light on in the lab up the path. Maybe Dwight was
in the lab doing some work? It was foolish of her not to have checked when she first pulled in.

-----

Demelza stared dumbly at the tray she’d loaded with the finished coffee and cups for them both.
There was no way to put this off any further. Her heart was still somersaulting in her chest and once
she began her walk up the gravel path, her knees trembled as well.

“Dwight?” she called tentatively, as she pushed open the door to the lab with her hip. It’s top hinge
was still a little unaligned from the break-in and the whole door didn't close properly unless it was
pulled forcefully with both hands.
The laboratory was quiet save the soon-to-be-reclaimed deep freezer buzzing steadily in the corner. The windows that westerly overlooked the sea were particularly rimy from the storm of the previous night. The late afternoon sun that filtered through was a muted, warm light. It was the only softness on offer to the inhabitants of the room, who seemed committed to their own sharp edges and cool self-torment.

“Oh Demelza, I just got back from Truro, Tonkin drove me. I didn’t think you were home so I came out here,” Dwight said, happy to hear her voice. He had resolved to pay her greater attention than he had the past few weeks and now was as good a time as any to start.

He meant to inquire how she fared in the storm last night but thought she appeared a bit agitated in the moment. Perhaps she hadn’t appreciated being left alone in such a torrent.

“Did you go for a run today?” he asked. He saw she was breathless, her cheeks flushed. Her eyes darted around the room, then finally settled on her feet. Dwight suspected she didn’t want to be confronted so he averted his attention back to the laptop.

“I made some coffee,” she said, but it sounded more like a question. She swallowed hard and watched him bent over his keyboard. She thought she detected a slight smile, or maybe it was just the absence of a frown. That was new--had something happened?

“Dwight I want...I need to talk to you about something.”

“Yeah?” he said, without glancing up again.

She set the cup in front of him and put her hand on his back, then drew it away quickly. She’d have to be disciplined, cautious now--she couldn't send mixed signals.

“Dwight. Can I have a moment? It’s important.”

“Of course.” He heard her tone was fragile and looked up to her face at once.

“Dwight, I’m going to say something awful and most likely you won’t like it.”

“Then don’t say it,” he laughed, then saw this wasn’t the time for a joke. “Melz? What is it?”

“I can’t... be your lover. Not anymore. It’s not that I don’t want you, it’s that I don’t...I don’t think we have that kind of love.”

“Oh?” It wasn’t really a question but more a way to register he’d heard the words that came out of her mouth, even if he did not yet understand them.

“I mean I do love you,” she stammered, “but not the way you want me to. The way you want us to be together. I’m not enough.”

“Are you saying you’re not good enough? Because that’s not true...” he began. He felt a few steps behind, his mind was trying to process what was happening. Words she’d already spoken hung in the air like bubbles but were popping before he’d had time to grasp their meaning.

“No, I’m saying I’m...” She tried not to get flustered, but it wasn’t working. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I know I’m good enough but that’s all, really. You need someone to be more than enough --someone to challenge you, to provoke you--to disturb the very universe around you, Dwight. We’ll never be that for each other.”

“You sound like someone who has been thinking about love a lot lately,’ her voice from a
conversation so many years ago rang in Dwight’s head.

“How long have you…?”

“I don’t know. I swear I wasn’t trying to deceive you. All those things I said--I never thought I was lying. I thought I wanted what you wanted, Dwight. All of it. I did. But remember that time in Snowdonia when you told me we can’t *will* ourselves into love? That love isn’t a decision for the head? Just because we *wanted* it, didn’t make it so.”

“I think…” he began, then stopped.

“What?” she said gently, coaxing him to continue.

“I was going to say that I think this the best cup of coffee I’ve ever had. Or one of the best anyway.”

“Dwight?”

“Wait, Demelza, hear me out, because this is important,” he said, his voice dark, brittle but measured. “This coffee is strong without being bitter at all, and not so hot that I can’t drink it straight away, the perfect amount of milk, just as you always know how to make it…” he exhaled sharply, his lips were thin. “I heard what you said and it is sinking in, but I need to know that I can still tell you how much I enjoy this coffee. Because that is what I would tell my friend, Demelza. In the moment, just as I noticed it. Whether she was in my classroom or working with me here in the lab or or lying next to me in bed. And if I can’t still talk to you about something as simple as this cup of beautiful coffee then I don’t know what…”

“Oh Dwight!” she cut him off and now she did dare to take his hand. “I will always be your friend--if you’ll still have me.”

“Of course, Melz,” he whispered. “I suppose…” He laughed lightly and shook his head. “I suppose that I’m grateful to you in a way...that you had the courage to speak up now before things had gone further.”

They both recalled without mentioning the conversation they’d had earlier about starting a family in the months to come.

“Dwight…” She wanted desperately to soothe him and her habit in recent weeks had been to take him in her arms to do so. But that couldn’t happen now. She was the cause of his distress and there was little she could do for him.

“You know my friendship with you, Dwight, was never just in the head. It was always in the heart too, in our own way. And maybe that makes me sound like a selfish child who wants to just toy with your feelings…”

“No, Demelza, I understand.” It was curious. He felt unsettled, yes, but he saw she spoke the truth. And she hadn’t just said that she didn’t love him enough to be his life partner, she had--perhaps rightly--suspected that he didn’t really feel that way about her either.

“You do? Oh, Dwight! I think…” she said, squeezing his hand in hers. “You and I are like parallel lines. Side by side, and ever so close--which is why it’s so easy to be confused. And always, *always* going in the same direction but…”

“But never intersecting and never will,” he finished for her.

They both sat silently for a minute. She reluctantly let go of his hand and put the cup to her lips.
“Tell me, Demelza, are you in love with someone else?” he asked suddenly.

She was so caught off guard, she found herself choking on her coffee.

“Oh, Dwight,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry, I cannot lie. Yes…”

“Is it someone in Chicago? I know about the job. I didn’t mean to spy but you have six unopened emails from the Field Museum on your laptop. Is this why you didn’t tell me?”

“No, Dwight, there’s no one in Chicago. I didn’t mention the position because I just didn’t want to crush your dream of a future together in Cornwall. But now I’ve made it worse?”

“No, Demelza, you were brave enough to face it, brave enough for both of us.”

She didn’t feel brave. She felt small and wanted to take it all back, to turn time backwards and freeze themselves in a different moment all together, when they were just mates, before she’d destroyed everything. Hadn’t that been the very fear he voiced in Scotland? That they might overindulge and ruin a good thing?

Demelza knew she had more she had to say, something she couldn’t ignore.

“There is someone else, Dwight,…here in Cornwall,” she continued.

“Here? Who?” he asked.

“Ross Poldark.”

“Ross?” he said incredulously, and curiously he felt mildly relieved. He’d genuinely always wanted her to find someone worthy of her in character and strength, and Ross Poldark was such a man.

But Dwight also realised at once such a relationship would not be without its complications. He found it odd that she didn’t seem bothered by this. Perhaps it wasn’t the occasion to discuss all the implications.

“Does anyone else know?” was all he dared ask.

“No,” she said slowly.

“No one? Not Verity or Caroline?”

“No just you,” she said.

Well maybe Prudie, she thought but didn’t say aloud.

“Keep it that way,” Dwight said.

Until we figure a way out of this. It might be a moot point tomorrow anyway, he thought.

“Is this what is troubling you most, Dwight? Who else might know?” she asked. She didn't mean to challenge him but her tone sounded sharp.

“No, it's just what I’m able to talk about right now, Demelza. You’ll forgive me but you can’t really ask more of me at the moment,” he said reminding her of the hurt, the disappointment, the shock that she’d just inflicted on him.

“Of course.”
“I think I’d like to do some work now...alone,” he said.

“Of course,” she repeated. “I’ll leave you the pot if you want more.”

Demelza started to move away from the work table when Dwight took her hand and pulled her back. He kissed it—quickly, softly, but sincerely.

At once she saw the enormity of that gesture. She bit her lip in grief, it was as though she’d been punched in the gut. She’d been feeling a lot in her gut lately, and suspected there was even more to come.

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It was still early—very early—and while Demelza had spent much of the day in bed and hadn’t eaten in hours, all she wanted now was lose herself in sleep. She was exhausted and suspected that even though the glowing evening sun might intrude upon her room, she’d have no problem falling asleep and staying that way for hours. It was just another way to flee.

But first she had to contact Ross. She wanted more than anything to ring him but suspected she’d fall apart if she tried to use her voice—or if she heard his. Reluctantly, she opted for a text.

‘Spoke to Dwight. It wasn’t fun but he’ll be ok,’ she wrote.

‘And you?’

Oh god, he wanted to show her he’d learned his lesson. He saw this would affect her too, he had to ask. Of course, he cared.

She couldn’t bring herself to lie and say she was fine. She wasn’t.

‘So tired. Ring you tomorrow? I want to hear your voice.’

‘Me too. Night, love.’

Of course he cared.

Night, love.

Chapter End Notes

One again I'm grateful to all the fun mourning doves facts found in Howe Elliot McClure's 1941 publication (page 84) https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=14649&context=rtd
Dwight poked his head through the slightly opened bedroom door. Demelza was still asleep, her hair spilled out on the pillow, her hunched body huddled deep in the mound of covers. A dim light filtered in through the window; he doubted the sea would be visible on such a foggy morning.

Not wanting to wake her, he turned, but as he shifted his weight, a floorboard creaked underfoot. She stirred.

“Dwight?” she said with a voice that was drowsy and far away.

Her eyes opened after several laboured blinks and he saw they looked tired—not the usual brilliant blue that could light up a room. But everything felt dull and hazed today, as though the mist that was enveloping the sea side had crept into the cottage.

“Good morning,” he said. “It looks to be…”

“A miserable day?” she offered, glancing up at the window and pulling the grey duvet further up around her neck.

“Let’s hope not,” he said. “I could use a little luck before facing off with the ethics board today. But I heard the sun will be out midday, if that helps you feel better,” he added.

It was unlike Demelza to be so gloomy. Usually she had enough cheer for them both but apparently not today. Wasn’t Dwight supposed to be the one with the low spirits? After all, yesterday his lover had dumped him for one of his closest friends, and in just a few short hours he’d know for certain that his business had failed.

She’s feeling the loss too. At least I have something to distract me today, he thought.

They’d already agreed he would go to Truro alone. Dwight was to meet with the ethics review board on his own this morning without any consortium members present—not even Pearce would be there when they questioned him. Even in her professional capacity as an associate of CEA, there was no reason for Demelza to accompany him just to sit around in the lobby waiting. And there was even less reason now that her emotional attachments lay elsewhere.

An outing of some sort, or maybe just a run, would do her good, he thought, but didn’t want to suggest it lest he sound patronising, intruding.

“I’m leaving in a few minutes for Truro—with Tonkin. He’s driving so you can have the Defender today,” he said, watching her face carefully.

“Ok,” she said. “Will you need a ride home?”

If this were just a few weeks ago, the sight of her sleepy and snuggled in her bed would have warmed his heart. Now it all seemed so sad.

Everything has changed. Can we ever bounce back?

He’d have liked to just rub her arm or pat her head--gestures which once would be read as friendly affection but today would be misunderstood. Now he didn’t even dare to step over the threshold into her room.
She doesn't want me. I have to let her know I understand.

“I can make you breakfast?” she asked, her voice uncertain.

“No, you go back to sleep. I’ll take a few of those scones with me.”

“I didn’t make them,” she warned but stopped short of mentioning Prudie’s name.

Dwight caught that and smiled gently, appreciating her tact. Yes, if she’d returned from a tryst with baked goods prepared by her new lover’s housekeeper, it would be in poor taste to mention it.

_How civil we are,_ he thought.

“I won’t be late.”

“I’ll make us dinner,” she said sitting up, now trying a genuine smile. “Any special requests?”

“Surprise me. Whatever strikes your fancy,” he said softly, then turned to leave her alone.

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Once she heard the front door close, followed by Tonkin’s jolly baritone greeting Dwight in the drive, Demelza tried to rouse herself. But the effort it took to sit up was too great and she plopped back against her pillows, squeezing her eyes shut again.

She knew she had no business to feel envious that Dwight had somewhere to go today and that he had Tonkin to keep him company. She had toyed with idea of tagging along, to at least offer moral support, but then had thought better of it.

_Don’t insert yourself into his plans. If he wanted you in his business he would ave said so,_ she chided herself.

Earlier, she had tried to read Dwight’s mood but saw he was trying to hide his feelings. He’d pulled a curtain and the depths of his blue-grey eyes were no longer available to her. She’d seen him stone faced and stoic before, shut off from others—but never from her.

_He looked like he needed a hug but it’s better I give him space._

Unable to fall back asleep, her mind wandered to another man whose emotional landscape was as ever-changing as the Cornish seaside.

In her overnight stay at Nampara, she and Ross had shared so many laughs together. She hadn’t quite expected that, but of course they should. What does happiness look like, after all? Yet when she’d last left him, he’d once again grown dark, anguished at letting her go. She had held his black head to her breast and kissed his temple gently—reassuring him, soothing him. And in that moment he had let her care for him. He opened, laid himself bare before her. She had suspected this was a new development for him and she loved him all the more for it.

She knew it would not be an easy road ahead, loving a person as complex as Ross Poldark. Already she was deep in this, and no matter the obstacles fate would surely have in store for them, she wouldn’t turn away.

But this morning she wished she had someone there to comfort her. Ross’s love seemed so far away and everything around her was cold and dim. Her skin prickled with irritation and her mouth felt dry.

Her whole life she’d always relished her solitude but not today. Now she’d never felt so lonely.
Demelza was halfway through an uninspired pot of tea when Verity rang.

“How are you my dear?” Verity asked cautiously.

*What did she know?*

“Well, it’s a rather cloudy day so there’s that...” Demelza began, then tried her best to pull herself together. “I have the car today. I was thinking of taking a drive along the coast but I’m not sure I’m up to that anymore.” She moved across the quiet kitchen and peered out the window that faced north. The fog had abated somewhat but the scene still looked colourless and muted.

“Demelza, I’m still up here with Aunt Agatha and will be through the weekend,” Verity said. “Why don’t you come to Trenwith today?”

“Oh... erm...I’m not sure I’m the brightest company.” She didn’t want to say why. It would all be exposed soon enough but she couldn’t quite put it into words yet.

“We can have lunch, just you and me. Maybe a guest appearance from Aunt Agatha but no grim tarot cards, I promise.”

“Well, that does sound nice,” Demelza replied. Verity’s bright voice had worked to soften her reserve. Hadn’t she just admitted to herself that she felt lonely? “I have to run a quick errand or two first. I’m making Dwight a lamb stew for supper and want to get to the butcher early.”

She realised how silly that sounded. She’d just stomped on their friendship of over ten years and still thought she could make it up with a well cooked meal.

“Perfect. Come around half past eleven?” Verity replied.

Verity’s sweet, light laugh had touched Demelza, cutting through the gloom. Yes, there were other places to find comfort besides a lover’s arms. She was reminded of the kindness of friends and again wondered how she’d been so fortunate to have made such lovely new ones in her short stay in Cornwall. She now had something to look forward to later this morning, and she owed it to Verity to snap out of this funk before then.

After she dressed to go to the shops, Demelza picked up her mobile and rang Caroline. For days now she’d been contemplating telling her about Ross and finally felt ready. At first she thought it a bit adolescent to chat about her love life with a girlfriend, but Caroline had been with her through these many weeks. She deserved to know the truth or at least why Demelza had been so distracted lately.

“You sound terrible, Demelza,” Caroline said at once.

Demelza had to laugh. It was such a genuine Caroline response.

“Well I suppose that’s how I feel. You see I’ve...Dwight and I have ended things... romantically, I mean,” she said.

“So now you’re free to be with Ross Poldark?”

“Yes but...” How did Caroline already know about her and Ross?

“Then that should make you feel good, no? So stop moping,” Caroline said quickly. “Oh, I almost forgot. I was going to ring *you*, Demelza. Listen to this! Selina, Katie Thomas’s older sister, phoned
earlier to ask if we’d heard from Katie. She’s gone missing apparently.”

Demelza laughed again. What she thought would be a drawn out conversation was over in a flash and now there was more urgent business to address. She appreciated Caroline’s diversionary tactics.

“Didn’t you say Katie had a boyfriend back in Truro? Couldn’t she have just gotten anxious to see him perhaps?” Demelza suggested.

“That’s what Selina wondered too. But it seems Katie didn’t take much with her—just her wallet and mobile—so Selina was more than a little worried.”

“It sounds like she isn’t planning to be gone long then.”

“Yes, but it has been 48 hours now,” Caroline explained.

“Oh,” Demelza instantly grew more concerned. “Do we know Katie’s boyfriend’s name? Should we look him up?”

“I can ask Selina...Oh! Maybe it’s Stephen Carrington!” Caroline teased.

“Now you are being utterly ridiculous,” Demelza said. “You forget the one thing we do know about Carrington is that he’s living in Spain now. And besides he has to be in his late 60’s…”

“That’s hardly the other side of the world. Barcelona’s like, what, less than two hours by plane? And age never matters in these secret affairs. Love knows no such bounds, Demelza. You should know that.”

“If Selina’s so worried, did she contact the police?” Demelza asked, ignoring this last suggestion of Caroline’s.

“No. She said—now this the strange part—that Katie wouldn’t want that. Apparently Katie believed the police were not to be trusted in this whole affair. Or at least the local Cornwall police that is.”

“The police? But why? What did she mean?” This was seeming a bit far fetched to Demelza. A police conspiracy was a little over the top for an office mix up with an environmental impact report.

“I’m not sure, but I told her to ring the London police if Katie didn’t get in contact soon. Still perhaps we should ring Noelle, your new friend from CPE? See if she’s heard from Katie—weren’t they chums?”

“Now that you mention it, Caroline, that’s curious too. Noelle’s seemed to make herself a bit scarce the past few days. I got one text from her telling me everything was okay, no new peeping Toms in the neighbourhood, but she hasn’t taken any of my calls when I rang her,” Demelza said. She hadn’t tried since Wednesday morning though; she should probably try again.

“Could she be embarrassed for having rung you late at night since there wasn’t any danger after all?”

“Maybe…” But Demelza was unconvinced. “Still, I hope Selina speaks to the London police about Katie. Maybe we should drive by the Thomas house later and see if their mum is okay. I’m off to see Verity for lunch but later I could...”

“Look Demelza, I’ll be in Truro anyway. I’ll think of some ruse to stop in to see Mrs. Thomas this afternoon,” Caroline offered. “You enjoy your visit with Verity. Without me to distract you both maybe you’ll actually get to see those historic tapestries once and for all.”
Demelza was going to ask how Caroline knew where the Thomas family lived but Caroline had already rung off. Surely that information was public knowledge, and even if it wasn’t easily gotten, no doubt Caroline would find a way.

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Hours later, Demelza still felt sleepy as she finally made her way to Trenwith. She’d been fuzzy and indecisive at the shops earlier and had lost track of time while deliberating between an enticing cut of pork or the lamb she had originally sought. She didn’t want to keep Verity waiting so she’d need to hurry. Yet somehow she found herself on the side road that took her around the back gates of Trenwith. She’d made this drive loads of times now without the SATNAV. Just where was her head today?

Perhaps her body wasn’t tired it was just her spirit that was drained. And she was definitely missing Ross now. She knew he was busy today with consortium business, but she resolved to ring him after she saw Verity, even if just for a moment. She wanted to hear his voice.

Demelza. Oh, the way he said her name! That low hiss in her ear.

Twenty four hours ago I was in his arms and in his bed.

She’d quickly come to know the gentle creak the old mahogany bed frame gave when one first lay down. Friendly and welcoming--like she belonged in it just as much as Ross did or any other Poldark who had slept there before them.

She was a grown woman of thirty but felt her whole chest fill with butterflies at the thought of his touch. Demelza held her breath recalling Ross’s warm skin on hers, how their scents mingled together on the pillows. The raspy groans she could conjure from him, merely by putting her hand to his face.

How soon can I be with him again? This was all she could think now.

She suddenly refocused on the road ahead of her with a flash of horror, but by the time she hit the brakes, it was too late.
Trenwith Treasures

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Demelza looked down at the small red creature lying on the side of the road. It gave one last quiver then was still.

“Oh good god! I’m so sorry! So sorry!” she cried. She crouched down and looked into its lifeless eyes, and once she was quite sure the fox wouldn’t rear its head one last time to bite her, stroked its glossy back. If one ignored the great bloody gash along its underside, it might have looked to be a perfect taxidermied specimen, the kind found in a nature center with a label that read ‘Vulpes vulpes, Conservation status: Common.’

“What were you doing in the road, my friend? I never meant to hurt you. Oh, look what I’ve done!” Now tears were forming in her eyes. She felt a sob rise up from her breast and instead of containing it as she normally would do, she let go. It came out in an unexpected groan that surprised her and caused a nearby robin to abandon its perch and flutter away.

“What have I done, little one? What can I do now?”

There was nothing, of course. Some things once destroyed can never be made right again. Beautiful, powerful, lovely things.

She decided she couldn’t leave the fox on the side of the road where other scavengers might ravage its lifeless body. In the back of the Defender she easily found the spade she knew was there, then after identifying a suitable point further off the road, she began to dig.

It was a grassless spot that looked to be the beginnings of path, maybe at one time it was a narrow road of sorts, for carts or horses, but not cars. It had been closed off by an old wooden gate and seemed to lead only into an overgrown wood now. Demelza wondered if this was all part of Trenwith land. She’d lost her bearings but thought she must be close to the back entrance and the avenue of old trees she’d seen a few weeks before.

The ground was soft but the soil heavy from all the rain. Her spade rang out in the quiet as she struck it in over and over, until she thought the hole was deep enough. After the fox was laid in the grave and his body covered, she still felt he needed further tribute. She returned the spade to the car and came back with the pocket knife she always carried in her rucksack. On a small scrap of timber that probably had at one time been part of the fence, she carved ‘RIP FOX, 5-5-17’. It was a relief that the old wood was soft and easily marked. She jammed the plank into the mound then took a deep breath.

“I’m so sorry,” she said one last time. It was all she could do.

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“Doctor Demelza Carne! Nice to see you again,” Aunt Agatha said with a gleeful smile and shuffled across the parlour to meet her guest. She didn’t seem to mind that Demelza was so late but took her hand and squeezed tightly without letting go.

“Thank you, Miss Poldark,” Demelza said trying to catch her breath after her unexpected adventure. She was conscious of the dirt under her nails but the old woman didn’t seem to notice. “Are you well?”
“Everyone’s always asking after my health! I’ll say to you what I tell them all,” Agatha said looking askance at Verity, who was still in the hallway. “I’m fit as a fiddle. But you—you look thin. Make sure Verity feeds you today. A man likes a woman with a little meat on her bones, you know!”

Demelza stifled a laugh. Agatha herself was thin as a rake. She wondered just what Aunt Agatha knew of men.

“I’ll remember that, Miss Poldark,” she smiled.

“So tell me, any recent dreams? More foxes, eh?”

“Oh...no dreams but...I don’t suppose you can tell me, what it means to have seen a dead fox in real life? To have killed it--accidentally--I mean?” Demelza felt sheepish for even asking.

“That’s an omen, for sure. In the road you say? Your path is blocked, you’re struggling to make a transformation but you have to travel on your own. Beware of someone trying to lead you astray—and of danger! Fox energy is strong. It might have been too much for you.”

“Of course, danger,” Verity laughed joining them. “Always danger.”

Finally letting go of Demelza’s hand, Agatha gave an exaggerated huff and took a step back back towards her chair. Then she turned as if she suddenly recalled something and spoke again to Demelza in a whisper.

“Tell your gentleman friend to be careful. I heard George and his man talking. He’s coming after him, after your Dr. Enys.”

“Is he? What did he say?” Demelza grasped Agatha’s arm in alarm.

“Yes, wants to stop him from pursuing his business so his man is going to do him harm. Francis is in danger, mark my words!”

“Oh Francis....yes, Miss Poldark,” Demelza eased her grip and smiled politely. “I’ll be sure to tell Verity.”

“Aunt, come sit down and I’ll have you brought some tea,“ Verity offered, sensing her aunt was growing distressed and confused.

“Forget tea. It’s nearly noon--bring me some brandy!” the old woman snapped.

“Demelza, I should tell you I spoke to Ross. He told me about you two...” Verity said, pulling Demelza aside after Agatha was settled by the fire.

“Oh?” Demelza sounded a bit surprised and found herself speechless. “How is he?” she asked.

“You haven’t spoken to him?” Now it was Verity’s turn to be surprised. “Don’t worry, Ross is fine, a bit restless as always, but now he has something new to anticipate and is rather more hopeful than I’ve seen him in years. And you?”

“I’m happy for some distractions today. Thank you for the invitation.”

“I’m glad you could get away. Sorry it was short notice or you could have brought Dwight too.” Verity scanned Demelza’s face to see if the mention of Dwight’s name caused her any discomfort. Only a quick shadow passed over Demelza’s eyes before she smiled weakly.

“No, this is exactly what I needed,” Demelza said and squeezed Verity’s hand. “It’s like you read my
mind. Besides Dwight is before the ethics board today.”

“Is that what’s troubling you? Do you want to talk about it?”

“No, not now. Show me your tapestries before something prevents us again, like a hurricane or an explosion or a surprise visit from the Queen!” she laughed as she followed Verity up the massive staircase that led to the upper bedchambers.

Demelza had already been in awe of the great Trenwith estate—the grounds, the great hall downstairs, the leaded glass windows, the polished wood wall paneling, the massive stone hearths in every room. But somehow seeing the private rooms upstairs, where Trenwith’s historical residents had slept, made the house seem more real and less like a museum. Actual people had lived here, with hopes and dreams for the future. There was sorrow too that played out behind the solid oak doors and under the pristine embroidered coverlets, heartache from love lost or denied. And of course from death.

“Well it’s funny you should mention royalty because apparently secret meetings were purported to have taken place here before the trial and execution of Charles I during the Civil War. I can’t quite verify that, but it makes a good story for the tourists. These two guest rooms in the South Wing have the historic tapestries. Come,” Verity said, leading her into the first bedroom. “This is from a group attributed to a workshop in Antwerp, late 17th century.”

“Good god! They are beautiful,” Demelza gasped. She was rather relieved she hadn’t just used a more colourful expletive in her surprise. Her eyes slowly wandered over the figures in sumptuous blues and golds that covered all four walls. She’d never seen anything like them before.

“This panel depicts Masinissa, King of the Numidians being offer the crown of Syphax, King of the Massaesylians from ‘The Story of Scipio’. Sadly it has been reduced in size but that’s to be expected with something so old,” Verity explained.

“How do you care for them? I mean it must be an awful lot of responsibility!” Demelza was curious to know.

“We are so fortunate on that score. It’s discreet in the corner over there, but we’ve installed humidity and environmental control equipment. And of course there’s no open flames allowed in this room!” Verity laughed.

“But if you can’t afford a full staff—I mean for the gardens—how do you…” Demelza began.

“Oh, but that’s the best story of all.” Verity bit her lip and flashed what was almost a naughty grin. “We have secured an endowment for their care from none other than George Warleggan.”

“George?” Demelza was startled by this but perhaps she had misjudged the man and he actually understood the value of protecting precious historical artefacts.

“It wasn’t exactly something he planned on doing…” Verity giggled. “Years ago Caroline did a piece on the tapestries for an architecture and design magazine. You know, local history, local treasures, etc. etc. and in it, she mistakenly stated that the current resident, local businessman George Warleggan, was committed of the care of these tapestries. The error was pointed out to Caroline and she went to George offering to print a retraction that would highlight her mistake and clarify that he, in fact, contributed nothing to their care. Well, he couldn’t really let that happen, could he?”

“She didn’t!” Demelza laughed.

“Oh, she did and that’s not all. Soon after several young art historians—who may have been friends
of Caroline’s--and who happened to be writing their dissertations on surviving 17th century tapestries in situ, were pointed in the direction of Trenwith. And so quite suddenly our two guest rooms were the subject of multiple scholarly articles and even a book. At that point George had gotten such publicity for his devotion to their preservation that he had no choice but to live up to his reputation. So you see he is a sort of accidental benefactor but one that works just fine for us nonetheless! And since it is an endowment, he can’t just pull the funds whenever he grows cross with the surviving Poldarks. He’s legally obliged to continue his support.”

“Oh such an incredible story! I love it. And how delightfully sneaky--and extraordinarily brilliant of Caroline!”

“It’s really just like her, isn’t it? Well, we are forever in her debt. There are so few rooms left in the whole country that are totally encompassed by tapestries and we are almost certain that we are the last historic home with wall to wall tapestries in two consecutive rooms.”

“Such a magnificent legacy,” Demelza said softly.

*These are Ross’s people too,* she thought.

“It’s humbling isn’t it? To think these have lasted longer than we’ve been alive and, hopefully, will last well beyond us?” Verity said.

“Yes, it does make one feel small and insignificant,” Demelza said.

“Demelza, you are not insignificant!” Verity said, looking her friend in the eye.

“I know. I do, really,” Demelza replied, suddenly ashamed of such an obvious display of self-pity.

“But?” Verity encouraged her to continue.

“I’m sorry. As much as I’m happy about Ross...it’s just...I’m just a touch out of sorts today. Sad even. About things with Dwight. He’d never been anything but lovely to me and we were such good friends. I’m worried I lost that now,” Demelza said.

Verity led them over to an upholstered bench under the window. At first Demelza was reluctant to sit, thinking it might be some priceless museum piece that would crumble under her weight. But Verity read her hesitation.

“Don’t worry. It’s just an overpriced reproduction and is probably less than fifty years old!” she laughed. “Oh Demelza, I’m sorry for you both. And I’m sure you and Dwight can find a way to be friends still. Haven't you for years?”

“Yes, but this time, when we became...involved...it was different. Dwight seemed changed, like he suddenly had another path he had to follow. And another pace--to speed things along when we used to just let them unfold organically. Dwight’s not naïve nor inexperienced in affairs of the heart, so it wasn’t like he was suddenly blinded by desire that he mistook for love. He’s always been a very self aware man.”

“It sounds like you know him well, Demelza.”

“Maybe his biological clock was ticking,” Demelza tried to laugh.

“But you felt ending it--your romantic affair--was the right thing to do though?”

“Oh, it was the only thing to do.”
“Then you followed your heart.”

“Yes,” Demelza said softly. “And now Ross and I can be…”

Lovers. I am now Ross Poldark’s woman.

Demelza stammered suddenly searching for words to explain how shaken she still felt by her new reality. “It’s just that Ross, well he’s so…” She threw her hands up. What could she say about this man who had upset the very ground beneath her feet? It was a beautiful yet terrifying feeling to realise the whole world had changed.

“Of course Ross is my cousin so I’m partial to him but he’s a good man, Demelza. It’s not hard to understand why you love Ross. And of course why he loves you.”

For the second time that morning, Demelza started to tear up quite uncharacteristically, which immediately embarrassed her. She sniffed inelegantly and looked away at once.

“Oh I’m sorry, I presumed...You do love him?” Verity asked cautiously.

“I do, without a doubt. And I know Ross loves me. I’m just thinking… Some love is like a fish barb, you know, you take the bait, it goes in but it won’t leave you without ripping you apart, on the inside, in a way you can never repair. Oh sure you can cut the hook and swim away but you’ll always have it in you still, marring you and your flesh, your faith…”

“Dear, that’s a bit of grim outlook on love!” Verity said.

“No, no, I know good love isn't just that. It’s also warmth and tenderness, the day to day kindness and forgiveness. It’s not just the thrill. And I see that in Ross, and in only a short while, we’ve had that. And we’ll have more of that in the future. But Ross is…”

“Really like a fish barb?” Verity teased.

“It’s just I’ve never felt anything like this before,” Demelza sighed.

“Demelza, you probably can tell just how much Ross means to me. I’ve known Ross nearly all my life and now that my parents and my brother are gone, he’s the closest relative I have left. Yes, I am quite loyal to him and he, sweetly, has been to me. But for years we both buried ourselves in our work and our other duties, whatever we perceived them to be, in order to forget our own heartaches. So I cannot tell you how happy I am to see Ross with you. He has rejoined the living,” Verity began.

“Oh,” Demelza said.

“But listen, Demelza, that’s not just your doing. I hope you know it’s not your responsibility to keep him even keeled--that’s his own. He knows that. But you’ve shown him a way forward. And you’ve given him hope. He--and I--will be forever grateful for that.”

“Thank you Verity. You have no idea how much this has helped me,” Demelza smiled and hugged Verity tightly.

“Come then, let’s go eat. And before you go, I have some goodies for you.”

Aunt Agatha had gone up to her room for a rest, so they ate lunch alone in the solarium just off the dining room. As Dwight had correctly predicted, the sun made its scheduled appearance just before one. At once the room--and the mood--brightened significantly.
“My grandmother always said that sometimes all it takes to soften even the fiercest temper is sunshine and fresh air,” Verity said.

“You know, there’s an awful lot of true in that. Here’s to Poldark family wisdom!” Demelza laughed, holding her glass up in salute.

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After lunch, Verity was almost giddy with excitement as she led Demelza down the hall and through a pantry just beyond the kitchen.

It was a beautiful space, with glossy white fitted cupboards that reached up to the very top of the twelve foot high ceiling. A ladder on a track--like the kind found in libraries--ran the length of the shelves that were lined with old stone crockery, glass bottles and jars, and lumpy burlap bundles tied neatly with twine. Bunches of herbs hung from wooden drying racks. A stone mortar and pestle stood next to a wooden rolling pin on the black granite work surface. Lemons were stacked in a blue and white porcelain bowl. Everything was bathed in the soft light that streamed in from the massive multi-paned window. Though ostensibly still functional, the room had an elegance--nothing was out of place unless it was supposed to be--and looked as though it had just been styled for a photoshoot.

“So this is Caroline’s latest idea. Since I won’t open a cafe on the grounds, she’s asked me to do a Trenwith Kitchen blog with her. Recipes, historical vignettes, loads and loads of photos. She’s been here--can’t you tell? Caroline does the concept and is responsible for the imagery and I’m to write the text. So far it's been a treat to work with her but I told her I’d only keep it up if it stayed small.”

“Verity! How much fun that must be!”

“This month’s theme is herbs--or maybe duck--we can’t quite decide. And everything is made here at Trenwith, of course. I’m afraid we just used up the duck eggs in our baking this morning or I’d offer you some. They’re so wonderfully rich! But we do have some duck sausage that you must take home. It’s smoked on the premises--this time we used Applewood, I hope you can taste it.”

“Do you do the...slaughtering of the ducks yourself?” Demelza asked tentatively.

“It’s been years since we kept anything alive at Trenwith,” Verity replied, then laughed when she realised how that sounded. “No, I get them from our butcher--Nancarrow’s in Perranporth. And then there’s this.”

She reached down and opened a small stainless steel refrigerator, then handed over a white plastic tub, its lid firmly fastened. It wasn't labeled, just had the date had been written on the side in black marker.

“This...is the biggest secret from the Trenwith Kitchen, but I think I can share with you now that you are more closely associated with the family,” she grinned slyly again. “Plus it will be on the blog soon enough.”

Demelza looked at the mysterious container and smiled politely.

“It’s duck fat,” Verity whispered.

“Duck fat? Oh...so this is what made those roasted potatoes so delicious? Oh thank you!” Demelza hugged Verity and truly did feel as though she’d been initiated into some great Poldark tradition. “Did you learn this from Aunt Agatha?” she asked.

“Aunt Agatha? She’s never prepared a meal in her entire life. I doubt she could even find the Trenwith kitchen! Use it sparingly to save your arteries but it truly is amazing. That’s what makes
I can’t wait to tell Dwight, Demelza thought and then checked herself. Would he still share in her little excitements or did she need to start pulling away in these domestic intimacies? She sighed and resolved they’d work this out. They simply had to.

“What are those?” Demelza asked pointing to an intriguing row of small corked glass bottles. Some were cloudy-blue, others brown, but all distinctly old; they looked as though they might contain some sort of medicinal tonic or homemade tinctures.

“Smell one and see if you can tell,” Verity dared.

Demelza pulled the stopper from one and took a whiff, then laughed heartily. “My goodness, is that rum? Did you find a pirate’s cache in the back garden?” When Demelza had been working in Trinidad she had, on occasion, sampled Jack Iron, a very strong, overproof rum. The fumes from Verity’s little bottle made her eyes water in much the same way.

“No, no pirate’s booty, at least none we’ve found yet. But many of the old recipes call for a strong rum, so I’ve been experimenting with different concoctions, all procured legally from the off-license, I assure you. In the end I think it’s just an excuse to collect antique bottles,” Verity explained. “But please take one.”

Demelza chose a dark, squat bottle that had a pattern of risen bumps around it. It reminded her of a berry—or maybe a grenade.

“And here, take some fresh bread too, and this herbed butter. I meant to come by and stock the engine house yesterday but Ross came and stayed longer than either of us had expected…”

“He came here yesterday?” Demelza asked, then caught herself. “I mean, I have no business…his movements are not my concern…he can certainly go…” She was flustered now. What had she thought Ross was doing yesterday while she breaking things off with Dwight? Sitting alone at Nampara drinking tea? Twiddling his thumbs until he heard from her next?

“It’s quite alright. He had some things he needed to talk through. You are not the only one moved by love, Demelza,” Verity smiled. “Here let me get you a basket or something so you can carry all this home. You didn’t walk, did you?”

“No, for once I have the Defender. No need to lend me one of your charming little baskets, I have my rucksack in the car—I’ll be right back,” Demelza replied.

She sprinted out to the car parked behind the house and dumped her laptop, mobile, and camera on the passenger seat, then took the empty rucksack back to the kitchen.

“Do you really have to leave so soon?” Verity asked her when she returned. “Aunt Agatha will be disappointed when she wakes from her nap.”

“I’m afraid I have to get back to do some work in the laboratory—it might very well be the last we ever do here. Just some water samples I told Dwight I would finish analyzing, for control data to have on file. But I promised Agatha I’d be back to play cards soon so I’ll have to keep my word. Something tells me she wouldn’t forget that.” Demelza laughed then she turned and looked at Verity, her face serious again. “But really, you’ve been a lifesaver today,” she said softly, and kissed Verity on the cheek.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Verity laughed.
Demelza settled the stuffed rucksack on the passenger side floor and swung the Defender around in the gravel drive. As she headed towards the front gate to leave, a four wheel fuel delivery tanker sat idle, blocking the way just ahead of her. She sounded the horn, trying to get the driver’s attention, but there seemed to be no one in sight. She was surprised to see there was no one in the security booth either. Lately there had been one eager scowling face or another with a clipboard waiting to pounce. They seemed to take their jobs screening Trenwith visitors rather seriously.

Feeling too impatient to wait indefinitely, she considered heading for the overgrown entrance at the back of the estate where she’d run into George and Ross a few weeks before. But she wasn’t sure of the exact route around the gardens and remembered there had been some sort of lock on the gate. And unlike Ross, she didn’t have a key.

Impulsively she stepped on the accelerator and carefully drove around the lorry, regrettably leaving some tire tracks on the already muddy lawn in the process.

As she hastily turned right out of the unmanned front gate, her mobile fell to the floor but she reached over and stopped her laptop from following. She hadn’t checked her messages for hours. When she’d gone out earlier to get the rucksack, she had been so focused on her treasure trove of goodies from Verity that she hadn’t seen the new text from Dwight.

Once again his latest message went unread: We have a job!! Ring me ASAP. Other news too. Incredible morning.

Verity stood alone at the window watching the Defender’s maneuvers across the lawn. She laughed at Demelza’s pluck and thought how vexed it would have made Tom Harry if he’d witnessed it.

Where is Harry? she wondered. No doubt he’s be extra cross that Demelza hadn’t signed out with him or his staff.

Verity sighed—she too had had a lovely visit and looked forward to a deepening friendship with her cousin’s new companion. And Aunt Agatha seemed to have taken to Demelza, which was a relief for them all. Verity would have to make it a point to invite them over to dinner soon.

But in their conversation earlier, Demelza also had also given Verity something to think about.

Some love is like a fish barb and it won’t let you go.

“She’s quite right you know. You’ll never be free, will you?” Verity said softly to herself and moved quickly down the hall to the library. Once she was sure she was alone, she closed the door and pulled out her mobile. Her heart raced as she dialed the once familiar number.

“Hello, Andrew? It’s me,” she said.

Chapter End Notes

Information about the tapestries came to me directly from Caroline Lowsley-Williams of Chavenage House, the filming location for (2015) Poldark’s Trenwith. She was so lovely about answering my questions. I even asked her about the use of candles in the
filming of Poldark and she replied, "Ireton’s room was shown off wonderfully well in Poldark. The production team are very careful with the candles and there is always a fire officer on set when there are any naked flames." I am most grateful for her generous response.
Dwight stared into the overly sweet coffee before him. He had asked for milk but after examining the uncovered pitcher that appeared to have been sitting out all morning, he changed his mind and decided to just add extra sugar. The results were as disappointing as he might have expected, but he wasn’t really focused on his cup. Instead he was ruminating on all that had happened in the last 24 hours.

Yesterday when Demelza had told him her news, it had been a crushing experience for him, one that had left him feeling adrift for the remainder of the night. And since then...

Yes, it had been an extraordinary morning. First he had good news from his solicitor that was a surprise. Then there had been another most unexpected announcement, one that certainly shocked most of the members of the consortium. Now that Dwight thought about this last unanticipated development, he saw it was, of course, the simplest solution, other than George Warleggan dropping his complaints altogether. Yet it was not necessarily painless—at least not for one of the parties involved.

Tonkin seemed just as caught off guard as Dwight and apparently had had no prior warning either. But his jolly laugh filled the conference room and he wasted no time inviting the consortium to a celebratory lunch. Dwight graciously bowed out, wanting some time alone to process all that had transpired and what was to come next.

In just a few days time, CEA would finally begin work on a new impact assessment. It was all they had hoped for—the very reason they had come to Cornwall five weeks before. The consortium had to file some documents to reflect the change in their status but no one expected that to take long. Dwight couldn’t possibly think of what Warleggan could object to now.

Yes, extraordinary. Dwight knew he should feel relieved and excited. He could only hope his professional relationship with Demelza could return to its previous standing. He’d never forgive himself if he’d ruined that.

Demelza might have been the one to end things, but he blamed himself for creating such a mess. And while she had been the one to first suggest they sleep together this time around, he saw now that he had pushed it too far too fast.

 Asking her to marry me after only a few weeks back together? Pushing her to start a family? What was I thinking?

He shook his head in disbelief.

“Dr. Enys? Are you enjoying your solitude or may I join you?” a voice that was now quite familiar asked him.

“Caroline,” he said looking up at her bright eyes.

She had the playful twist of a smile that she tried to conceal behind a mask of aloof coolness.

He was learning to read her.

“Yes, please sit down, but I must caution you, I may not be the most animated company this afternoon. It’s already been an exhilarating, but exhausting, morning.” He felt he should warn her; he had no sense how his current mood might come across.
And what was his mood? Bewildered? Hopeful? Or was it still dull and cheerless, as grey as the dodgy milk in the pitcher?

“Maybe you should wait and allow me to be the judge of that. I heard from Demelza that you’d recently had some good financial news?” she said with the arched brow she used when initiating a new conversation topic.

“Well, the biggest news is we’ll be getting to work at once. That’s a relief. But it also seems we’ve been given a grant—out of nowhere—with enough cash to replace the equipment we need. The only catch, as far as I can discern, is we’ll need to offer some educational programmes locally. But that’s no problem, really. I’ve regretted leaving teaching so this is an incentive to do some again. And Demelza had been talking about organising a coastal bird tour for Benjy Ross Carter, so now she’ll only have to open it up to other children. I can’t imagine she’d object to that.”

“A grant? How fascinating…” Caroline said.

“Yes, from a foundation I’d never heard of…there’s a mysterious veil of anonymity around them though. My lawyer assures me it is above board and isn’t an illegal money laundering scheme but I’m still a bit suspicious nonetheless.”

“Don’t be silly. Take the money and run, as they say,” she smiled.

“Call me cautious but I’d like to know exactly to whom I’m beholden. It’s torturous. Ross Poldark has sworn it isn’t him and I believe him, for it would greatly compromise our case if he had any—even secret—financial involvement of our firm. He knows that and I trust him.”

Dwight laughed lightly at his own words then shook his head.

*Trust Ross? Do I still?* he wondered.

But then again after this morning’s meeting, Dwight had renewed reason to trust Ross Poldark. He had proven once again that he was an honest and honourable man. And a good friend.

“So anyway, things are looking up for CEA. Now I just need to find us another place to live and to work. We’ve only got the engine house until June,” he said. “I doubt we’ll be done with our work before then.” This was the only wrinkle left to sort.

*Of course I don't know if Demelza will still want to live with me. I should be ready for that conversation.*

Caroline, perhaps imagining what was troubling his thoughts, reached across the table to touch his hand gingerly.

“I should tell you, I do know about Demelza and…” she began.

“And Ross Poldark,” he finished for her. “You must think me a fool. Everyone does, don’t they?” he said grimly. Of course Dwight never suspected the not so subtle hand Caroline had in placing Ross and Demelza in each other’s way.

“No, Dwight. I can’t speak for anyone else, but I don’t think you a fool. We’ve all been deceived in love at one time or another.”

“You know, Caroline… I don’t think Demelza ever deceived me,” he laughed. “Knowing Demelza as I do, I think...that she deceived herself. She’d never willingly lie to me nor seek to hurt me. I can only imagine this must be really hard on her.” Dwight took a sip from his cup so as to avoid looking
Caroline in the eye.

She raised a brow incredulously.

But Dwight had been sincere. In this moment of his own despair, he was fretting over Demelza’s pain. It wasn’t weakness, but immense empathy.

She saw this.

“Good god, Dr. Enys, your heart is exceptional,” she laughed.

“Is it? Because I think I don’t know my heart at all. I’d been approaching my relationship with Demelza like a scientist, not a lover. I looked at all the data in front of me and then came up with the most plausible explanation. We were attracted to each other, Demelza and I, we cared so much about each other, we got on so well--of course the logical conclusion was that we were in love. But see, I didn't test it. That’s bad methodology. Yet she did, and she managed to poke holes in my beautiful hypothesis easily. Maybe she saw it because she looks up—at the sky and the birds and the endless horizons, whereas I’m so narrowly focused on the spot of earth just in front of me…”

“You may be talking of science but you sound poetic to me,” Caroline said. “Listen, I believe that some friends are dear enough that even under certain circumstances one would find it easy to forgive and continue to trust. I’ve only just met Demelza, but I find her character extraordinary—and I know you do too, which is why this must sting.”

Yes it stings, he thought. Apt word. But it is just that—a sting—not a gaping wound. How curious.

“And I have known Ross Poldark long and as imperfect as he is, I’d trust him with my life,” she continued.

“I know this too, Caroline. Thank you,” he said sincerely. “But you know you are denying me the privilege of feeling sorry for myself. I believe I’m entitled to that,” he teased.

“Nonsense. Feel sorry that you’ve had a substandard coffee instead of a proper drink.” She glanced at her watch. Slim and gold, its face was encircled with small diamonds. Dwight couldn't help but notice how expensive it looked and wondered if she had bought it herself or if it had been a token of someone else’s admiration of her.

“Come Dr. Enys, let’s leave this place, and you and I and Horace can go find a better watering hole.”

“Horace?” he asked.

She lifted her black shoulder bag a few inches so Dwight see the mesh panel on its side. He spied the two black bulging eyes of the little pug he’d met when he last stayed at her townhouse.

“They are so fussy in here about dogs so I must smuggle him in. But at Vertigo they are not so discriminatory. He could breathe freely, we could have some cocktails, so you’d really be doing Horace a great service.”

“Of course,” Dwight replied with a broad smile.

“Where is your Blue Beast, Dr Enys?”

“I left it with Demelza today. Which is just as well—if we are to have cocktails as you suggest, then I may not exactly be in a state for driving later.”
“Can I offer you a ride home then or more appropriately arrange one for you since I won’t be either,” she laughed.

“No, believe it or not, I’m meeting Ross in a few hours and driving back with him.”

“Ross?” she laughed. “Really?”

“Wish us luck.”

“I’m sure you'll be more than civil to each other. I’d expect nothing less. In fact I believe you’d be better off brawling and getting some of that testosterone-fueled aggression out.”

“I believe you may be right!” Dwight laughed and rose from the table. In just a few short minutes, his mood had definitely been lifted by her company.

Without speaking, he put his hand lightly to Caroline’s’s elbow, and together they moved across the cafe towards the door. He was aware that it was the first time he had touched her since their dance at Trenwith weeks ago. Her arm was slender, graceful, yet seemed to possess an undeniable strength. He wanted to feel more of her shimmering vitality, so impulsively he put his hand on her back.

She didn't pull away but slowed her pace just a bit, almost leaning into his touch.

Suddenly Dwight had a revelation and almost stopped in his tracks. It was a confirmation of suspicions he hadn’t even realised he was harbouring.

Something Caroline had said earlier wasn’t quite right. Offhandedly she’d mentioned that it had been Demelza who had told her about the recent change in CEA’s financial prospects.

And that's hardly possible…since I haven't even told Demelza about the grant yet, he thought.

So Caroline had some hand in the RayVen Foundation’s grant to CEA. He paused to look at her. He couldn’t contain the smile that radiated from somewhere deep. It filled him and he knew he was also smiling with his eyes.

But this wasn’t the time to discuss Caroline's secret--and life saving--philanthropy. Dwight knew then that there would be other conversations with Caroline Penvenen in the future.

Many more.
As she began her drive home, Demelza grew conscious of how she much lighter she felt, relieved of her burden. Just as she’d hoped, the visit with Verity had bolstered her confidence about the recent choices she had made. Actually, she had no doubts that she had done the right thing following her heart, but somehow hearing someone else agree with her, went a long way in easing her troubled spirits. She was further soothed when she turned north onto the road that ran along the seaside, and left the gloom of the wood surrounding Trenwith behind her. Her heart opened at the the sight of the vast blue sky beyond and while she drove, her thoughts casually wandered to the supper she had planned for Dwight that evening.

_I had only the little bit of thyme and I forgot to buy tarragon this morning! I should have asked Verity if she had any--maybe there’s some dried in the cupboard at the engine house._

Demelza knew she was putting too much stock in the ability of one good meal to mend things with Dwight, but she was hoping it would be a celebration dinner, that the news of today’s meeting would be what they had been waiting for and that the ethics board would rule in their favour and end this nightmare with Warleggan. She hadn’t checked her mobile to see if he’d sent any word but she had a good feeling that she couldn’t quite explain, as though she just knew they would be working again as of tomorrow.

_How long will this assessment actually take?_ she wondered. Really since they arrived, she had been trying to get as much preliminary work done as she reasonably could before their ‘official start’; soon she’d see if her efforts made any significant impact on the schedule. Would they end up staying here working for the consortium throughout the summer or would they sail through the project in just a few weeks time?

A summer in Cornwall might be lovely. Maybe she could stay on for a bit of a holiday afterwards. What was this glorious seaside like in early autumn?

It then occurred to her she hadn’t yet thought out how she and Ross would be together once this assessment was done and she had to move on for other jobs. They hadn’t discussed it--just one of many things they hadn’t ever discussed.

_Well, I’ll just need to get back here as often as I can, that’s all. Every weekend, in fact, _she assured herself. She was not about to get in a panic. They would make this work. Again she felt she _knew _it.

She continued along the empty road north and her thoughts drifted away from dinner to the coastal birds she imagined were circling the cliffs just beyond the verge. Would she have ample time to see more of them and do more than just a casual nest count? Exactly when would these birds leave here and move on to winter habitats? October? She’d have to check what Carrington reported in his earlier work for CPE Environmental Group.

_Wintering birds._

And then it hit her--that something that had been niggling at the back of her mind for weeks now, an answer to a question she hadn’t yet thought to ask.

“Oh good god! How could I have been so stupid. Of course! That’s it!” she exclaimed aloud and pulled the Defender into a lay-by at once. Without switching off the engine, she reached over for her laptop, accessing one of the many reports she’d saved to her hard drive. Frantically she scrolled through the documents until she found what she was looking for--the breeding bird survey CPE
Environmental Group had done just this past autumn for Warleggan. Then she opened the bird survey they did for the consortium two years earlier in May. They were identical.

“And I, of all stupid bloody fools, did not catch this?!” she bellowed and clapped her laptop shut in disgust. All this time she had been so busy scrutinising the differences, when in the end it was the similarity in data that was the dead giveaway.

She reached for her mobile to ring Dwight and saw at once it had no signal and little battery. No surprise there—she hadn’t charged it today. Last night she’d left her charger in what was once again Dwight’s room and had felt too sheepish to retrieve it, then this morning it had slipped her foggy mind.

“Fucking hell!” she muttered and tapped out a text anyway hoping that as she drove on, her reception might change and the message would go through at some point before the battery died.

*Found faked data in Warleggan report. Ring me!!*

“Oh Dwight! I hope to god you are at home,” she groaned and shifted the gear lever to resume her drive back. Any stress or strife in their current relationship was forgotten in her desperation to share this discovery with him.

She was just about to pull back onto the road when she saw another vehicle approaching. Right away she could tell it was travelling too fast and there was something about its garish yellow colour—in the brief second it made an impression on her brain—that seemed ominous. Her guard heightened by such an anomalous sight on the quiet country road, she gripped the wheel tightly and watched in her wing mirror as it approached without slowing.

As it passed, it swerved ever so and swiped the side of the Defender—seemingly deliberately—causing it to spin.

“What the hell…” Demelza began. Even though she had sensed the oncoming danger she hadn’t been ready to be jolted so. Now perpendicular with the road, Demelza moved to get out of the way of any other traffic, but thankfully the road remained deserted. Then she caught sight of the same yellow car turning around and coming back again.

This wasn’t good. She knew not to panic and kept her breathing steady; she was relieved when it raced past her, back south along the coast and out of view. She checked her mobile for a signal and again found none. Frustrated she tossed it into the rucksack stuffed with Verity’s goodies.

“Steady, Carne,” she said aloud. “Just some arsehole kids out for a bit of fun.” But she knew it wasn’t kids—as the car had whizzed by, she noted two rather burly men. The driver was bearded but that was the only real distinguishing characteristic that registered in the moment. She thought she should check the damage to the side of the Defender but wasn’t eager to leave the safety of the car.

She pulled back onto the road and was about to switch on the radio for a calming distraction when she saw it again.

The yellow car—now she could tell it was a Ford Ecosport—was behind her and once again traveling at a speed that was far too fast for that road. It didn’t seem to be slowing down as it barreled closer. She considered increasing her own speed but thought that if she remained steady, it would simply pass her on the right since there was still no oncoming traffic.

Yet within seconds it was on her rear gate, close enough that now she could see faces in her rear view mirror. The driver looked familiar but she couldn’t quite place where she’d seen him before.
No, she’d spoken to him—she heard his rough voice in her head. What was he saying to her? Both men had angry eyes, snarling mouths. And then she knew.

They were targeting her.

First one tap on her bumper—a ballsy move for a vehicle smaller than the Defender—then it fell back a few yards. But another bump followed with greater force, enough to send the Defender into a skid again.

Surprised at herself for still being able to keep a level head, Demelza turned into the skid and gently applied the brakes. Her plan was to pull across to the oncoming lane and quickly turn to go back towards Trenwith, where she was certain to find helpful people and working phone lines. The Defender, however, choose that very moment to stall. She turned the ignition to get going again but was met with only a sputtering cough. Once more she tried, but it wasn’t catching.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” she whispered. The Ford that had overtaken her, pulled to a halt in the middle of the road, blocking the way unless she could make a sudden, sharp turn.

Desperately Demelza tried again but worried she had already flooded the engine. She heard a car door slam shut before she looked up to see the passenger get out and lumber towards her. He held something menacing in his hand that she thought might be a cricket bat.

The rear gate lock of the Defender was still broken, but since they left no valuables behind whenever they parked in town, this simply hadn’t been a bother to them before. Now this posed a serious problem.

And even if she could have secured herself in the Defender, with such a bat the man could smash her windows if he was persistent—and strong—enough. She thought of the spade but quickly dismissed the idea of using it as any sort of weapon. With two assailants, if she were overpowered, it was just as likely to be seized and used against her.

Yet what the two men had in brawn just might hamper their agility. Demelza felt confident that if she were to exit now, before the one approaching stranger reached her, she could outrun him, although she’d need to get off the road lest she be overtaken by the Ford.

Without further contemplation, she grabbed her rucksack and stealthily exited the passenger door. As soon as her trainers hit the pavement, she bounded westward towards the cliffs.

Immediately she recognised where she was. This was the precise spot Ross had left his car the afternoon they had climbed the rock face to the cave, and where she had wandered alone the morning after she’d stayed at Nampara the first time. Both events seemed a lifetime ago.

There was shouting behind her but she didn’t turn. Instead she scrambled down the loose rocks and crouched among the larger boulders, convinced her breathing was heavy enough to be heard a mile away.

“She’s done a fuckin’ runner, Tom.”

Demelza couldn’t quite place the man’s accent but it wasn’t local.

“Well she can’t ‘ave gone far, can she? Go after ‘er, you dickhead,” the other voice called, followed by the slamming of another car door.

They were both out now, both hunting her. In their voices Demelza heard a darkness—it wasn’t quite what they said but how that pushed her own animal instincts to high alert. But she had the advantage
of knowing the terrain, and sensing she should exploit that, decided to go further down, another fifty feet to the cleft in the cliff where Kellow’s ladder awaited.

Demelza scooted to the edge of the precipice face on her bottom, then inelegantly turned around and slithered backwards on her belly, just inches at a time until she felt her legs dangle over the edge. Her stomach dropped as well, and it was only the deep grunts in the distance telling her the men were still coming, that drove her on until she found the first rung. She balanced herself, then tentatively reached down—first with her right hand and then her left foot. She began the descent.

The wind whipped around her, and while it wasn’t presently raining, the air closer to the sea was wet and grainy with salt and spray, adding one more element to contend with. Her hands shifted steadily down, one foot to the next rung, then the other foot. She had managed, in those first crucial moments, to move through her panic and traverse down quite a few feet. She thought she should count to give herself a better idea of how much distance she had covered, but since she hadn’t started doing so while at the top, she now felt a bit disoriented. Looking in front of her, she saw only the wet rock wall and did not dare look up or down.

It was too late to rethink this plan.

“Steady Carne. You can do this,” she panted. “You can fucking do this. You’ve done it before.” Of course she had never climbed down the ancient ladder, only up. And she tried to push from her thoughts that the last time she had done this climb she’d been secured with ropes, was wearing a helmet, and she was with someone who would have done everything in his power to keep her safe.

“Oh Ross,” she whimpered to the wind.

But she couldn’t think of Ross now. His strong, protective arms, his tender kiss, his loving whispers—these could bring her no comfort now, just make her realise what she was missing. And what she might lose forever. It was too much.

Her foot successfully hit another rung and again she found she exhaled loud enough to hear it over the crash of the sea below.

One of the missing rungs has to be soon, she thought but despite this warning when it happened, and her foot found no purchase, she felt a jolt of terror slice through her. But she could no longer go back up and had to continue. She’d need to rely on her upper arm strength, to reach low on the side rails until she found something. She wished she had been wearing gloves and climbing shoes instead of her trainers which were slipping on the wet rungs.

Leap of faith, leap of faith, she thought and lowered herself even further. Her right foot caught something and she knew she could continue her slither down.

It has to be only 10 more feet until the cave, she thought. But those feet were leagues to her right now and every terrifying step down she took, brought her further from any terra firma and closer to the roaring waves below.

The dizziness had returned. She wanted to go slow, to be deliberate, but she was racing to get out of sight before her would-be attackers saw her and got wind of her intended hiding place. It was even possible that they might not even know the ladder was there, as it wasn’t visible from the edge of the cliff. And if the cave was a secret to them, they’d assume she fell to the sea and would be washed away.

Steadily she climbed down, her hands damp from sweat and from the moisture that clung to the slimy wooden rungs. Then she felt it—a rush of cool air, different from that swirling around her. And she
smelled it—the musty damp, the wet rot, the soggy moss. The cave was just past the next rung.

She tried to hurry but then remembered there was another missing rung—was it below the cave or at its opening? Tentatively she felt and found it solid enough to hold her weight—she was level with its gaping mouth.

Last time Ross had gone first, and he’d reached for her with his long arms. Now she’d have to do it herself. Terrified and still dizzy, she scooched slowly to her left, closer to the dark hole in the cliff face. There was still a big gap between the cave and the rung, one she’d have to stretch to make. If everything had been dry and there had been no need to hurry, she could position herself carefully then launch herself in, she might even feel about for the foot holds she remembered were anchored in the rock walls near the ladder. But she had no such luxury today.

“Leap of faith,” she whispered again. “Leap of fucking faith.”
The moody Cornwall sky was still clear by late afternoon when the grey Peugeot headed west towards the coast and away from Truro. The two men inside the car were quiet but it was a comfortable, friendly silence, settled into after the easy conversation around the day’s developments had at last been depleted.

This was the first time they’d been alone after the events of the past few days—an opportunity to take a temperature reading of the friendship. Would rivalry over a woman drive a wedge between them? Ross’s announcement before the consortium earlier that morning went a long way to demonstrate his good will and eagerness to move on professionally. But personally?

Ross had expected Dwight to be civil but was surprised at just how remarkably stoic he appeared. Of course this might very well be a front put up for Ross’s sake and inside he might be churning with rage and turmoil. But somehow Ross doubted it. Dwight had always been upfront with him and Ross expected nothing less even now.

And Ross had read him correctly—Dwight did feel lighter and surprisingly even-keeled. After what ended up being a rather delightful afternoon of cocktails and conversation with Caroline Penvenen, he no longer felt quite as grieved by Demelza’s decision. And he was determined to cling to his initial impulse to feel relieved—well almost relieved—that it had been Ross who had stolen Demelza’s heart and not some distant stranger.

Separately Ross and Dwight had each been musing on how their lives intersected in a new way now. But both men also had another thing they could agree upon: they were exhausted. The past 24 hours had been tumultuous and they were eager to just settle into some sort of normalcy, whatever that might be from this point on.

“They’re supposed to be starting some roadwork in the next week on Ashley Road. You can be glad you won’t be making quite so many trips into Truro to see Pearce moving forward,” Ross said.

Dwight nodded but didn’t respond. Were there other reasons to go into Truro than to meet with the old solicitor? Dwight had grown rather fond of the town over the past few weeks but had hardly done any real exploring. Maybe Caroline could direct him to the more interesting sites—there were gardens and a museum after all. Or perhaps he could still see Caroline but at her estate, Killewarren, and not at the townhouse. She’d mentioned riding there and it hadn’t sounded like an idle invitation. Dwight felt oddly buoyant at the thought of continuing a friendship with Caroline. Of course he wouldn’t have much time for socialising in the coming weeks. Not with all the catching up CEA would need to do.

Dwight realised he hadn’t responded to Ross’s last statement and added a quick “oh yes,” lest he seem frosty.

“Sorry, I had a few pints with Caroline. I’m not used to drinking in the middle of the day and I have to admit they are making me a bit groggy,” he laughed.

“You deserved to celebrate,” Ross said. He wanted to suggest they continue the festivities once they got home but wasn’t sure how the logistics could be worked out. No, it wasn’t time yet. No doubt Dwight and Demelza still had things to talk about between themselves and now they had work plans to make as well. Let them toast to the future of CEA alone. There will be other nights for the three of them to forge a friendship.
And how would such a friendship look? Dinners at the engine house, the three of them? Swimming at Hendrawna Beach? Drinks on birthdays? Another gala event was likely at some point, knowing Caroline Penvenen. Perhaps Caroline’s presence could help. Ross couldn’t say just how it would unfold, but he trusted they’d work it out. Dwight and Demelza would insist they move through any awkwardness—they were both such kind and rational people. Well, Dwight was rational….was she? How well did he really know her? He felt he did, but of course he still had so much more to learn. Surely they’d only grow closer in the coming weeks.

Ross hoped he could speak to her soon or even see her tonight. Maybe they could meet later for a walk along the sea by the moonlight. He recalled with a start how her hand felt in his. Her lips on his mouth. Her bare skin pressed against his. Ross drove on hoping his inner thoughts weren’t visible on his face.

Dwight pulled out his mobile, then seeing there was still no response to the messages he’d sent earlier, tucked it back in his pocket. It was just as well. He wouldn’t want to have a conversation with Demelza, even one about work, while driving with Ross.

“I do wish George had been there today. That is my only regret. I’d have liked to see his face…” Ross said.

“Oh yes. I agree. I sort of expected that his man Tankard would be lurking in the corridors or perhaps listening at keyholes at least,” Dwight replied. “I wonder where he is off to?”

“And poor Cary Warleggan arrived after all the excitement was over. No doubt he was expecting to come in and pick over our carcases like the carrion-eater he is.”

“George’s uncle did seem utterly bewildered, didn’t he?” Dwight laughed.

“He was a bit out of his depth, if you ask me. He has no familiarity with people acting decently and gets easily thrown off when witnessing…”

“Ethical business practices?” Dwight finished for him. “Genuine generosity?”

Ross grew a bit flustered. He was hoping they could avoid talking about his personal motivations behind the announcement he made to the consortium. He quickly sought to change the subject.

“Dwight, do you remember all those years ago when George first put up that fence, along the path in the wood that leads to Trenwith?”

“Oh indeed I do. That was when Warleggan first moved into Trenwith wasn’t it? It didn't take you long to pull most of it down.”

“Not the whole fence, just the gate,” Ross said, with a playful wink. “And that was thanks to your wise intervention.”

“That was the last time I saw you…”

“Destroy property? Break the law?” Ross smiled. “I think it was the last time I did either.”

“Well I’m glad to hear that, Ross!” Dwight laughed.

“You know, Dwight, I wish could say otherwise, but I could still see myself doing that again, not just to Warleggan’s property. I’m not proud to admit that. Yet I do think I would only take my rage out on fences… maybe a glass window pane.”
“But never a person?”

“No, not that. I can’t see myself committing violence to another person. I think I’m finally adult enough to understand all the repercussions of such an action, even if I were in the right. And I can’t imagine getting my blood so worked up again that I’d bother. I mean, just what could rile me so?”

“Listen to you! You’ve finally grown up,” Dwight said.

“I’m getting philosophical in my old age. And let’s be honest, I’d most likely end up hurting myself now, wouldn’t I? But hurt another? No, those days are behind me.”

“I’m glad I was never at school with you, Ross,” Dwight shook his head.

“Oh, I could have used someone with your sense to keep me out of quite a few scrapes.”

Dwight was about to mention the one time Demelza prevented him from striking a stranger in a pub years ago but thought better of it. That was after all, the night he’d first ever slept with her. He’d need to do a better job of controlling such thoughts.

“Isn’t that fence somewhere around here?” Dwight asked, glancing out his window. He wasn’t terribly familiar with the back road they had taken but he suspected it led around the rear of Trenwith.

“Yes, it’s just up ahead.”

“I assume then that Warleggan rebuilt it after your last escapade?” Dwight asked.

“So it seems. Perhaps we’d better inspect,” Ross said, and suddenly pulled over.

“Ross? What are you doing?” Dwight hoped he hadn’t encouraged any foolish ideas.

But Ross had already begun to climb out of the car. He paused for just a moment when his fine leather shoes sank into the mud, then continued on his mission. He stepped over the ditch at the side of the road and moved towards the path in the wood.

“Ross!” Dwight called again but saw his friend had no intention of abandoning whatever reckless impulse was leading him on. Dwight decided it was important to follow Ross—perhaps he could control the damage.

“Ross?” Dwight asked cautiously as he got closer.

Ross was already on the grassless path, standing in front of the gate and examining a mound of freshly overturned dirt.

“What’s this?” Dwight asked, crouching to read what was scratched into the wooden plank sticking out of the earth.

“From the marker it seems someone has buried a fox today. But I can’t see any of the Trenwith grounds staff bothering to do such a thing.”

“Probably a passerby,” Dwight offered.

“George wouldn’t be happy to hear of trespassers,” Ross said. “This is Trenwith land, after all. Or at least it is on the other side of this fence.” Ross gave the old gate a quick push—it rattled just enough to announce it no longer hung squarely on its post. The rusty latch held but could be easily opened.
“Ross!” Dwight said sharply.

*For god’s sake, man! You’ve won today. Why willingly continue this decades-long feud? Do you not now have everything you want?* Dwight wanted to shout at him. But it occurred to him then that Ross’s victories had come at a cost, one Dwight couldn’t discount lightly.

“It looks like the whole thing needs some repair,” Dwight said, noting that the wooden scrap used as a grave marker had come from the gate at some point. He truly did not mean to spur Ross on but wanted to let him know that his loyalty still was unwavering. Even now.

“You think?” Ross asked, and with one swift thrust of his muddy foot, forced the gate open. Another stomp and the lower cross plank crunched in half. Ross reached down and yanked the rotten wood loose from its nail. His strong hands easily snapped what was left of the board, then with a growl of fury, tugged another loose and tossed it into the woods. He took a step back and laughed.

His deep laugh filled the otherwise silent wood. Dwight ran his hands through his hair and shook his head in disbelief, trying to hide his own smile.

“Don’t worry, Dwight. I’m quite done.” Ross brushed the dirt from his hands and took a deep breath. “And there are no security cameras at this entrance, in case you were wondering.” Ross reached into his coat pocket to fish out the nearly-empty pack of cigarettes he’d been carrying for the last few days but before he found his lighter, thought better of it. He wasn’t stressed and had no excuse to continue the habit.

“I wasn’t worried but thank you for that reassurance. You seem well acquainted with Warleggan’s surveillance?”

“Unfortunately yes…I believe I’m quite in your debt, Dwight. Not just for now.”

“Being your lookout, you mean?” Dwight laughed. He hated to admit that Ross’s two minutes of fence destruction had done wonders for both their moods. What was it Caroline had said about releasing built up testosterone?

“If there was anything I could do for you in return for all the headache and financial setbacks George put you through because of me…” Ross began.

“Well, Ross. Now that you mention it, there is something.”

“Name it.”

“Do any of your outbuildings at Nampara have electrical power?” Dwight asked.

“Yes, at least two of them, possibly a third but it would need some roof repair. Why?”

“Would you consider letting one to a small environmental consulting firm to use as laboratory space?”

“For CEA? Good god, of course. When do you need to move in?”

“We have the engine house until the end of June. Of course I’d need to check with my partner before we make it official but I think she’d enjoy staying close to the sea,” Dwight replied.

“Has Demelza finally accepted your offer of partnership in the business?” Ross asked.

“Not yet but when she hears the good news of today, I believe she will. I think I understand what
was holding her back and well, now that…”

“I am happy to help, in any way I can,” Ross said sincerely. His eyes had grown dark and serious.

Dwight saw this was the opportunity to push one more limit. Some things needed to be said.

“Ross, I must speak to you about something else. You’ll forgive me for not going into great lengths on this but I want you to know... I wish you and Demelza both great happiness,” Dwight said and felt his mouth tremble as he did so.

“Dwight, I…”

“I need to say this to you--and I’ll say the same to her about you. Ross, do not hurt her. Demelza is a strong and outspoken woman, but she is human and she is quite capable of feeling pain--she can be broken.”

Yes, I know this, although I wish I didn’t , Ross thought.

“I would never hurt her or willingly put her in harm’s way,” Ross stammered.

“Yes, Ross. I believe that.”

And so they had reached an accord.
The Call

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was just a little after two o’clock when Caroline stepped into St. Mary’s Street, alone save for Horace, the little pug tucked into a bag on her shoulder. She looked up at the clear sky and nodded with satisfaction. After considering taking a taxi to her next destination, she decided she might just walk the half mile to John Street since it promised to be such a nice day.

The fresh air felt good on her flushed face. She’d had two Aperol and elderflower spritzes and hoped she wasn’t weaving about the pavement as she walked. Two cocktails was over her usual limit for a midday meet-up, but in the presence of today’s companion, she’d found her spirits matching her drinks—sparkling and bright—and had a hard time saying no to a final round when Dwight insisted.

Their conversation had been lighter, easier this time around. Of course the cocktails helped but even before then, at the cafe, Caroline felt him to be open today. Was Dwight Enys a person that just slowly unfolded over time? Or perhaps had he been reserved in the past out of deference to his connection to Demelza? Was that it—was he just loyal and honest?

She wasn’t sure what to make of his changed relationship status. Should she be relieved? That didn’t seem quite right, for surely both he and Demelza were friends, and she should be sympathetic to their distress. It was funny when she thought about it, but she’d really only once seen him and Demelza actually together—at the Trenwith affair weeks ago. Everything she knew of the Carne-Enys affair had been reported to her by the other. Caroline found she envied the the way Dwight and Demelza spoke of each other, always with such unwavering devotion. Even after all that had just happened.

And now? If she saw them together, knowing they had ended their other sort of connection, would she feel jealous? She might just.

How curious.

What did she, Caroline Penvenen, and Dwight Enys even have in common, after all? She wondered what Demelza and Ross spoke about—they too came from such different worlds. And yet they seemed to have found one of their own. Perhaps they didn’t talk at all but engaged in other ways. Maybe that was the secret—follow the spark and don’t overthink it.

Caroline arrived at #8 about fifteen minutes later, a bit out of breath. About half way through her walk, as she passed by the museum, she’d regretted both her choice of shoes and the ten kilos of pug she carried on her shoulder. She probably should have taken Horace home first, but it was too late now.

Now with mustered composure, she rang the bell.

After a minute or two, a woman in pink pants and a floral top answered the door.

This must be the nurse, Caroline surmised.

“Can I help you?” the woman asked. She looked weary and distracted and didn’t hide the fact that she was scrolling through something on her mobile while speaking to Caroline.

“Mrs. Thomas,” Caroline said. “I’m looking to see her. Her daughter Selina and I spoke today and...” Suddenly the bubbly effervescence she’d felt earlier drained away fast and was replaced by a
flicker of doubt about what her next move should be. But before the shadows of hesitation showed on Caroline’s face, the nurse had already turned away and without even asking her name, beckoned her in.

“This way,” she said in neither a welcoming nor forbidding tone. Caroline stepped into a cramped lounge that seemed even more crowded by the large screen television precariously wedged into the corner.

“I’ll be going then?” The nurse asked the woman in the armchair and gave just a glance at Caroline, but also another towards the door to the kitchen.

“Mmm mmm,” said the woman Caroline presumed to be Mrs. Thomas.

The nurse gathered up a handbag and a few overstuffed plastic Tesco bags and left without another word.

“Well hello,” Mrs. Thomas said, turning her focus from Two Tribes to greet her new guest. Caroline was grateful when the woman reached for the remote and muted the programme’s volume altogether. “And who did you say you were, my dear?”

Caroline wondered if she drifted in and out focus all day or if her ailments were just physical. She couldn’t tell. An oxygen tank stood in the corner but there were no signs that Mrs. Thomas was currently attached to it--no tubes nor masks or anything. But on a table pushed up against the wall were rows and rows of pill bottles that suggested long term illness.

Had it been hard for Katie and Selina to leave their mother in such poor shape? Or was it the opposite—a much longed-for escape?

“My name is Caroline Penvenen, I live here in Truro and know your daughter, Selina,” Caroline said brightly. She’d learned over the years that when asking something of women, they required their own kind of seduction. Friendly and attentive, she shouldn’t be too overbearing yet mustn’t appear to be hiding anything.

“We please sit down then, Caroline,” Mrs. Thomas said in a casual and warm voice. She seemed to have no problem accepting that Caroline, who was older than Selina and more elegant in her style, was a friend of her daughter’s. She’d probably been used to years and years of girls coming round the house and no longer kept track of them all.

Caroline perched on the edge of the floral sofa and was glad to slip Horace’s weight from her shoulder. She wished she could kick off her shoes as well. Horace gave a little snuffle but otherwise offered no fuss about his continued confinement in his carrier.

“Yes, Selina’s doin’ well for herself, isn’t she? Her husband—oh, he’s a handsome devil—and he’s makin’ good money too! ‘Course everythin’ is so expensive in London, so it doesn’t go far, does it?” Mrs. Thomas laughed but the laugh quickly caught into a cough. She pointed to a glass of water that had been left on the coffee table and Caroline quickly handed it to her.

“I’m wondering if you maybe have heard from Katie?” Caroline ventured to ask after Mrs. Thomas’s coughing had abated.

“No, no. Katie isn’t here. She’s left for a bit. You a friend of hers too?”

“Yes, she is such a sweet girl!” Caroline replied.

Okay it’s only my first outright lie. But I would like to befriend her and help her. And isn’t that why
I'm here? She tried to justify it to herself. Still she was misleading a sick, old woman. It didn't sit right with her.

But before Caroline could contrive her next line of questioning, Mrs. Thomas started speaking again. Her eyes had gotten a dreamy, faraway look and it was unclear if she remembered to whom she was speaking. Caroline hoped the woman hadn't spilled any Thomas family secrets to the hired nurse these past weeks.

“Wasn’t right, the way they treated my Katie.”

“Oh?” Caroline encouraged, surprised and relieved Mrs. Thomas had brought up the topic of Katie’s dismissal from CPE Environmental Group without any prompting.

“Lettin’ her go when all she did was spot out a mistake. She was always good that way. Has a good eye. When she was a little girl she told me one day ‘No, no Mummy, those socks don’t go together.’ ‘Course one could hardly tell--it was just the width of the lace at the cuff that was different--I hadn't even noticed. Oh, she was only three when she did that and since then we counted on her to be our eyes! The whole family did. And now she likes that video game at the pub,” she laughed. “You know the one where you pick of all the things that are different in each picture? Oh, she’s brilliant at that. Has it on her mobile too now. Not as much fun as at the pub, though, eh?” she laughed.

For just a moment Caroline wondered whether Dwight Enys would be good at pub games. Maybe quiz night would be his thing? She could envision him having some deep knowledge of obscure baroque composers or 18th century naval battles and getting strangely competitive. And now she knew he was fond of ale. When faced with the enticing cocktail menu at Vertigo he’d chosen St. Austell’s Proper Job instead. She’d found it authentic and charming. He seemed to hold his drink well too. She liked that.

Caroline realised she hadn’t been listening to Mrs. Thomas and quickly tuned back in with a smile.

“She’s good with numbers too. That’s why Mr. Carrington hired her…Carrington was a friend of my brother’s, years ago. That’s how we knew him and how Katie got that job at CPE. ’Course he’s also the one who fired her.”

“Do you know...how to reach Stephen Carrington now?” Caroline asked cautiously.

“Carrington? Isn't he in Spain?” Mrs. Thomas coughed again but this time it was controlled and seemed to only stir up her disgust. “He goes to Spain and my Katie has to…well, it isn’t right.”

“No, it isn’t,” Caroline said. She had to try again. “And Katie now is...?”

“I told you I don’t know.” Mrs. Thomas, who had been a font of stories a moment earlier, suddenly stopped talking and grew sullen. She wrapped her arms across her body--a protective and defiant posture.

Caroline got the hint.

“Well, I am quite glad to have met you, Mrs. Thomas. I won't keep you any longer, I just promised Selina that I’d stop in.” Another lie. “Before I go, do you mind if I use your...”

“Oh yes, right through that door, just before the kitchen,” Mrs. Thomas replied, trying to be friendly again before flicking the volume back on.

The swell of applause and quiz show theme music immediately filled the room. Horace snapped a sharp bark at the abrupt change in atmosphere but after Caroline slipped her hand inside to soothe
him, he gave only a low growl, followed by a snore. She adjusted the strap on her shoulder and left the woman alone.

Caroline walked past the toilet and instead continued on through the kitchen to a little room just beyond. A stacked washing machine and tumble dryer filled most of the space. Some broken down cardboard boxes and empty bottles were neatly gathered, waiting to be taken out to the bins, a broom and mop were tucked next a frosted door that led to the empty back garden.

Caroline took one step into the room and peered around the side of the washing machine and smiled. A pair of large, blue eyes stared back at her, terrified.

“Hello Katie,” Caroline said gently.

Chapter End Notes

As “research” I had some Aperol and elderflower spritzes last week (as our dear Caroline had with Dwight) while I was in Germany. Originally I had written that she had 3 of them but one definitely left me tipsier than I had imagined. So trying to be a good scientist, I had to repeat the experiment at another bistro on another day and met similar results. Reluctantly I made the edit here and so Caroline just drank the 2. But who knows? Maybe Caroline holds her spirits better than I do!
Demelza allowed her eyes to adjust to the dark cave. When she’d made the grand step into the opening, she threw her whole weight forward and stumbled, landing in a cold, foul-smelling puddle. Now her hands were scraped and the knees of her jeans were uncomfortably wet. Still, she was grateful she hadn’t slipped backwards. She stood up, ducking carefully so she didn’t hit her head on the rock ceiling.

She strained to listen for voices, hoping her attackers hadn’t started down after her. She thought it unlikely but fear was growing in her, pulsing through her body and her mind, making it harder and harder to think clearly. From inside the cave, nothing could be heard but the screaming terns circling and diving out over the sea. She moved further into the black.

With her hands she felt along the mossy wall, inching slowly into the dark. Somewhere water dripped from a crack—each droplet met the sitting puddle below with a metallic-sounding plop that rang out and echoed in the silence. She remembered this from her last visit; then it had seemed ominous, now she found it comforting in its familiarity. It reminded her of a metronome, beating out a slow and steady time signature.

“Oh,” she uttered aloud, startled, when she kicked against something with the tip of her foot. She crouched and gasped again, this time in delight, when she realised it was the headlamp she’d dropped almost two weeks earlier—on the day she had first kissed Ross. Her trembling fingers found the switch and she gave a sigh of relief that its battery was still in tact.

The promise of light, even a weak one, bolstered her spirits. She paused to steady herself. It was time to stop running—for the moment anyway—and time to make a plan.

But it was once she stopped moving, that she felt the damp chill seeping into her body. Her skinned knees smarted under the now-soggy denim but her quick-dry athletic top was waterproof. She pulled up its hood to conserve any heat escaping from her head.

Since her jeans were already wet, she relented and sat down on the cold mossy floor of the cave, rucksack in her lap. She wasn’t at all hungry but suspected she would soon require some sort of inner fuel to keep warm. She considered unstopping the bottle of rum but decided to hold on to that for the time being. Perhaps it would be needed later for courage.

**Rum brave.** Wasn’t that the expression her father used to say?

Instead she fished out the knife from the bottom of her sack and unwrapped one of the packets from Verity. Her grubby fingers ripped from the crusty loaf of bread and then, with the knife, she hacked off some of the duck sausage.

Even in these dire circumstances, the complexity of Verity’s sausage was notable to her palette. Sweet, peppery—the smoke flavour was silky and didn’t overpower the earthy duck taste at all.

Demelza ate slowly and methodically, as if staying fortified was a task she’d been ordered to complete. And as she dutifully chewed and swallowed every bite, she traced her fingers along the engraving of the knife that had been given to her three years before.

**Dwight. Thanks, mate.**

No, it wouldn’t do to think of Dwight nor Verity nor any of her friends now, just as earlier she had fought to push Ross from her mind. Any warm thoughts might just break her.
She had learned this as a young girl. In moments of her father's darkest rage, it only made it worse to think of the cuddles and comfort she vaguely remembered from her missing mum. It was better to think of other things altogether--neutral things--not love. Never tenderness.

*This is still something to be grateful for,* she reminded herself and put another sliver of smoked sausage in her mouth. Wearing the rucksack had added an extra challenge to her climb down the ladder, but she was pleased now that she’d impulsively grabbed the sack before she fled from the car. The provisions might last her a while. But after they were gone? *Can you eat moss?* she wondered.

She switched off the headlamp to save power, knowing she’d need it later when the sun set completely. She could use her mobile for light as well but it might be best to conserve that already waning battery for other purposes.

The sun wasn’t expected to set for another five hours. So was that the plan then? To stay put overnight? Indefinitely? She couldn’t say but knew at least that she needed a break from fleeing. The adrenaline that had flooded her body was abating and exhaustion was setting in. Eating had at least kept her busy. Now she felt perilously close to giving up.

She tried to recall the optimism that had filled her earlier that afternoon. Where was the confidence in a future here in Cornwall that she’d felt? It had slithered away from her as she descended the old ladder into this nightmare.

What an idiot she was for having left the roadside at all! If only she’d braved it and kept running, she might have flagged down another passing car. But here? No one knew she was in danger. No one could help.

It occurred to her then that she should conserve her body’s power too. She’d need to focus on her breathing to stay calm, to keep her vitals steady, to control her racing mind.

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply then exhaled long and slow. First she put her hands to her belly to feel her steady breathing, then she let them wander to finger the silky soft moss beneath her.

It reminded her of something from Illogan, from her childhood.

They’d had a neighbor, Miss Trelasks, who her brothers and father always referred to as “the old spinster” but was probably only in her early forties at most. She always smiled sympathetically at Demelza, the lone girl in house of rowdy and unkempt boys, and over time took steps to befriend her.

“Please, call me Letitia,” Miss Trelasks had said to her one day. Demelza was never able to do that--it seemed inconceivable to address a grown up by only her Christian name--so she endeavoured to avoid calling her anything at all from that point on.

One time Letitia announced she was going away, to Yorkshire, for a whole week. That seemed so far away and the idea one could go by oneself had been a bit of an eye opener for the young girl. Letitia had asked if Demelza might come by her flat while she was gone and water her plants, of which there were many, and care for her cockatiel, Music.

The first time Demelza turned the key and entered Letitia’s place, her jaw dropped in amazement. How could a place have the exact layout as her flat right next door but be so completely different in look, in feel, even in smell? Everything was white--white leather sofa, white walls, high white shelves with small white sculptures and vases placed intermittently. And the carpet--soft and thick--
was the colour of a sandy white beach.

Demelza had left her shoes by the door so she wouldn't track dirt into the immaculate room but worried nonetheless that she'd leave a sullying trace somehow. And when she watered the plants, she was careful that no dirty run-off spilled over the sides of the pots.

*What would it be like to live alone in such a pristine setting with no one else to clean up after?*

Music, the bird, was white too—or off-white anyway. As charged, Demelza dutifully fed him and watered him each day. After a few days though she knew she had to attend more thoroughly to his cage and even though Letitia had given her instructions, she was nervous she might make a mistake.

And of course that was exactly what happened. As she tried to lift the top of the cage from its floor, Music crouched low and nosed his pointy beak at her hand, pecking with just enough strength so that she lost her focus and accidentally lifted the cage upwards with a jerk. Music, whose screeching up to this point was anything but lyrical, slipped under the gap at the bottom and made his escape.

The next thirty minutes were both terrifying and frustrating for Demelza. Over and over she reached for the bird, unsuccesssfully. Finally he left the kitchen and made for the lounge. She followed, terrified now that he would upset Letitia’s perfect white room. She tiptoed after him but he remained out of her reach. Occasionally he would sidle close as though he wanted to interact with her, then fly of to another perch.

“Oh, Music, please don’t do this,” she cried.

But the bird just cawed and fluttered his wings in triumph. Exhausted she laid down on the living room carpet and closed her eyes. The pile was silky plush against her hot face. She felt a tear make its way down her cheek; she quickly stifled it and held her breath.

Music suddenly alighted on her shoulder and when she dared to peek, she saw him look at her out of one cocked eye. She grabbed him, awkwardly, and pulled him close to her chest.

Wings flapping against the hands closed around him, heart beating, head tossing in anguish, Music fought his captor.

Finally Demelza could stand it no more—the idea that she was his torment—and released him at once. And to her great surprise, Music went nowhere but instead moved closer to her face, cooing softly, fluffing his feathers. She had let go and yet he had not left her.

She hadn't forgotten the feeling of his frantic heart bearing in her hands and vowed to never again interfere with any creature’s freedom.

*Sometimes you have to let go.*

The moss floor of the cave was no saxony pile carpet and as the damp chill spread up Demelza’s body, she was recalled her present surroundings. She opened her eyes with a start.

There, standing in front of her, was another bird. It wasn’t Letitia Trelask’s cockatiel of course, but it was one still familiar to her. It was the ringed shag she saw when she’d visited this cave last.

“Oh, it’s you,” she whispered. “Have you come for me?”
“Please, I don't want to make trouble,” Katie cried desperately. “Just let me stay with my mum. She needs me. The nurse don’t care about her feelings. Did they send you?”

“Who? No, no. I’m here for Selina--she’s worried about you. My name is Caroline. No one knows I’m here. Katie. Let’s go sit in the kitchen and you can tell me everything.”

Caroline reached out her hand and, after only a flash of hesitation, the girl took it.

“I know I should have told Selina where I was going but I got so scared and I didn't want to put her in it,” Katie said once they sat down in the empty kitchen. Mrs. Thomas was still enthralled in her programme in the other room and hadn’t noticed any of their conversation.

“Tell me Katie, what scared you? Something in London?”

“Well, yes but…first, before London, something happened here...in Truro. Did Selina tell you?” she asked tentatively. It was obvious to Caroline that Katie was eager to unburden herself, desperate to trust someone. Up to now it seemed Katie had only really trusted her mum, and Caroline could see Mrs. Thomas couldn't really offer her daughter more than love and loyalty. Not advice and certainly not protection.

“Yes, Selina told me some of that,” Caroline encouraged her. “How did that all come about?”

“It was strange. Really weird…”

She sounded almost dreamy for a minute--a bit like her mum when she’d been telling stories about the past.

“Well, see I worked for Mr. Carrington for just over a year and we got on real well. He treated me like a daughter almost and taught me a lot. About the business, I mean. I never knew we had so many laws protecting nature! But then one day, I pointed out a mistake on an EIA--that’s a kind of report we do,” Katie explained quickly, a hint of pride at her expertise could be heard in her voice. “Well, he just changed and got all grey faced. Like he was a different man altogether. His eyes--it was like they were dead?” Katie said.

Caroline nodded and squeezed Katie’s hand in reassurance.

“The problem was I had already called up the local planning authority office where I file the completed reports and told them there’d been a mistake. But that was wrong for me to do--I should have talked to Mr. Carrington first, I should have trusted him. I mean, I did trust him, you know? That's why I told the clerk at the planning authority straightaway. I wanted to protect his good reputation and thought the mistake must have been made on my part or one of the office temps that come in from time to time, not his. Still... I didn't expect it when he fired me.”

“That must have been a quite a shock,” Caroline offered.

“Yeah it was. And I could have lived with that. But a few days later, I came back to the office to pick up my final cheque and also to get the last things from my desk. So silly. Why did I need to go back for a coffee mug and some broken earbuds? Anway, he was there.”
“Stephen Carrington?”

“And that time he was different. Not the kind man I thought I knew, but not the cold one either. He was sitting in the dark alone. I thought maybe he was worried? And he didn’t...well, he didn't say he was sorry for letting me go but he seemed concerned 'bout me all of a sudden. He gave me his mobile number and told me that if I ever needed any sort of help I should phone him. But it was the way he said it. This wasn't just like any kind of help but like if something ‘special’ went wrong. I didn't really understand at the time. I mean I understood the feeling but not the words.”

“That’s curious,” Caroline said, pulling her lips thin in concern. She did not like how this story was unfolding. “Do you think...you could give me his number?”

“Why?” Katie asked.

“Well, I have some friends--they are ecologists…” Caroline began.

“Not Joan from CPE?” Katie asked sharply.

“No, from another firm--they have some questions for Mr. Carrington about the Warleggan impact assessment.”

“About the birds, right?” Katie said with another confident nod of her head. “I thought so. Okay, I’ll give it to you but maybe don’t tell him you got it from me?”

“Thank you Katie. But... can you tell me more about what scared you enough to leave Selina’s flat so suddenly?”

“Yeah...” Katie swallowed hard. “So that day when went back to get my stuff from CPE, as I was leaving there was another man outside the office. There's a little car park behind the building and he beckoned me back to talk. I didn’t want to follow him but he told me he was police.”

“Police?” Caroline was alarmed at once. “Are you sure?”

“Well, I wasn't but then he showed me his warrant card.”

“Really?”

“Yes, it was real. At least I think it was. And he told me I was in trouble. That since I’d helped Carrington and worked for him, I was ‘assisting an offence’--is that the phrase? He said it was in the Serious Crimes Act. Or it might be conspiracy--because I’d helped commit fraud. He said that I could be charged but that if I kept my mouth shut, that might not happen. And I should do it for Mr. Carrington.”

“For Mr. Carrington?” Caroline clarified.

“Yes, and when I said why should I care about Carrington, I mean he sacked me? So the man said then maybe I should do it for my mother. Because I wouldn't want anything bad to happen to her.”

“Bad? Was he...specific?”

“No, he made it seem like they’d be watching and maybe she could lose the house? I know...that’s weird, right? It was vague and I can’t recall his words, but I do recall his face.”

“Yes?”

“Dark red beard and round blue eyes. He was youngish, sorta, but looked like any minute he might
have a stroke.”

“Was he driving a police car?” Caroline thought to ask.

“Not a blue and yellow one but it still looked kind of official, like it wasn’t his personal vehicle but for work somehow. It was yellow. Couldn’t miss it, super ugly. Not like the other man’s car.”

“Other man?”

“Yes, that’s who I saw in London. That’s what scared me, why I left.”

“Okay, tell me about the other man,” Caroline said patiently. She was trying to follow along with Katie’s twisted storytelling.

“So after the policeman talked to me, he went over and leaned in the window of this other car that was waiting. That was a nice car--Range Rover, sort of a dark shiny red. And I saw the man. He had... well, fancy hair for a bloke. That’s how I recognised him when I saw him again in London--his hair. And the fact that he was sitting in a red car.”

“In London? Where was the car…?” Caroline tried her best to find questions that would keep the girl talking without sounding too probing or off-putting. She was hoping the Aperol cocktails weren’t dulling her ability of pick out relevant clues from the girl’s rambling tale.

“At the showroom in London where my brother-in-law, João works. He’d spilled soup on his tie at lunch, so he rang Selina and she asked me to bring him another one ‘round. He’s so fussy about what he wears at work--you know slick clothes and expensive ties? And he thinks that’s what will sell a luxury car! Like he has to look the part. But he stands out, if you ask me. I think he should aim for subtle, don’t be noticeable at all, you know what I mean?”

“I do,” Caroline smiled approvingly.

*Good instinct and a good eye.*

“So when I got to the dealership I spotted this same man I’d seen in Truro. I guess he was interested in a McClaren, or maybe he just interested in how he looked in one, and the 570s on the showroom floor was red--a brighter red but still red--so it triggered the memory,” Katie said confidently.

“Can you be sure that...it was the same man?”

“Oh yes, I’m sure. I have a good visual memory. Everyone tells me that. But it was him alright. And I knew it was because, well, just looking at him, I got so scared, like I couldn’t breathe. I left the tie on João’s desk and went straight to the train station. Maybe I overreacted but didn’t want to tell Selina because I thought maybe João knew that man? And then if João told him where I was staying...? I couldn’t get Selina involved. I just couldn’t.”

“But you told your mum?”

“First I called Mr.Carrington’s mobile but only got his voicemail. So yeah, I’ve only told my mum. But she don’t know quite everything--she just knows to keep it a secret that I’m here. She don’t mind. Just as long as I’m back.”

Caroline saw Katie smile for the first time that afternoon. Demelza and she had had it all wrong. It wasn’t a boyfriend that brought Katie back to Truro but her mother’s love and comfort--and extreme fear.
Caroline now tapped her fingers anxiously on the table. Katie had just excited some of Caroline’s suspicions and she was hungry to follow all the breadcrumbs laid out before her.

She thought carefully about her next move. There were procedures for these sorts of things, no doubt. Then again she wasn’t police—if by her unskilled questioning she led a witness to a conclusion, it wasn’t quite the same thing as if a detective had, was it? Still, she thought she should tread with care. She pulled out her mobile and began swiping through the photos that she knew were still there.

“Katie, my dear. I’d like you to tell me if any of these men look familiar to you,” she began cautiously.

*Was ‘familiar’ the right word to use?* she wondered. *Or should I be more specific?*

Caroline then showed her a photo of Richard Tonkin, followed by John Tressida from the gala at Trenwith.

“No, no, I don’t think so?” Katie asked hesitantly, looking carefully at Caroline for some clue of how she was supposed to respond.

“That’s fine. You are doing brilliantly,” Caroline said. She bit her lip as she tried to select her second set of photos.

“What about these…” She now showed Katie a picture of Ross Poldark followed by one of Dwight. She had almost forgotten just how handsome Dwight had looked that night. She was quite proud of the suit she’d selected for him. Maybe she could contrive another elegant affair to invite him to in the near future. Would he be game?

“No, no. They sure are hot but I don’t know them. I’m sorry.”

“And this man?” Caroline tried to sound casual as she offered another photo from the party.

“Oh! That’s him! That’s the man who I saw in the car park in Truro talking to the policeman--the one I saw again in London!” She squeezed Caroline’s hand and looked up, her eyes ablaze.

Caroline tried to give a neutral sort of smile but inside, her heart skipped a beat and her stomach fell. This was no longer an entertaining puzzle. Suddenly the whole scenario seemed real—and dangerous—in a way it hadn’t before.

Now she had to figure out how to leave the Thomas house as quickly as possible and find Demelza. Caroline realised she hadn’t yet responded to Katie’s positive identification and that the girl was still looking at her expectantly.

“Well, that’s been so very helpful, hasn’t it?” Caroline said politely but coolly, and tucked her mobile back into the side pocket of Horace’s carrier.

“Listen dear, I need to be going now but I shall be in touch soon. There’s nothing to worry about but just... keep to yourselves for the time being, as you have been doing? Until I ring again, okay?”

Caroline was used to stretching the truth and sweet talking strangers, but she felt awful about lying to Katie just now. But what else could she say? That the girl was in fact in danger and that Caroline could do nothing to help?

“Yes I will. And thank you so much for letting me talk but don’t tell Selina I’m back home, not just yet? I know she’s worried but...Please?”
“No, I won’t. Take care of yourself…and your mum,” Caroline said and squeezed her hand back.

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Caroline was trembling when she got out to the pavement after having said a quick goodbye to Mrs. Thomas. She pulled Horace from his carrier and pressed her face to his sleek furry head.

Were the police really involved? Katie was certainly convinced and hadn’t she just demonstrated herself to be a careful witness?

Caroline quickly dialed Demelza and instantly grew frustrated when the call went to voicemail. This wouldn’t do—she had to tell someone straight away, someone she could trust. Someone strong and level headed. She tried Ross Poldark next and was unable to reach him either. That might be just as well. Perhaps Ross wouldn’t respond calmly after all if offered evidence that actual fraud had been committed against the mining consortium, not to mention threats made against an innocent girl.

Finally she tried Dwight but hung up before he’d even have a chance to answer. She didn’t exactly know how to explain to Dwight all that had just happened since he knew nothing yet about why she’d ever sought out Katie Thomas—and she wasn’t sure it was her place to tell him. No, that really was better coming from Demelza. Caroline tried her again and this time left a message.

“Good god, Demelza, ring me at once! I found Katie Thomas and she just identified George Warleggan as one of the men who threatened her over the environmental report. Go ahead and tell Dwight-- or Ross--but please don’t tell anyone else until I’ve explained everything.”
Flight

_Plop!_ The dripping water rang out, disturbing the silence of the cave. There were no other sounds but that of Demelza’s own breathing, which she tried to quiet.

The bird moved still closer so Demelza could now see the metallic-tinged sheen on its feathers and the tag on its leg. Before, on the day she’d climbed with Ross, the ring had appeared to be light green. Today she saw it was actually yellow, the letters on the tag—one large and two underneath in a smaller font—were white. Demelza recalled, with regret, that her good camera was somewhere on the floor of the Defender, but thankfully she did have her mobile. When she had been here with Ross she’d left that locked in the Peugeot’s boot, but now she could at least take some sort of a photo of the shag. Slowly she reached for her rucksack and pulled out her phone. She was surprised at how her cold fingers quivered but she managed to steady herself just enough to snap a few shots, hoping the flash wouldn’t drive the bird away.

It didn’t. It turned its head towards Demelza and stared.

Demelza gasped, startled by the bird’s calm majesty.

And looking into the shag’s shiny black eye, Demelza was suddenly charged with a renewed inspiration to fight this out. Her lungs filled with life-giving air and somewhere deep within her, a flare was lit. She wouldn’t give up. Her heart was overcome with things she wanted to do—things she must do.

Of course she was curious to find out who had tagged the bird standing before her. But she also wanted to tell Verity that yes, she did taste the applewood smoke in the duck sausage. Then they’d walk in the old garden and see what was newly in bloom or together perhaps they’d raise a glass of strong rum to Cornish pirates of old.

_Dwight._ Oh, she had so much to tell Dwight! She was dying to explain the flaw she’d detected in Carrington’s report but she was equally desperate to make him dinner just as she’d promised. And after all these years she must thank him again for the gift of the pocket knife.

And then there was Ross. Her dear, sweet Ross. She was ready to try the peatiest Islay whisky from his collection. What was it called again? Oh yes, _Ardbeg Dark Cove_. Well, that was aptly named—she’d never forget that now. He’d pour her a glass and she’d ask him why he’d chosen an ash tree for his yard. Wasn’t he concerned about Chalara fraxinea? She’d curl up by his side in front of the fire and tell him about the fate of the sad little fox and how Aunt Agatha had been accurate, for once, in her prognostication of danger. She’d show him the photos of the shag—the shag they had found together. She’d tell every bit of this story to him. She’d feel his beard on her cheek while she spoke in a special soft voice—already she had one that was just for him. He’d listen, he’d care, he’d want to help her. His hand would strum her back as he held her in that strong but gentle way.

_Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine._

She’d tell him that she had been scared.

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Her awakened heart now pounding, Demelza tried again to steady both her breathing and her racing mind to thoroughly assess the situation.
How long would it be before someone realised she was missing? Would Dwight just assume she was gone for the night and, out of pride, let her be? She couldn’t hold out hope for a rescue from friends—it was time to face that reality.

It was far more likely that she’d be found first by the guys who ran her off the road—might they not get sick of waiting and come down to get her? If only she knew why they had targeted her in the first place. If she could better understand their motives, she could predict their moves. Were they actually trying to hurt her or was their aim just to scare her off? How much did they care about finishing the job they started—if she went up the ladder might they still be waiting? She knew she couldn’t really fight it out with them.

*No, flight has always been your choice, Carne. But you can’t run anywhere now, can you?* she chided herself.

Once again she weighed the risks of staying. She had nothing with which to build a fire and her clothes were already damp. This week the average ground temperature after sunset had been ten degrees so she’d get dangerously cold if she stayed there overnight. Yes, to stay was most certainly a risk. A risk that could possibly work out if she were to be found the next day. But that was no certainty.

If only this had happened earlier that week, even yesterday! Then Dwight would have surely missed her after just a few hours. Now she couldn’t say how long before the alarm would be raised—maybe another whole day?

And even if someone were looking for her, they’d never look here. How many people were aware of the cave’s existence, besides Ross and Jinny Carter? She couldn’t shout to alert any search parties to where she was without also giving away her hiding place to her attackers, if they were still in the vicinity.

But perhaps she could still flee. Maybe not go up the ladder but...down?

It was another way out—one far more dangerous upfront but, if it worked, this whole ordeal would be over more quickly and she might just have shot of survival.

But how much did she know her own strength and trust herself?

Demelza laughed. Then surprised at hearing her own voice in the quiet cave, she laughed again. She knew laughing, like crying, was the body’s natural response to calm itself down, and she smiled to know hers was working on its own, outside of her conscious mind, to keep her going. She stood up and inhaled deeply again, filling her chest with the cool air of the damp cave.

She knew what she was going to do. There was no room for doubt.

She dumped the contents of her rucksack out at her feet to assess what she had at her disposal. But she had forgotten about the little round bottle and when it hit the uneven rocky floor, it smashed and its precious contents leaked out into the moss.

“Fucking hell!” she muttered. So much for rum brave.

She spread the rest of her possessions out in front of her and began to refine her plan. It seemed counter intuitive to strip but what choice did she have? Wet clothes would weigh her down and besides, what was that expression they teach young hikers? *Cotton kills.*

She took off her trainers and socks first, then her jeans. Her knickers, athletic bra, and top were all quick-dry nylon and could stay. With the knife, she jabbed at the cuffs of her top until she’d
succeeded in making holes big enough to slip her thumbs through. Now her sleeves would stay in place covering the length of her arms and not ride up as she moved. It might not really make a difference, but she felt it couldn’t hurt. She was mildly relieved she hadn’t cut herself in the process of her crude tailoring but then stupidly took one step backwards, right on to a shard of broken glass from the Verity’s little bottle.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” she cried and grabbed up her sock to try to staunch the bleeding. It hurt like hell and distracted her from the plan she had been formulating in her head. “God damn it!” she said, then again tried to refocus.

She switched the headlamp on, then with her knife, began to carefully scratch into the mottled red rock wall.

_D Carne here 5-5-17. Contact Poldark_.

It was more difficult and took longer than she expected but in the end she felt confident it was at least legible—if anyone found their way to this cave.

_Yes, it’s lovely, you idiot, but will it last?_ she chided herself. Would the water dripping down the wall wear away her work before anyone even saw it? She couldn’t entertain such a worry right now. She had to focus on the minutes just ahead of her.

But she sensed the message was too cryptic so she took her mobile in hand and tapped out a more detailed memo of what had happened and where she was headed. That one she addressed to Dwight. He knew the security code to her mobile and could open it—if it were ever found here.

Again, _if_.

She hated the idea of leaving her phone behind but it was the only choice. She placed it, the headlamp, the knife, and her socks on the carefully folded jeans. Next to the pile she tucked the packet of herbed butter and any remnants left from her earlier snack. She hoped the food waste wouldn’t attract any rats to the cave—rats that might spoil her dear shag’s nest.

Then she tossed the white tub back into the rucksack and after a moment of consideration, slipped her trainers back on. Blood from her cut foot seeped through the blue mesh and began to pool around her bare ankle. It stung but there was nothing to be done. Climbing barefoot was simply too dangerous. She had to act now before her courage evaporated.

Without putting full weight on her tender foot, she tried a few tentative steps towards the mouth of the cave. She hated what came next. But there was no other way.

The distance between the cave opening and the ladder was a stretch for her. She remembered how hard it had been to muster the courage to do it that day with Ross and how she’d hesitated, lingering in the cave, filled with fear. How silly she’d been! Then she had safety ropes and a helmet. Then she had Ross!

And now? She’d never felt less safe, not in all her years. But then in a flash of clarity, it hit her. The realisation that she—that no one—was ever really safe.

_Are we not always hostages to fate just by living? Yet we fool ourselves into believing that we have some sort of control over our destiny. And that if we’re cautious, if we act wisely all the time, if we avoid risks, we’ll somehow be alright._

Because to truly contemplate the terrors that might be waiting around every corner, every day, in even the most pedestrian situations, would be untenable. No, security had never been more than an
With that, Demelza swung her leg out and once she reached the closest rung, her arm followed. She clawed at the slimey wood with all her might until she was sure her weight was centered and she’d found her balance. She didn’t look up but focused on the rock face in front of her and slowly began her descent.

Going down now was surprisingly easier than going up. With each step she moved closer to the ground and at least the danger from a fall was lessened. Her bare legs tingled in the cool wet air but she called on the muscle strength within, from all those years of running, to keep her going. The sea pounded below and the wind whipped her loose hair into her eyes and mouth and whistled sharply in her ears, deafening her to any other sounds. If her assailants were close, she wouldn’t know.

Down she went, slowly and steadily. This time she remembered to count each rung. It helped—a fixed rhythm to help track her progress and keep her breathing steady. Empty save for the tub of duck fat, the rucksack felt oddly light but also uncomfortable as it bounced against her back.

Finally she was just a few feet from the flat shelf of rock that separated the ladder from the sea. It had been there that she and Ross had disembarked weeks before. Oh, so much had happened since then! And even though it had led her here, she wouldn’t change a thing. She’d do it all again, exactly the same way. Well if given a choice, maybe she’d take a different road home from Trenwith.

She was so elated to have made it down that she almost leapt the last few feet. But how ridiculous would it be to twist an ankle—or worse—when she was so close? Instead she continued on the last two rungs, until at last her trainer hit the wet, rocky ground.

Now she forced herself to look up but saw nothing but grey skies. Was the weather turning? Of course it was, this was spring in Cornwall after all. She’d have to act fast.

She crouched down and took off her shoes. Her foot was still bleeding slightly but there was nothing to be done. Next she opened her rucksack and took out the small tub from Verity. She sighed—this last move probably would make little difference but it was worth a try. She scooped out a soft handful of duck fat and with it, began to lather up her bare legs, greasing her muscles like a channel swimmer. She lifted her top and coated her belly and back as well, hoping the fat would offer enough extra insulation to keep her warm. The distance between here and Hendrawna Beach near Nampara wasn’t long as the crow flies. But she was no bird and there was no guarantee the sea wouldn’t have its own ideas and divert her course.

She had one last thought that she should not leave any visible traces for her assailants to follow, so she slipped her trainers into the sea one at a time. Then she returned the tub to the rucksack and watched as that too slowly sank into the frothing green-grey water.

She tightened the hood over her head and stretched her limbs one last time, then moved to the edge of the shelf.

Demelza wasn’t one to pray but she felt she needed one final appeal, some gesture of reverence to the forces around her. She turned and offered a salute to the ladder and the dark hole barely visible from where she stood.

“Good bye,” she said softly to the shag she hoped was still nesting inside. “Goodbye.”

Demelza moved closer to the ledge, then without any further delay, dove into the frigid sea.
As Dwight walked up the path to the engine house, he realised to his surprise, that he did not dread seeing Demelza again. In fact, he felt what he needed most just now, was to spend some time with her to recalibrate, to go back to how things had been five weeks ago. He hoped she felt the same. Maybe they’d talk more about the future of their friendship, maybe they’d start drafting plans for the new assessment, or maybe they’d just sit side by side over a quiet supper.

It was almost five o’clock when he entered the cottage and was immediately aware of how cold and dark it was. There was no delicious smell coming from the kitchen as he had come to expect since sharing the space with Demelza.

*In the past five weeks how many meals has she made for me? Did I ever properly show her my gratitude?*

“Demelza?” he called. He poked his head upstairs and shouted her name again, hoping he hadn’t woken her from a nap. There was no answer.

Dwight returned to the silent kitchen and absently opened the refrigerator. There was a nice new cut of lamb that hadn’t been there that morning--she must have already been to the shops. Two potatoes and a few carrots were scrubbed and waiting in the strainer in the sink; a few sprigs of thyme sat on the work surface but he couldn’t tell how long it had been since they’d been picked. White beans soaked in a blue enameled pot on the cooker that had not been turned on.

*Stew. But it all should have been started long ago. Maybe this was intended for another day?*

*The Defender! Did I even look for it?* he thought. He flung the cottage door open and saw what he hadn’t bothered to notice when Ross dropped him off. The car was not there.

For the first time in a long time, Dwight wasn’t sure what to do next. He desperately wanted to be helpful, to contribute to whatever cooking scheme Demelza had in mind, as if asserting himself in their shared domicile was crucial to their continued friendship. But he was afraid to upset any of her plans and ruin the lamb or undercook the beans. And wherever she was, he didn’t want to intrude on her solitude--now more than ever.

“Demelza?” he called again and this time realised how much he needed her. He pulled out his mobile and began to ring hers while he quickly walked up the path. As he expected, the laboratory was dark and empty too.

Demelza’s number had gone straight to voicemail--her mobile must have been switched off. He knew she wasn’t with Caroline nor Ross since he’d just seen them both. Maybe Verity knew of her plans even if she had intentions of going off alone somewhere. He felt foolish but rang her all the same.

“Oh Dwight, I wish I could help you,” Verity said apologetically. “Demelza was here earlier but she left hours ago, just after two o’clock, maybe?”

“Did she have the car?”
“Yes, she said she was going back to do some lab work.”

It was probably nothing but it just wasn’t really like her. There had to be a reasonable explanation—she could be off on a run. But would she take the car for that? Maybe if she was looking for a scenic location.

An alarm bell rang faintly in his mind.

Dwight hesitated for just a moment then tried Ross next.

“Ross...is Demelza there by any chance?” he asked nervously.

“I’ve only just got in but no, she isn’t. Prudie isn’t back yet from her errands so I’m all alone save Garrick.”

“And you haven’t made plans to see Demelza? I know this is awkward...I’m sorry,” Dwight stammered. But his concern for Demelza trumped any pride he had in that moment. His gut was telling him something was amiss.

“Dwight, is something wrong?” Ross asked cautiously.

“It’s just that I can't locate her. Her mobile is off. She’s not at the engine house nor in the lab, and was last seen at Trenwith hours ago.”

“Dwight, stay there. I’ll come get you and we can look for her together. Maybe the Defender got another leaky tire and her mobile battery has died.”

“Thank you, Ross,” Dwight said earnestly. “In the meanwhile I’ll check her laptop to see if she left any leads on what she might be up to or where she might have gone.”

Dwight felt sheepish looking for the laptop. Earlier that day, before his big meeting with the ethics board, he had considered asking to borrow it again, as he had been doing for weeks now. But he just couldn’t—not today. He didn’t want to violate her personal space further. He already regretted that he had inadvertently read emails intended just for her. He couldn’t bear reading anything more...intimate.

But he needn’t have fretted now. Her laptop was nowhere to be found.

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“Did you find anything? Any sense of where she might have gone?” Ross asked as soon as Dwight climbed into the Peugeot.

“No, her laptop wasn’t in her room nor the lab, so probably she has it with her, but that would suggest she hasn’t gone for a run. Clearly she’s working somewhere...I know I’m overreacting. She hadn’t mentioned anything to you, plans of any sort?”

“No...well, I suppose...” Ross weighed what he was about to say. He wasn’t sure it was relevant but he was done keeping secrets from Dwight. “She did say she was interested in finding Stephen Carrington, the original ecologist who wrote the assessment reports but unless she’s gone off to Spain, I can't imagine where she would have begun.”

“She said what? Carrington? Had she found him?” Dwight was utterly shocked. “Why didn't she mention this to me?!” Was this somehow a bigger secret than her love for Ross Poldark?
“No, she hadn’t yet. I can only imagine she was trying to be of some real assistance...”

Dwight then thought about how, weeks ago, he had kept the punctured tire from her.

Who am I to judge? I’ve had my secrets too.

“If she wanted to speak to Carrington, what would she be doing to find him? I had no luck on that score when I contacted his former office,” Dwight said.

“I don’t know. She didn’t tell me any details.” Ross tried to sound reassuring. “Look there’s the Defender up there,” Ross said and pressed on the accelerator.

“Thank god, if she’s had a breakdown she’s at least close to home,” Dwight said with a sigh, but as they drew closer, his stomach dropped. “Oh good god...”

The Defender’s rear bumper was bashed, the passenger door hung open, but it didn’t really resemble an accident. The car had been deserted, perhaps in haste. Everything about the scene just seemed wrong.

“Maybe she’s just around here or down walking along the shore,” Ross said, and quickly switched off the Peugeot’s ignition.

“Why would she leave the door wide open? And there’s no beach here, no shore to walk along.” Dwight slammed his door and hurried towards the Defender to better assess the situation with his own eyes.

But standing next to the car didn’t bring the comfort he sought and instead only stirred his fears that something had happened to Demelza—and happened suddenly.

“Is that her camera?” Ross asked, examining the passenger floor. Her camera was smashed—it looked as though someone had taken a blunt instrument to it and left it, bent and cracked, tossed aside.

“What happened to it? Could she had dropped it? I don’t see her laptop or any of her other things...” Dwight rummaged around on the car floor and peered under the seat. He went around to the back and opened the gate. There was nothing there but the buckets and spades they’d been hauling around with them for weeks. One of the spades had some fresh dirt on it, but nothing looked out of place.

It still could mean anything.

“If she is around here, somewhere...she wouldn't take the laptop outdoors if there was even a chance it might rain. She’s very protective of it.” Dwight had grown thin lipped. He hated every word coming out of his mouth and wished he could find the well of rational explanations that Ross seemed to have at his fingertips.

“Maybe it’s still at the engine house and you overlooked it,” Ross suggested.

“I don’t think so, I checked everywhere. And tell me, why are the car bumper and her camera smashed? What happened here?!” Dwight remembered how someone had taken a cricket bat to the contents of their lab. Had he, through his dogged persistence to continue this project, inadvertently brought danger to her?

Ross said nothing. His mouth was twisted as though he were deep in thought but his dark eyes remained impassive. Finally he spoke, shattering the weighty silence that had settled around them.

“Today of all days, why the hell did I take the back roads up behind Trenwith? If we’d driven up the
coastal road earlier, we might have come upon on her in time!"

And just like that, the cool facade fell away and Ross began to show his fear--and his fury at himself for not preventing whatever harm had befallen Demelza.

“Demelza?” Dwight called out, then futilely tried her mobile again only to find he no longer had any signal at all.

“You are right. Something is wrong here--we need to start searching for her,” Ross said. “I hope to god I’m mistaken but it’s possible she’d go that way, down there.”

“Why there?” Dwight asked looking at the rocky, scrubby terrain that lined the side of the road.

“This path leads to where we climbed the cliff face together so she may have felt it was familiar…” Ross closed his eyes in both horror and disbelief. Would she really go down Kellow’s Ladder again, on her own, without any safety precautions? No, she surely had more sense than that. Unless something--or someone--had driven her to do it.

Ross and Dwight cautiously began to zig zag down, scrambling over the boulders and skirting around the thick gorse. Ross led the way and if Dwight was unnerved by the descent towards to the edge he didn't say a word.

There were no signs of anyone but footprints wouldn’t really last long in the dry and sandy soil here, especially not on a windy day.

On they went, the way growing steeper and more difficult to navigate. Dwight knew Demelza to be nimble and brave but couldn’t see how she could safely traverse this treacherous ground if she were fleeing any sort of danger.

Yes, the conclusion that Demelza was facing some outside threat had taken root in his brain and would not be dislodged. But a threat from whom? And why?

“The old ladder is just another thirty feet down if she...” Ross couldn’t finish his sentence. He desperately wanted to find Demelza but not here. With every step he took he hoped with all his heart that he was wrong about where she might have gone.

Finally they approached the cleft in the rock where Kellow’s ladder awaited.

“Whoa!” Dwight exclaimed aloud when he peered over the edge at the ancient ladder below. Instinctively he reached out for Ross’s arm, both to steady himself as his knees grew weak, and for comfort as a most sickening thought washed over him. Slowly, he let go of Ross and crouched, then sat on his bottom. Lower to the ground, he felt less overcome by vertigo but by no means settled.

“Demelza!” Dwight called into the evil, crying wind. There was no answer other than the distant shrieks of gulls and the thunderous crash of waves on the rocks below. Every muscle in his body twitched with the urge to act, and yet there was nothing he could do.

Where could she be?

Still unable to fully grasp the the worst, Dwight steeled his nerves and leaning forward, peered down at the violent surf sixty feet below the clifftop. He saw nothing but the swirling foam of the sea, roaring with anger at the jagged rocks that stood guard to thwart its murderous pounding. He looked to Ross frozen beside him.

Ross’s hands were balled in fists and his eyes were as dark and stormy as the sky closing in around
“Good god!” Ross gasped. “We’ve lost her and it’s all my fault.”

Ross didn’t dare look at Dwight. He couldn’t bear to see the despair he was feeling reflected in someone else’s eyes. He thought he made out a distinct call in the distance, a harsh whistle that rose slightly on the second note.

_Cur-lee, cur-lee._

Impossible. Could a curlew really be found by the sea cliffs or was it Ross’s imagination playing the cruelest of jokes on him?

_Cur-lee, cur-lee._

Then the lines came to him, words he’d once impulsively shared with Demelza when she was still just an intriguing and charming overnight guest who’d caught his attention. Before she had captured his heart.

_O curlew, cry no more in the air,_

_Or only to the water in the West;_  

_Because your crying brings to my mind_  

_passion-dimmed eyes and long heavy hair_  

_That was shaken out over my breast:_  

_There is enough evil in the crying of wind._

Ross wondered if he would ever look into Demelza’s passion-dimmed eyes again or feel her hair spilled across him as he held her close in the night. All life had been sucked out of him at the thought that she might be lost forever.

It was Dwight who found the courage to speak now.

“Ross! I think that’s a shoe down there. Look--in the sea!” he cried, pointing to the half-submerged trainer, barely visible as it bobbed up and down with the waves.

“Yes, it is! Can you tell if it’s hers?” Ross asked.

“Not from up here but tell me, is it possible that she’d go down the ladder...into the sea? To swim?” Dwight asked, clinging to a shred of hope that she was safe somewhere.

“Would she do something so impulsive? So reckless?” Ross replied. In that moment Ross again became aware that while he knew he loved this woman, he didn’t really know her well; Dwight still knew her better.

“Is she a strong swimmer?” Ross managed to ask.

“I don’t really know. She’s strong and generally fit so I suppose. But it’s so cold and she has very little body fat as...”

_As I know._ Ross looked away embarrassed.
But Dwight wasn’t troubled at all by this exchange. His hurt feelings and his pride took a backseat to his overpowering concern for Demelza’s safety. He was on his feet again, ready to act.

“Ross, we need to go down there! We need to search the water for her before it gets dark!” Dwight urged.

“Yes, I think you are right. But first we need to get help. There’s no signal here but I’ve WiFi in my car. Come, let’s go back and notify the police,” Ross said solemnly.

Cur-lee, cur-lee.

The curious cries were discernible again then faded into the unrelenting wind.

Reluctantly, Ross and Dwight turned away from the cliff’s edge--and away from any signs of Demelza.

Chapter End Notes

Again I borrowed the lovely words of Keats (He Reproves the Curlew). A fabulous online archive of his poetry can be found here: http://ota.ox.ac.uk/text/3259.html
Those Who Know Secret Things

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The shock of the cold water was felt first on her face. Demelza hadn’t expected that, and at once regretted not greasing her cheeks as well as her legs. She gasped, and when her facial muscles responded more slowly than she’d anticipated, she inadvertently swallowed water. The dark kelp and the salt made her gag. It was a poor start.

She had to make a decision. If she swam hugging the rocky cliffs, the journey would be longer as the coastline meandered and curved. But she’d be less likely to lose her bearings. The other option was to first go further out to sea before heading north—a straighter line towards her final destination. But further out, the sea would be more savage and if it grew rougher still, it might prove too much. She hoped she’d been correct in her estimation of the distance to Nampara Cove and the sandy beach that waited just beyond.

The important thing was to keep moving. She’d already taken several long strokes and the rocky shelf at the foot of the ladder was now well behind her. The sea had been relatively calm today but the sky above had turned a familiar grey, and rain and wind would follow shortly. These past weeks Demelza had stood on the cliffs, and from a distance, watched the great swells on stormy days. But to be caught up in one? She’d be no match and would be battered on the rocks or swept out to sea.

But even a calm sea seethed with threatening vitality; she felt stupidly surprised at how much strength was required to keep going in the same direction. She pushed forward with all her might but it would be a mistake to use all her reserves up at once—she knew this. And yet she was racing against the clock. Every second counted.

Maybe I can get you to slow down, pace yourself. Think about what’s waiting in the distance. Isn’t that what Ross had advised her? Right before he rested his head in her bare lap. Good god, to think that was only yesterday morning!

Now she was very much thinking about what waited in the distance—more cosy mornings, more cups of coffee, more hours of love. Yes, loving…she was fighting desperately to stay alive and wasn’t loving the very purpose of life?

Ross was right—she’d have to pace herself and get control of the erratic energy coursing through her body.

Come on, Carne. Swimming is like running. Have to keep the mind busy, think of something, solve a problem, she reminded herself.

There were always details from Stephen Carrington’s writing to recall. Recently that’s what she’d been focusing on as she went for her daily run along the cliffs. Maybe it would help her plod onward in this capricious sea.

Okay, what did he say about wind? Hmm…’a significant threat to nests is wind. Strong spring winds could be violent enough to sway the trees and throw out or tip over dove nests. During a period of strong winds it became evident that more dove nests were built on the sides of trees away from the winds than on other sides.’

She’d steadied her rhythm and managed to find a middle path. The rocky cliffs were to her right—she
swam parallel to them without exactly following all their contours. She was less than ten minutes into her swim and already felt her armpits chafing with each stroke.

‘During April when there were more hours of strong northern winds, more nests were built on the south side of trees than in other positions.’

Cold water that was getting into her ears upset her equilibrium and made her nauseated. A growing discomfort spread from her belly upward and she regretted having eaten Verity’s duck sausage.

‘In May there were more strong winds from the south yet more nests were built on the south side. In June, July, and August there were more strong southerly winds and each month a greater number of nests was built on the north.’

Already she could feel the grease on her legs flaking off in chunks as it got cold.

So why were the nests built in May facing the wind? Why break the pattern? she wondered just as a biting wind whipped up, temporarily flattening the peaks of the waves around her. Maybe it was best not of think about wind.

Trees. Ok, so much of dove survival depends on the trees, of course. But which ones? Did Carrington ever specify whether the trees in question were native to Cornwall? How many native trees are under threat since he wrote that? And where there have been deliberate restoration efforts, what has been the effect on the dove population?

She glanced over her shoulder and saw the shore was no longer to her right but suddenly behind her. How the hell did that happen? She fought hard to right her course. She didn't dare to look up at the clouds but the light was definitely changing around her.

Her arms felt heavy and she didn't really feel her legs much at all. She mustn’t panic.

Pace yourself.

She knew the importance of taking a break and tried to stop, to tread water for just a bit and catch her breath and let her muscles relax. It was harder to do than she imagined and without her constant motion, once again she drifted off course. The sea would not let her be.

After a few minutes she started again. She thought it a good sign that the cold was still overwhelming--that was better than feeling nothing at all. Her mind returned to the tagged bird in the cave. The colour and the code on the ring were familiar yet she just couldn’t place it. She hated that she’d have to wait to look it up, then had a quick pang of regret recalling she’d need a new mobile to do so. She almost laughed at how ridiculous this concern was. Before she’d have need of a mobile she’d need to get out of this sea alive.

I know I’ve seen that tag! Ok, when was the last time I saw tagged specimens in person? Drawers and drawers of them...

Chicago. Of course. It had been such a glorious afternoon at the Field Museum that felt less like a job interview and more like a conversation with familiar colleagues, old friends even. Then, after her tour of the lab space and storage facility, she had stood outside alone under the clear February sky. The museum was so close to Lake Michigan, which seemed to Demelza as vast as the sea. But the winter had been bitterly cold, so much of what lay in front of her was frozen. There were miles of ice, to the north and to the south, all along the lakefront. Hundreds of yards out, some waves had frozen mid crest, and closer to the shore, where the icy water had clung to the concrete piers, it had been covered with snow and formed mountainous peaks. Glossy white and still--like a meringue--but also
ominous. What dangers churned underneath unseen? Darkly, she had imagined the terror of being trapped under such thick sheets of ice.

_I have to let them know in Chicago I'm not taking the job. They were all so lovely but I belong here._
_In Cornwall. And I have to tell Dwight about the birds in the Warleggan report._

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Horace the Pug should have been lolling on his back while his mistress rubbed his belly and cooed his praises. He'd had a long day out and about town, dragged from one appointment to the next at her whim, and now was supposed to be _his_ time. Yet she seemed oblivious to his displeasure.

She was walking in circles through their townhouse, muttering to herself, mobile in hand. Horace considered leaping from the sofa and licking—or even nibbling—at her bare feet to get her attention but thought better of it. It was too far of a jump and not worth his effort—and really beneath his dignity to stoop so low. All he could do was issue a few loud sighs and snuffle indignantly at her persistent neglect. He'd just need to accept his miserable existence and find some rest until she deigned to feed him. At least she'd been good about the butcher-fresh dinners lately.

For his mistress it was hardly a satisfying evening either; it seemed impossible for her to shake the disquiet that had taken hold of her after her stunning meeting with Katie Thomas hours earlier. She'd raced straight home and had hoped that by now she might be making some plans, doing _something_. But all this time she'd been unable to share this new intelligence with anyone trustworthy, so her frustration and worries had only grown.

Since she remained unable to reach Ross and Demelza, she threw her reluctance aside and dialed Dwight again. But this too was without any success. Everyone's mobiles—she'd even tried Verity's on a whim—continued to go straight to voicemail.

Where the hell were they all? This wasn’t exactly the sort of news that would keep! And while the events that had occurred thus far—what had been reported to her and she'd uncovered previously with Demelza—might have been merely threats, Caroline sensed that was all about to change. It was her business to understand how humans worked and she had a keen sense of timing. It just felt as though things were about to come to a head.

But why now? Hadn't Dwight explained that Warleggan conceded and CEA could move forward with the assessment? Or had George been bluffing?

Caroline couldn't bear to sit idle while others might be in danger but since she remained alone, all she could do was pace.

Her mobile buzzed and she jumped with start. Horace grunted, irked by yet another distraction that would keep his mistress from bestowing the affection he was owed.

“Good god, Emma! I wasn’t expecting to hear from you.” Caroline was surprised to find she was so breathless but somehow still managed to speak.

“I told you I’d ring after I sorted the packing list,” Emma replied.

“Packing list?” Caroline asked absently.

“For London?” Emma said with a nervous laugh. “Remember we decided I should go up tonight with Lorenzo and Charlie in the van? They want to be on the road by 8 so I figure we need to start loading it by 6. Don’t forget your flight leaves Newquay at 7:20 tomorrow so I’ll have a car come for you at 5:30. I know it’s early but there’s really no way ‘round that. Are you in Truro or at
It had completely slipped Caroline’s mind that they were booked for Grand Design Live at London ExCel for the weekend. In truth Caroline had grown rather bored of these sorts of trade shows for stylists but this was one she had felt needed to attend. It was kind of her assistant to offer to drive with the lads and take care of all the setting up. But then again, it made sense—Emma was much more of a night owl than Caroline and never seemed to get bleary-eyed if sleep deprived. And as the face associated with “the brand,” it was important that Caroline look polished and be ready to speak eloquently when she did turn up later.

*If* she turned up...Did she really need to attend? Perhaps her presence was needed more here?

“Emma, dear, what if I didn’t go...”

“Cancel? Now? But we paid our fees and you are featured prominently in the promotional materials...”

“What if you and Lorenzo carried the day?”

“Caroline! Are you drunk?” Emma laughed, but was only half joking.

“Sadly not anymore,” Caroline replied. “Look, I’ve got something I’m trying to make sense of. I can’t tell how much of an urgent crisis, it is but it is serious.”

“Are you ill?” Emma sounded panicked. Caroline was normally so cool and in control. This was just so unlike her.

“No, no. It’s not me. It’s just I think I’ve uncovered some...wait, Emma!” Caroline grew excited.

“You have experience with the law! Maybe you can help me.”

“The law? Oh Jesus! Caroline, I’m coming over!” Emma said quickly.

"Okay but be warned. I’ve only got gin here and not much of it,” Caroline said before she rang off. She sighed and felt just a bit of relief. Perhaps she found a new confidante after all.

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Demelza had lost track of the time; it felt as though she’d been in the water for hours when it had been just over fifty minutes. She thought—she hoped—Nampara Cove couldn’t be far. Prudie had said it was just over a mile from Kellow’s Ladder—or was that the distance by land? Was it farther by sea?

Again it was becoming harder and harder to stay her course and now she found she was not only drifting but bobbing up and down on the frothy waves as the surface grew choppier.

*It can’t be far now.*

Again she called on her experience from running. Better to not think about the finish line, about how little is left, but keep pushing through to the very end with the same steady effort. Otherwise every stroke would be disappointing. And exhausting.

Demelza sensed its shadow before she saw it.

To her left, in the distance where the horizon had been, was now a dark wall, over five meters high. This was no longer the glorious shimmering blue-green spring sea but deep brown, even red in places where the light dazzled on the tendinous strands stretching higher and higher. It was alive, a
throbbing muscle that pulled its strength upward and upward until eventually it would release all that astounding power. The sea around her--maybe the whole world--seemed to hold its breath in anticipation. Demelza felt herself both pulled toward it and rising with it. It was a gloriously terrifying sensation, like flying--unnatural but exhilarating all the same.

A great wave was coming towards her. There was nothing to do but let go.

Chapter End Notes

Once again I am in debt to Howe Elliott McClure’s dissertation on mourning doves, a veritable goldmine of information. Please forgive all ornithological liberties I have taken.

https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?
referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=14649&context=rtd

The title of this chapter comes from Rilke’s Book of Hours: Love Poems to God (“I want to be with those who know secret things or else alone”). It’s a stunner. Read the whole thing here:

https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/455528-das-stunden-buch

Lastly, I came across a lot of conflicting info on greasing before a cold water swim. That said duck fat presented itself as a plot device, and how could I refuse? I didn't include it in this fic but I can imagine Demelza and Dwight arguing about this later. He (might) say “But the body needs the shock of cold water to close off the vascular system in the arms and legs so the trunk will hold in any heat it has longer, increasing the time one can survive in cold water. Greasing would only prevent this closing off of the extremities, making heat loss from the core happen more quickly.”

To which she might respond, “Dwight, it wasn’t really that effective to begin with so if anything merely served as a placebo. Get over it, okay?”
It has not been easy to be the only Poldark girl but over the years Verity had tried her best to carve out a unique identity, one in which she could fulfill her family obligations and still be true to herself. Sometimes she thought she had managed but there were still days when she felt that no matter how she tried, she only seemed to disappoint.

It hadn’t been so much an issue when they were all young. Then, the adults seemed to ignore them in an odd way; age and sex seemed less crucial to what others expected and what they expected of themselves. Over summer holidays, she and Francis and Ross had the run of Trenwith, exploring the dusty attic and musty cellars, the ancient gardens, and the enchanted wood beyond. They grew bold enough to play along the dangerous cliffs and on the beaches at high tide, then sneaked home keeping the perils they’d skirted a well-guarded secret.

“We oughtn’t have gone near that ladder,” Francis whispered as they sat in the empty Trenwith kitchen having their tea. “Should we tell Papa?”

“Francis! If you say one word aloud to another soul about our adventure, we’ll never invite you along again,” Verity hissed. Then when she saw his eyes grow wet with tears she passed over a serviette and looked away to allow him a moment to pull himself together.

“Please...Ver? Ross? I won’t betray you! I swear!” Francis stammered.

“Really Francis, if we teach you how to swim, you might not be so scared next time,” Ross said coolly. He laughed then shoved another bun in his mouth. It would be years before either he or Verity saw Francis as a real threat.

On rainy days they played round after round of Scabby Queen and Bastard, and tried their best not to laugh as Aunt Agatha snored from her armchair nearby. Once she’d caught them.

“You think I’m so funny, eh? All Poldarks snore! And everyone of you will follow in my wake, if you’re lucky enough to grow as old as I am!” she’d barked.

Oh but that was was unthinkable! That they’d ever get old--as old as she? That’s what they had thought and had been half right--poor Francis didn't make it far, he died when he was only 32. So Aunt Agatha had had been right--nothing was a given. Just because they were part of this ancient Poldark family hadn’t meant luck was on their side.

It was when they started to get older that the Poldark burden weighed heavier. Francis was groomed as the heir of an ancient estate and Verity had to start acting like a lady, whatever that meant.

Verity’s mother, a loving woman, patiently sought to train her only daughter in the traditions of gardening and baking, and tending to the historical significance of the estate and the family name. Some of these lessons were interesting but Verity’d always felt she’d rather be doing something more substantial. She didn't want to just tend roses but examine the pile of rubble and old bricks in the yard. If they were so concerned with the estate and the family history why didn’t they let her rebuild the wing of Trenwith that had been destroyed by a fire in 1874?

Funny it’s those very skills learned in the Trenwith Kitchen with my mother and not what I learned in school that might just be my calling after all. Decades later no one is talking about my use of innovative materials at harmony with the Cornwall landscape anymore but my recipes instead, she thought soberly. Well, maybe Caroline’s interest would fade away and the whole blog project would
come to nothing. Perhaps then—if she was firm enough to resist any further family interference—she could just concentrate on architecture again.

It had been her father and Aunt Agatha who questioned young Verity’s pursuits as “unfeminine” and even disloyal. Her brother Francis, who had previously accepted her as a playmate, started to follow their father’s lead when they hit adolescence, and began to push her aside. Francis mocked her intelligence and inclinations—never cruelly, but his teasing was persistent enough to let her know he didn’t take her seriously. She just didn’t measure up in his teenage brain—she wasn’t as pretty as the girls Francis fancied nor was she as cool as the girls Ross hung with. So what was her value then?

Ross had been kind but aloof. He never really understood her pain until they were much older—by then they both had been betrayed by Francis.

But back when they were still young, there had been, briefly, one person who was supportive of Verity: Ross’s mum, Aunt Grace.

“Verity, you’ve so many talents. A keen eye, a mathematical mind, an innate ability to think in three dimensions—have you considered architecture?”

Verity remembered that day clearly. It was around Easter and she’d been around eleven years old. They were playing at Nampara and had spent hours constructing an elaborate run for the new piglets. Well, it had been Ross’s idea to race them but Verity had done the design and most of the actual building. Where had Francis been that day? Was he not there or had she just erased him from this perfect memory? Aunt Grace hadn’t come to scold them for messing with the pigs or getting dirty, as the Trenwith adults might have. And she didn’t tell her she was too old to be acting like a boy. Verity felt like it was the first time anyone had really seen her for who she was, what she could be.

And later, when Verity was in architecture school, there was no one who understood her drive, her passion, her determination to put in the long hours. By that time both Aunt Grace and Verity’s own mother were both gone. Ross was off in London and offered his admiration from afar but could do little to support her emotionally. Especially not as Elizabeth Chenowyth first captivated then destroyed his heart.

“Why did I ever listen to them? Why did I ever listen to them?” the Trenwith Poldarks chided her every time she came home. Her early professional accolades meant nothing to them. She was still expected to serve them their tea and listen to the same boring stories they told over and over, and until she was paired off with some respectable man, she’d never be much in their eyes. And then the irony was when she did find a man—Andrew Blamey—they rejected him without giving him a real chance. He wasn’t local enough, wasn’t rich enough, wasn’t respectable enough, whatever the hell that meant.

Why? Why did I ever listen to them? She asked herself now and pressed her foot to the accelerator with equal parts anticipation and jitters.

The early evening sun dazzled her eyes as Verity turned off Dunstaville Terrace and headed northwest on Bassett Street. She found an open spot near the park and decided to take it. The walk would do her good—and buy her some time to pull herself together.

Whatever spring storm was brewing back home had already blown through Falmouth hours earlier. A soft breeze rustled the trees as she made her way towards Beacon Road. Outside a garden wall the pavement was plastered with wet magnolia petals and now more fluttered down on the wind. She was surprised they were just blooming here when they’d had magnolia blossoms at Trenwith more than a month ago.

*Everything in its own time.*
The scent was sweet and heady; the smell of decay was less about death and more about transition. It reminded her of grappa and she giggled at the association.

Verity had tried not to read too much into Andrew’s suggestion they meet at Sole & Stelle. It was a lovely little restaurant, authentically Italian and off the beaten path in a more residential area away from the waterfront, as though the proprietors were dodging customers not seeking them. Its name came from Dante: “L’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle” and fit its intimate setting. The tables were small—for pairs who needed to be close, who had a lot to talk about, or who just needed to look into each other’s eyes. Perhaps that’s why they had frequented it so often when they were together. Maybe to go back there was a bad idea.

Verity wasn’t sure what she expected, to be honest, but Andrew had seemed surprisingly happy to hear from her. Was it possible that after all these years he had forgiven her for heeding her brother and father’s commands and breaking their engagement? Or maybe he had not forgiven but had merely made peace with it? Perhaps he no longer cared at all because he no longer cared for her. She must be ready to accept that, if that were the case, and she mustn’t open herself up to new hurt if he had moved on to someone else.

It wasn’t too late, she could turn around and go back home.

To what? To years of spectating as others lived their lives—and loved—around her? Of busying herself in her uninspired work or the affairs of the Historical Trust while her empty heart ached? A heart that had once been moved and moved far, that still would not heed her call when she tried to bring it back down to her little corner of the world. No, she wasn’t going to just sit around Trenwith enduring George’s schemes and watching Aunt Agatha’s slow decay.

Demelza was right—some love was like a fish barb. Verity may have gotten away but the flesh remained mangled. A mortal wound. She had to make it right.

She paused at the window and caught sight of her reflection. She probably should have taken more time to ready herself before she’d impulsively left Trenwith. In her haste she hadn’t even changed her clothes just grabbed a cardigan. Now she thought maybe bare shouldered might be a more alluring look. She’d put on some lipstick but that was all. Somehow she thought this was a test. If Andrew didn’t want her now as she was, for who she was, then this wasn’t worth pursuing.

The door opened with the soft tinkle of a little bell and she stepped into the crowded restaurant. A figure at a back corner table stood up, tall, and nodded to her from across the tiny room.

She held her breath as she maneuvered her way through the oblivious diners. After all these years she could have done so with her eyes closed; she knew the way to their table.

“Verity,” the man said once she was close enough. A fragile smile quivered on his lips and he held out his hand to her. “You came. I can’t believe you came.”
The sky continued to darken like an angry bruise, making the hour seem later than it really was. Desperate for a sense of control, Dwight gripped the side of the motor boat as it moved steadily over the grey-green sea. Perhaps if the craft were going faster, if it had powered through the waves rather than allowing itself to be tossed and swayed on the rolling tide, he might have felt less disturbed. But they had to go slowly. They were searching.

Dwight’s nausea had started earlier, when he had stood atop the cliff and first allowed himself to to imagine what might have happened to Demelza. And then, after he and Ross climbed down the ladder to meet the search boat, it had only worsened by the minute.

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“Sergeant Martin is going to meet me down below with his boat. You stay here, Dwight, and wait for the constable and show him where the Defender went off the road,” Ross had said once they’d used the Peugeot’s Wifi to contact the police. “I’m going back to go down now and see if…”

“Ross! You can’t be serious!” Impatient and disgusted, Dwight had had enough of Ross’s stubborn heroics. But then he read the anguish and panic on Ross’s face and had a flash of sympathy. It wasn’t ego driving Ross on, but fear. Dwight knew the feeling—he too was experiencing fear and also had the same urge to act. And he certainly was not going to stand around the roadside while Ross scaled the cliff looking for Demelza.

“No, Ross. We both go. Show me the way,” Dwight said firmly.

Ross knew Dwight had always avoided heights but this certainly wasn’t the time to question his friend’s resolve. Together they trudged solemnly back down towards the cleft in the rock where the ladder awaited.

“If you want to wait for the police, they may have safety ropes…” Ross offered Dwight one more out.

“No. Let’s just do this together and then meet Zacky’s boat below,” Dwight replied. “Hopefully he’ll be here soon.”

Ross went first. As he clung to the soggy wooden rungs, slowly feeling his way down, he tried to remind himself he’d done this climb dozens of time in his life. But it had never been like this before—in a state of emotional distress, in bad weather, in dress shoes. He fought to maintain control, surprised at how numb and cold his fingers had grown in only a few minutes.

Ross was about eight feet down when Dwight began his own descent. Ross had expected Dwight to go slowly and was surprised to see him catching up quickly. Dwight seemed to be gingerly springing from one rung down to the next.

Ross quickened his pace. He felt he had to mask his own terror to help Dwight in his confidence.

*It’s good he’s not overthinking things but he needs to be mindful of the slick surface and the missing rungs,* Ross thought, then felt his stomach lurch as his own foot failed to find purchase. There was the first one. Ross had almost missed it; his focus had been upward.
“Look out for this broken rung! There are some anchors in the wall, if you need a foothold. They aren’t predictable though, so you’ll need to look for them,” Ross called up.

“Right!” Dwight called back. Dwight wasn’t looking down at all but concentrating on the wet rock face in front of him and on maintaining his grip on the slimey rungs. If ever there was a time to call on the remarkable mental discipline he’d cultivated over the years, it was now. Uncertain of his footing, he’d been supporting his full body weight with largely just his arms for most of the descent. Now he was feeling grateful for his regular upper body workouts.

*I just have to think of it as an insanely long, ridiculous pull up,* Dwight thought.

The wind whipped around them and the furious crash of waves could be heard below. In just twenty minutes, the sea had altered its temper; the mild spring afternoon was officially over.

“There’s a cave just five feet further down,” Ross called up. “I’m going in to check but you needn’t…” Ross didn’t finish his sentence but it hardly mattered. The wind was carrying all their words away and neither of them were feeling particularly conversant.

When Dwight dared to look down, he swallowed hard. He saw Ross swing towards the dark mouth that gaped three feet to the left of the ladder, and knew at once it was one complication he was not up for.

“I think I’ll keep going down,” Dwight shouted.

They were about half way down the ladder now and every foot closer to the ground below brought Dwight some measure of relief—from the vertigo at least. But it could hardly be enjoyed. The recognition that they’d soon be searching the dark waters ushered in another, new terror.

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Ross shivered when he landed on the cave’s moss floor, but it wasn’t from chill. The dark emptiness, the distinct smell, the sudden quiet away from the wind, made for an eerie transition. He knew at once Demelza wasn’t there but he had to call her name all the same.

“Demelza?” His voice echoed in the dark. He stumbled forward, something blocking his path. Then he heard it, the sickening crunch of plastic and metal breaking under his foot. He pulled his mobile out of his pocket to use as a torch, regretting not doing so sooner. When he saw the neat pile of clothing and the smashed mobile he’d apparently just destroyed, he groaned aloud.

*She’s been here. I knew it.* he wondered and swept his light around the cave. Beyond the pool of dank water collecting from the dripping fissure in the wall, he saw the empty shag nest, and felt a pang of tender sorrow.

*A shag in a cave!* He recalled how she had cried out in delight and he’d found her excitement so endearing. And then he kissed her and the whole world shifted forever.

But no one and nothing else was there now. Ross went back to the pile of clothes to examine them further. They were her jeans, he was certain. Why had she undressed? And there were other things—a pocket knife, a crust of bread, a paper packet of some food scraps. This was looking strangely deliberate. Then he saw the bloody sock and his heart skipped a beat. He had known something had happened but now he had proof she was hurt. He shone his light around again and this time saw the message etched on the wall: *D Carne here 5-5-17. Contact Poldark*.

Good god! She’d been in danger and she’d reached out for him. In her darkest hour and in her fear, she had trusted Ross, had named Ross to help. And now he was here but was he too late? What the
hell could Poldark do now? He felt as though he had betrayed her with his incompetence and bad timing.

“My love, where are you?” he whispered and squeezed his eyes shut to stop the anxious tears.

“Ross!” Dwight called from outside. “Sergeant Martin is here already! Come on!”

Ross stuffed the smashed mobile and the knife in his pocket and steeled himself for the remaining climb down.

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Sergeant Zacky Martin had arrived at the bottom of the ladder in his daughter’s old motor boat. He hadn’t waited for the police boat to make its way down from Perranporth but instead had given them instructions to follow south along the cliffs while he simultaneously headed north. While it seemed a cautious and comprehensive plan to double the search team, he didn’t have the heart to tell Ross or Dwight the real reason he’d made the decision. That they’d have to double the effort now because the search itself would most likely be cut short. That they had very little time to act before the sea and the weather became untenable.

As the waves tossed the idling craft about, Sergeant Zacky Martin and PC Daniels waited patiently for Ross and Dwight to make their way down the final rungs of the treacherous old ladder.

Impressed that both made it down in such wind without incident, PC Daniels first helped Dwight, then Ross into the boat.

“She was here--Dr. Carne--and she’s in some sort of danger. I think someone was chasing her, otherwise why would she have gone this way? She made it at least as far as the cave safely but then…?” Ross was out of breath as he explained what he’d found to both Dwight and Zacky.

“That old miner’s cave?” PC Daniels asked in disbelief. “But what makes you think she’d be down here?”

“We saw a trainer earlier, when we were on the cliff, that might have been hers, but it’s gone now. Must have washed away,” Dwight added. “That’s why we think maybe she’d gone in the water. But we don’t know if it was deliberate or if she…” He didn’t need to finish his sentence. They could all imagine other ways--a fall, a push--that would result in a body ending up in the sea. And no one need mention that these other scenarios seemed far more plausible than a woman willingly plunging in for a swim.

“Well we’re here now, Ross. Let’s start looking,” Zacky said in his usual steady tone. “PC Daniels, you steer and I’ll man the torch.” Luckily the old motor was more cooperative with Zacky than it usually was with Jinny, and started on the first try. As the clouds continued to shift, the search crew began the slow crawl up the coast.

“Are these hers?” Ross asked Dwight and handed over the mobile and the knife engraved with Dwight’s name.

Dwight’s lips drew thin and the sickening wave that rose from his gut matched the one that swelled under the boat.

Finally Dwight could contain it no more and leaned over the side and retched. At least his groans and sickening gags were largely carried away on the wind. This was a new sensation for him. Boats were usually his thing; in all his years he’d never gotten sea sick. That was Demelza’s tendency.
"You alright then, Dr. Enys?" Sergeant Zacky Martin shouted over the motor’s persistent roar. Ross had discreetly looked away to allow Dwight a moment, then clapped his hand to his back.

"Focus on the horizon," Ross muttered.

But how could he? He was supposed to be scanning the waters as they looked for any sign of human life.

Or were they already looking for a body?

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Everything had gone black. Demelza’s eyes were squeezed shut but even if they weren’t, she wouldn’t have been able to make sense of where she was. She’d been heaved about; she didn’t know where and she hadn’t fought it. All she could do was wait until the bore had finished its onslaught. She felt--she heard--the pressure changing around her, the stream of bubbles rising towards the surface. That had to be a good sign. She should open her eyes and try to follow.

But when she did, she was completely disoriented. All around her was the murky brown of a thousand years of death-debris mucked up from the sea floor. The water rushed thick, impenetrable to any light, and made it impossible to tell if she was swimming up or going deeper down. Once again she decided to let go, to allow the sea to show her the way.

Things were going dim again. What she needed was to breathe. Maybe she should just stop fighting and let her lungs fill. She was falling, falling, and it felt an easy comfort, like giving in to sleep.

‘All the soarings of my mind begin in my blood’--was that Goethe or Rilke?

As she began to lose consciousness her animal brain keep her airways shut but her thoughts wandered aimlessly.

Andorinha...Selina and João Andorinha were married at St. Merryn Church in Newquay. Drawers and drawers of a ndorinhas …and all so beautiful …look at the green tags around the andorinhas’ wee feet.

Her body was no longer tumbling down but gently floating upwards. Still it was so dark.

I’ll be trapped under the ice soon. I’ll push and push but it’s too solid to give and they’ll never even know I went under until the lake thaws. Does the infinite space we dissolve into, taste of us then?

Suddenly she twitched awake. No, she’d have to fight. Legs pulsing, arms flailing, she tore and grabbed at everything around her. Of course there was nothing to take hold of but she clawed and scratched and finally balled her hands into angry fists. Twisting and thrashing, she almost missed it--the dazzle of light just above.

After three determined strokes, she pierced the surface and without a moment to spare, breathed the wet sea air greedily. The low slung clouds were dark grey now, but to her even the dim light was glaringly bright, and she had to blink over and over to adjust. The salt and the wind stung but she vowed to keep her eyes open until she could focus properly again.

Bobbing up and down on the waves, she tried to steady herself, to relax even. This was no time for a muscle cramp. Her breathing continued as violent gasps loud enough to echo in her own throbbing ears. Then she turned just a few degrees clockwise and saw it: Hendrawna Beach was within her sights. The swell must have carried her past the cove she’d been seeking as a landmark.
The animal brain was again in control and pushed her on towards the shore. When she was close enough to feel the seafloor beneath her feet, she moaned with a relief she hadn’t dared to imagine for the past hour. She tried walking but her legs simply did not have the strength to push through the water, so she swam the remaining distance to the beach. Finally, she hauled herself on the shore and threw herself down like a flopping fish.

Overcome with dizziness, she desperately gripped at the land to regain her senses.

In that moment it all came together. That andorinha means swallow in Portuguese. That she had seen the green tags before--just a few months before--in the windowless basement laboratory in Chicago. That she was alive.

“I remember now,” she muttered aloud. “The green tags are from Portugal. Ross, our shag is from Portugal.”

She let her cheek rest against the cool, wet sand and closed her eyes.

Demelza lay there for what felt like minutes. She felt completely removed from her body, as though the once-strong muscles that had just powered through the sea were now filled with jelly. She’d never felt weaker.

Yet she must summon even more strength--from god knew where--and once again get moving. She may have escaped the sea but danger was not necessarily behind her. Hypothermia was now the greatest threat but by no means the only one. If her attackers were still on her scent and learned how she’d fled, they might have traced her route by road. They could be waiting anywhere--maybe at the top of the bluff, hidden in the seagrass. Of course she’d be too weak to run, too weak to fight. But she’d come this far and already taken so many risks. She had to take the chance.

She stirred and got to her feet, still dripping wet. She could hardly stand. The air felt colder than the water and the freezing wind pierced her aching ears. Scraped up by the shells and rocks along the shore, her foot had begun to bleed again, so painfully she limped up the grassy dunes towards the valley beyond it, and headed for Nampara.

In her exhaustion she could no longer make sense of time but did manage to keep her bearings. At least the sea was behind her and could no longer pull her off course. The grassy path seemed like it went on for miles but somehow, eventually, she made it to the house. The yard was terrifying in its emptiness--dust and debris danced in the driving wind, the trees rustled, anxiously clinging to their new leaves. At the door she tried to sniff the lilac which in a day or two would be in full bloom, hoping the scent, like smelling salts, would awaken her dulled senses. But she smelled nothing.

No one answered the door as she rapped with whatever strength she could muster. She tried the knob, and when she found it unlocked, pushed the door open and collapsed in the hallway. She felt her wet head settle on the cold flagstone.

No, Carne, you can’t give up now and die on Ross’s doorstep. That wouldn’t be fair to him. You know what to do.

Suddenly Garrick was next to her. Had he come from elsewhere in the house or had she left the front door open? The dog knew at once she was no intruder and barked a happy greeting, then immediately began licking her--first her delicious smelling legs, then her bloody foot.

“Oh Garrick, my sweet old friend!” she rasped. She was laughing but tears stung in her irritated eyes,
then felt hot as they streamed down her cold face. Garrick seemed to know she was unwell and in his attentive zeal, knocked her over as she tried to sit up. Too weak to right herself, she considered crawling.

She tried to shout Ross’s name but hadn’t the air in her lungs. Sensing her need to summon help, Garrick offered a series of loud barks to alert the other residents of Nampara. Where were they? Shouldn’t Prudie at least be here somewhere?

“Thanks, boy,” she whispered.

She found her feet again and first limped to the panel near the stairs, desperately pressing the thermostat until she saw a red light flash. But there was no accompanying beep to let her know it had registered her request. She recalled Ross saying the heating system at Nampara was as temperamental as the one at the engine house. This wouldn’t do--she needed another source to warm her, and fast.

Instinctively she headed to the parlour then closed the door behind her to keep out the draughts from the hallway. Swaying and still limping, she reached for the blanket she knew she’d find laid over the back of the leather chair by the hearth. The last time she’d showed up here, just two days before, Ross had wrapped her in it after she’d been caught in the rain. Once again she was soaked to the skin and shivering uncontrollably--only now she was frightfully alone. She thought she felt the house shaking then realised it was her own teeth chattering violently in her head.

*Shivering is a good sign. Means hypothermia hasn’t set in yet,* she reminded herself.

She was relieved to find a stack of old newspapers and kindling, and after fumbling for the matchbox on the mantle, knelt down to build a fire.

The paper lit right away and it seemed as though the stacked logs should have been dry enough, but instead of catching the flame, they seemed to check its vitality and the blaze faded away after just a few minutes. She tried again, this time shoving in stick after stick of kindling to feed the fire. At once the room filled with smoke, stinging her nose and making it hard to breathe. If she was going to remain conscious, she’d need to open a window, but she wasn’t sure she could make it across the room.

*How stupid. I should have tried the gas fire in the library,* she thought. Yet, even in her muddled state, she felt the library a bit too private to enter without Ross. Her eyes closed and her head began to feel too heavy to hold upright.

Again Garrick barked, this time followed by a low growl, and he turned his pricked ears to the sound of heavy feet in the hallway. The parlour door was pushed open but it was not Ross who entered.

Chapter End Notes

I have borrowed (again) bits and bobs of Demelza’s sea adventure from Winston Graham’s Jeremy Poldark (p. 561 in my downloaded e-version). I do so openly and with the greatest admiration and gratitude. Graham wrote that scene as taking place the first Friday in May. I hadn’t deliberately planned it--although perhaps that date was subconsciously lodged in my brain--but the first Friday in May was the day I had designated for Demelza’s excursion in this fic too. That was fun to discover after I had written it!
Also more Rilke in this chapter (“All the soarings of my mind begin in my blood”) and then this line from the Second Duino Elegy (“Does the infinite space we dissolve into, taste of us then?”) Read all the full elegies here:
https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/Rilke.php#anchor_Toc509812216
Sergeant Zacky Martin swept the search lamp across the darkening water while the boat moved steadily on, hugging the jagged coast line. To the west, storm clouds had swallowed the horizon and around them, the winds continued to pick up speed. At last they came around the cove to Hendrawna, the beach closest to Nampara. Neither Ross nor Dwight said a word but were thinking the same thing. This was their last hope.

If there were no traces of Demelza on the beach then they’d need to swing the boat out to sea, where the savage water would be far less forgiving to a swimmer. The mission would change--from rescue to recovery.

They were still about 200 yards away when they spied Garrick on the shore barking furiously.

“Ross, look! Is that odd?” asked Dwight asked, lowering the binoculars he’d been using. “Does your dog normally stay that far away from home when a storm is brewing?”

Ross stiffened. He didn't answer but instead pulled out his mobile and was surprised to find he finally had a signal. He could now see he had messages--three from Caroline throughout the afternoon and four from Prudie in the last half hour. It was unlike both to be so persistent knowing as they did that, even on a good day, Ross rarely checked his mobile. He sensed some desperation on their part but it was no use trying to ring either now. The roaring of the wind and the motor was too insistent to allow for conversation.

But a flicker of hope shot through him, so Ross ordered Zacky to pull closer still. Again the search lamp skimmed slowly over the shadows on the water and then across the shore. The boat was parallel to the beach but still out in deeper waters when Ross saw something in the distance beside the barking dog. He gestured frantically for the binoculars to get a better look.

Footprints on the sand. Were they...bloody?

“I’m getting out!” Ross shouted and began to stand up.

“Not yet, Ross. Let’s pull in first...” Dwight tried to be a voice of reason though he was hardly feeling any patience himself. He too wanted to jump from the boat to check out the scene in person.

“Demelza!” Ross called into the wind. “Demelza!” At the sound of this shouting Garrick only grew more excited, and ventured towards the water as though he’d swim out to meet him if his master didn't come in soon.

“I’ll radio for the lads to come down and search the beach.” This time it was Zacky who remained calm and in control. “You go on then, Ross, and see what you can find. Dr. Enys, stay with me and PC Daniels and we’ll continue to look up ahead in the water.”

“Yes, you go Ross,” Dwight replied. He was disappointed by Zacky’s orders but not mutinous enough to object.

“No, Dwight, we should both go,” Ross replied.

Zacky nodded. “Aye, go on then but let me get you closer still. I’ll be okay with just Daniels. We’ll
keep going round the bend past the jagged rocks then maybe double back.”

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“You, there! Miss! Eh?!” Agatha Poldark called out into the gloom.

No one had bothered to switch on a light as the evening crept into the empty Trenwith parlour. Agatha had only just snapped awake, and after a few seconds of bewilderment and confusion, she took in her surroundings. Of course it was the same chair she’d napped in for the past thirty years but she still always required a moment. Her first semi-lucid thought was usually, ‘So I’m still alive then?’

She’d heard footsteps in the hallway and called out to the new girl who’d been recently engaged as nurse--or companion, depending on her qualifications. Agatha hadn’t bothered to learn her name and most likely wouldn't either. This new one would be gone in a few weeks time too. They all left eventually.

“You!” It was a hiss but somehow loud enough to wake any neighbours within a five mile range. “Where’s little Verity? Why isn’t she here?!”

“She’s gone, ma’am,” the young woman answered, as she rushed in to Agatha’s side. She considered checking the woman’s pulse; she had been instructed to keep a gentle eye on the Agatha’s vital signs and report straightaway if anything seemed amiss. But she took one look at the old woman’s narrowing snake eyes and knew better than to touch her.

“Gone?” Agatha brushed the idea away. “That's impossible. I need her.”

“Sorry, Miss Poldark. She left hours ago. You were napping and Miss Poldark--the other Miss Poldark, Miss Verity Poldark, I mean--said she had to leave urgently for business in Falmouth, but I wasn’t to wake you.”

“You’re telling me you had orders to just leave me here? What if I never woke up? Did you think of that? Eh?”

“But you did, ma’am. So why I don’t I get you a nice…”

“Falmouth, you say? What’s so urgent in Falmouth?” Agatha asked suspiciously. “Is it her work calling her back?”

“Couldn’t say, ma’am. Miss Verity Poldark said she’d try to be back to see you day after next and she’d ring you later tonight.” She tried to sound reassuring when what she really wanted to do was slowly back out of the room, then run for the hills.

“No, she'd write me a note if it were just work. No, no, something…or someone has beckoned her. Yes, yes, it's that Blamey, isn’t it? It’s him, I just know it! She’s snuck off to see him and left me all alone!” She started to rock back and forth in her chair.

The young woman grew worried Agatha might slip out if she grew too agitated, so reluctantly she stepped closer to catch her.

“T’twas a wicked and cruel thing to do! Verity’s place is with her family--who else is going to care for me? And keep me safe from the treachery?! Ah!! Oh, where is Ross then? You know, my nephew, Ross Poldark?” Agatha reached for her cane and banged on the floor in fury.

“Dunno, ma’am. Are you expecting him this evening?”
“No! But call for him! Go on then!” Agatha bellowed.

Happy for an excuse to finally exit, the young woman scurried out of the room.

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“Heavens! Mr. Ross, yer home--finally! I been ringin’ and ringin’!” Prudie called as she met Dwight and Ross at the front steps of Nampara, the door behind her gaping wide open. She’d been standing on the threshold, wielding a grimey tea towel as though she were waving down a Pamplona bull.

The walk up from the beach had been a silent, anguished march for both Dwight and Ross. The bloody footprints they’d spied earlier ended at the grassy dunes. They hadn’t stopped to look for any further evidence of Demelza—or any other injured party—but instead followed Garrick at a fast clip as the dog led them straight towards the house. Both had been too afraid to speculate about what they might find as they got closer. And both assumed the worst.

They had not expected to be met with a draught of acrid smoke when they first entered the hallway.

“What in god’s name…?” Ross asked, utterly bewildered and trying not to choke.

“Is there a fire?” Dwight cried and began to frantically move about the hallway, stopping to feel the closed parlour door for signs of danger behind it. He felt a flicker of relief that it was cool to the touch and only then looked to Prudie for answers.

She flung the towel over her shoulder and quickly steered them towards the dining room, which was less smokey but chilly from its open windows. They stood dumbly while she continued to rock back and forth on her feet, her fists jammed into her pockets. She was clearly excited—bursting to share her news—but didn’t seem panicked.

“It’s alright, it’s alright. Nothin’ to worry about any longer,” she said, her lips curled in a slight smile of satisfaction.

“But what happened? All this smoke…” Dwight asked.

“Is she here? Is Demelza here?” Ross was trying to remain calm but his voice had grown dark and low.

“Oh, it was far worse before. When I got back from the shops, the whole house was full of smoke. That’s when I found her--Dr. Demelza--crouched in a chair. She was unable to move, really. Soakin’ wet, tryin’ to warm herself after havin’ been in the sea for some time,” Prudie explained. “Poor thing was too out of sorts to get a proper blaze started--chimney flue was stuck, so nothin’ drew up. She’s alright now though. Ole Prudie knew what to do!”

“She never could build a fire,” Dwight muttered, wiping his eye.

“Where is she?” Ross cried again, pacing back into the hallway.

“Oh hush, she’s upstairs in a hot bath. Seemed the thing for her,” Prudie replied. “And take yer wet shoes off, I’m tryin’ to keep this floor dry!” She gestured to the pools of dripping water and mud that had collected on the flagstones at their feet. Further on, smears of blood were still visible on the stairs despite someone’s hasty attempt to wipe them away.

Obediently they both began to remove their sodden shoes, although their socks and trouser legs were still soaked as well.
“What happened? What did she say?” Dwight asked, trying to get everyone caught up. He was reeling from the relief but would remain anxious until he had answers and could see Demelza with his own eyes.

“Well she didn’t say much to me at all,” Prudie said.

“Is she in shock?” Dwight fretted.

Ross’s face had grown grey, his eyes darkened with a terrible fury.

“Oh she’s had a shock, a real fright, I’d say,” Prudie replied.

“And you didn’t think to take her to A&E? To call 999?” Ross didn’t mean to take his frustration out on Prudie but his words boomed through the silent house.

Luckily she’d years of experience with Ross’s ever-changing moods, and the decidedly unnuanced manner in which he expressed himself, to allow herself to be fazed. She put up her hands in defense then waved him away.

“No, Dr. Demelza insisted! No emergency services, no police. I was to wait fer you to come back and also ring Dr. Enys, but nothin’ else. There was no convincin’ her and I wasn’t ‘bout leave her alone.”

“But the blood?” Dwight asked.

“Cut her foot on some broken glass is all. That was the least of her worries.”

“Broken glass? Where? Does she have any other injuries? Did she say whether anyone hurt her or what happened to her car? Was anyone else around?” Ross demanded.

“I told you, she couldn’t really do much talkin.’ But if you don’t like my answers, go on up and interrogate her yerself!” Prudie had grown irritated with their questioning, so ignoring them, she returned to the urgent task of airing out the house.

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The door to the bathroom had been left slightly open by Prudie, who’d wanted to be able to hear if Demelza called. Ross and Dwight pushed it cautiously and at once were overcome with the unmistakable smell of lavender bath oil emanating from the steamy room. It was cloying but an improvement from the smoke that still lingered downstairs.

Demelza was submerged up to her chin in the old bathtub, a field of bubbles floated on the surface obscuring her naked body. Her heavy lids were only half open, her face looked strained, both pale from exhaustion but also red from the hot water and rising steam.

When they laid eyes on her--conscious, breathing, and seemingly in one piece--they both staggered. Dwight gripped the door frame for support while Ross held Dwight’s shoulders tightly.

“Demelza!” Ross groaned in relief when he saw her, then choked up. No further words came and he realised he could say nothing else without breaking down. Instead he tried only a weak smile. He thought his legs might buckle under him and he pressed himself against the wall as Dwight moved into the room, closer to the tub.

“Well excuse me, gentlemen, do come right on in. I suppose I haven’t the right to any privacy, though I might begin to feel my dignity affronted if you get too close.” Her voice was still hoarse and
bit wobbly, but she managed to pull a smile.

“Oh thank god, Melz, you are...alive! How did you get here? From the ladder? Did you…” Dwight began.

“Swim? Yes, I think you’d call it that but it felt more like wrestling a 400 pound octopus,” she said trying her best to present as upbeat. “But I did make it all the way here safely—or safe enough anyway—and then Prudie took care of me. She gave me glass of whisky then put me straightaway in this hot bath.”

“Demelza! You know with hypothermia you shouldn't have had any alcohol…” Dwight snapped at once.

“Yes, you are right there, Dwight, I do know…but it did feel good. And quite honestly it probably wasn’t actually hypothermia and the whisky helped. Besides it’s too late now so you’d better just calm down…” Demelza dismissed his concerns but Dwight began to pace with continued worry.

Ross wasn’t sure what to make of this exchange but thought he should say something. He hoped Prudie had at least poured Demelza some of his better whisky. After all these years, would the housekeeper even know good from mediocre? How could she when Ross never offered her any? He resolved to change that. Everything must change moving forward.

He looked away from the tub and wiped his stinging eyes with the back of his hands. The smoke from the parlour must have drifted up the stairs.

“Yes, it’s too late now but you could still experience shock, you know,” Dwight said, his hand to his brow as he ran through worst case scenarios in his head. “You must consider the strain to your internal organs. Don't move suddenly! Tell me, are you experiencing any pain? Is your speech slurred?”

“You tell me, Dwight? Is my speech slurred? I’ll tell you what, bring me a thermometer and I’ll check my core temp,” she laughed. They both knew body core temperature readings could only best be taken rectally. She was seeking a moment of levity, but Dwight seemed unable to grasp she was teasing him now.

“You just need to be gentle with yourself, stay as inactive as you can,” Dwight responded without catching her wit.

“Aren’t you at all curious what happened?” she asked.

“Yes, of course, Demelza, if you think you can…” Ross tried again to speak but the words caught in his throat.

“Acting irrational is also sign of shock…” Dwight continued.

“Ross, would you mind giving me just a moment alone with Dwight?” Demelza said suddenly.

Ross didn’t know what to say or what to feel. Demelza had not yet said anything directly to him at all. Was it possible she blamed him for this ordeal? Rightly so, perhaps. He didn’t know the details of what had happened but if he’d dragged her into danger, as he imagined he did, he would never forgive himself.

Ross looked at her again to better gauge her current state. She was still slouched under the water but clutched the sides of the tub with such a determined grip, her knuckles had whitened and her fingers tensed. Ross had only seen Demelza’s eyes that dark once before, and he’d since come to realise it
meant she was angry. He wanted to assent to her request of course, but in a flash, felt some sympathy for Dwight. Still, he nodded and silently stepped into the hall and closed the bathroom door behind him.

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“How dare you you, Dwight, stand there and say that I’m...that I’m irrational?” Demelza sputtered once she heard the latch click.

“I didn't say that. But then again, Demelza, you plunged into the wild sea, seemingly on purpose…” Dwight replied, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Yes I did, but don’t you think I’d have given it a very thorough analysis before I did such a thing? That I’d have weighed the risk of death? Because, Dwight, that is precisely what I did! So it must have been a rather massive scare that’d have made me take the chance. Have you asked me about that?”

“Demelza…”

“Two men--really big ones I might add--tried to force me off the road while I was driving along the cliff in that stupid old hunk of rubbish Defender, that I swear I’ll never set foot in again, mind you. I’ve no doubt they were banking on me going over. And when I got out and ran, they went after me. So it sure seemed like they were pretty determined to kill me themselves or make sure I found some form of accidental death.”

“Good god…” Dwight stammered.

“And then as I was hiding out in some ancient god-forsaken miner’s cave with the sun bound to disappear and the temperature drop, I knew my chances of surviving overnight were pretty slim.” Demelza still held the sides of the tub but had managed to sit up straight to face him. She didn't care that her naked body was no longer hidden under the veil of bathwater.

“So I had to choose--and I knew I was choosing how I might die. Alone in a cave with nothing but damp moss? Or go back up that ladder and maybe die at some stranger's hands, when the hate and violence in his eyes would be the last thing I’d ever see?”

Would you rather...

“Or else I could try my best against the power of the sea, and while still violent, at least the sea isn’t hateful. So I knew which one I’d want to keep me company at the end, if it was to be my end.” She recalled how close she came to losing consciousness while underwater and felt a sob of relief start to rise from her chest. She swallowed hard and continued.

“But I also knew that I had some odds on my side. I was well aware of the sea temperature--I’ve been tracking for days you know--and I was aware of the tides and sunsets too. I knew that in such water--around 12 degrees most days--a body might have a good hour or two if she were lucky, before she’d succumb to exhaustion or unconsciousness. And I knew that it was only around a mile to Nampara Cove and I thought that I might be able to make it, with some provisions. So I rationally took off anything cotton and then I rubbed myself all over with Verity’s duck fat--don’t you dare even laugh--and I took the chance. But don’t, for one minute, say it was irrational, Dwight. Because, bloody hell, knowing it might be the last risk I ever take, I thought this fucking risk out!” she cried. Her eyes were puffy and face was wet now but it was impossible to tell if that was from steam or from tears.
“Demelza, I don’t know what to say…” Dwight bit his lip and moved closer to her, then squeezed his own eyes shut tightly.

“Why don't you admit that you felt scared, Dwight? That you still do? That you couldn't control the situation, that you had no facts and statistics at your disposal to save things? Because that is what we have to face sometimes, Dwight. We try our best with a rational approach but we are always at the mercy of other forces--nature, god, men--whatever fortune wants to fling at us.”

“Yes, good god, I was scared. So scared,” he whispered.

“Good! Because you should be. So was I--I still am. Who the fuck are these people and why are they so desperate to harm us--to kill us?”

“I don’t know. Demelza, I...I’d lost you already. I don’t want to lose you like that. Forever?” he said and finally ventured to look her in the eye.

“Oh Dwight! You didn't lose me. By your side, always.”

“Parallel lines. Yes.” His voice was soft, the tears that he now allowed to fall weren’t tears of distress nor pain, but of warmth, of relief--of love.

“And I will also love you, Dwight. And you me. Now please give me a hug this very instant and then take me home.”

“I...erm...I’d have thought you want to stay here tonight? At Nampara with Ross…”

“Oh, Dwight, I’m so exhausted--and I want my own bed. Poor Ross--and poor you--I know I’ve worried you all. I saw how shaken Ross was but I’m...shattered. I can't be there for anyone else right now. Does that sound selfish?”

“No, Demelza, that sounds right after your ordeal,” Dwight said and handed her a towel.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: Savvy fans of Winston Graham will notice the not-so-paraphrased borrowing from Jeremy Poldark: A Novel of Cornwall (pg. 240) Only in the book it was the servant Jane Gimlett, not Prudie, who finds Demelza “crouched in a chair unable to move in a room full of smoke,” and of course, WG’s poor Demelza also happened to be in labour in his masterful telling.
Demelza was bundled in a flannel dressing gown of Ross’s and ushered to the guest room down the hall. She tried her best to walk on her own but in the end had clutched Dwight’s arm until she made it to the edge of the bed. Thankfully her foot had stopped bleeding, and before they’d left the bathroom, Dwight had expertly bandaged it for her. The cut no longer smarted but now both her feet felt very cold--they were always cold, but this was a different sort of chill. She refrained from mentioning it to Dwight, lest his worry return. Still, she didn’t feel like putting on the thick socks Prudie had left for her. Not yet. She suspected her hesitation wasn’t at all a rejection of the itchy old wool but a fear her arms simply would be too weak to lift.

Dwight sat next to her and read her frailty. Without saying a word, he took the socks in his own hands.

“Who is Ross speaking to?” Demelza asked him. She had heard Ross’s low and serious tones drift up the staircase then meet with another man’s voice--a voice that was slower and unmistakably Cornish.

“That will be Sergeant Zacky Martin. Zacky is Jinny Carter’s father,” Dwight explained and pulled the first sock carefully over the bandaged foot. “You remember Jinny, of course.” He knew better than to directly question her but still wanted to gauge if she showed any signs of concussion or confusion.

“No! No, Dwight! We can’t trust the police! They could be in on this,” Demelza cried and pulled her foot back in alarm.

“Demelza, when Ross called, it was Zacky who got out Jinny’s boat straightaway, without waiting for backup--he was with us the whole time, looking up and down the coast for you.” Dwight looked at her and saw the panic that washed over her face. None of this was making sense.

“Aiming to finish me off?” she asked. She was serious.

“Demelza?”

“I’m telling you, whoever ran me off the road...the one man, I was pretty sure I recognised him from somewhere--now I think he was one of the policemen who came to the engine house when we had the break-in!”

“What? Demelza, Sergeant Martin wasn’t even at the scene. Sure, I met him at the station to file the incident report the next day but it was two younger constables who first responded to our break-in.”

“Okay, okay, not Sergeant Martin then. Maybe the other one?”

“PC Daniels? Are you sure?” Dwight asked her cautiously.

“No, no, not him. Wasn’t there another? Okay, I'm not sure. I mean, the man I saw today wasn't in uniform but well, Selina told Caroline not to trust the police and now I can't place where I saw him before but...Good god, I don't know who to trust! Someone knew I would be on that road, Dwight. How?” She pulled the borrowed dressing gown closer around her neck and seemed to huddle in fear.
“Demelza, what are you talking about? Who’s Selina?”

“Selina is Katie’s sister. Caroline managed to find her for us. But now Katie is missing. Oh, there’s so much to tell you. Caroline! I have to ring her. But I’ve left my mobile…”

“Who’s missing? Katie? Demelza, who are these people you’re speaking of? And what has Caroline to do with any of this?” Dwight asked. He’d need to tell her about the state of her mobile but maybe this wasn’t exactly the right moment.

“Yes, ring Caroline. See what she’s found,” she said absently and shivered.

“Look Demelza, I’m going to go downstairs and ask Sergeant Martin when he thinks we’ll have the Defender back. Then I’ll ring Caroline if you think it’s important,” he offered.

“Oh yes, it’s important, Dwight. You believe me, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. It sounds like you have quite a bit to explain, but let’s get you dressed first. It looks like Prudie has managed to scrounge up some dry clothes for you here and I know she’s downstairs fussing about what to feed you. Tell me, will you be alright on your own for a few minutes? I’ll send Ross up as soon as he’s done talking with Sergeant Martin.” Dwight patted her arm and was grateful she at least didn’t shrink away from his touch.

Dwight pulled the door behind him and rubbed his eyes in exhaustion and frustration. He was not encouraged by the wild look of terror he’d just seen in Demelza’s eyes and the seemingly disjointed tale she was trying to piece together for him. He wanted Ross to speak to her straightaway. Perhaps Ross could make better sense of what she was trying to explain--and assess the danger that might still be following them.

--

Demelza had managed to pull on the flannel pajamas bottoms Prudie had laid out for her but had done little else in the minutes she was alone. She was still wrapped in Ross’s dressing gown and had made a few half-hearted attempts to towel off her wet hair when he knocked.

It took her a few tries before her voice could rasp out a response loud enough to be heard through the heavy oak door.

“Yes, come in,” she croaked.

“You look exhausted,” Ross said tentatively. He’d been waiting for a more overt signal waving him in but could not stay away from her any longer, and shuffled slowly through the doorway.

“I am. But look, my legs can support me now.” Demelza stood up carefully, once again trying to sound cheerful for him. She was determined not to fall apart in his presence. “That’s an improvement over an hour ago.”

She started to wobble and he moved quickly to her side and sat her back on the bed then squeezed her hand. He looked at their locked hands in his lap for a moment before he spoke.

“Dwight said you wanted to go back to the engine house tonight.”

“I hope you understand.” She tried to catch his eye.

“Of course,” he nodded and jerked his head away.
“No...I’m not sure you do, Ross. I’m not going back to be with Dwight. I’m going to be alone in my own space so I can recover in body from today. If I stayed here--well, I suspect I’d be up into the night...”

“Demelza, I promise I wouldn't...you could sleep here, in the guest room,” Ross interrupted. He reached for her, clutching her shoulders. If he was swearing he could keep his hands off her, he wasn’t making a very convincing case, but he could wait no more. He pulled her towards him, pressed her head against his heart, and wrapped his arms gently around her. Having her in his arms, finally, to be able to touch her again, to feel her warmth and her chest rise and fall as she breathed, he could contain his facade of calm no longer. Tears fell freely from his eyes and he kissed first her ear, then her eyelids over and over. She moved closer and he felt her own wet lashes flutter against his cheek.

“It’s not about what you promise. I wouldn't be able to resist creeping down the hall,” she snuffled, then stroked his beard gently with her trembling fingertips. She rested her head against his chest again and when his strong hands gripped across her back, despite her resolve to stay strong, a soft whimper escaped her lips.

“I’m sorry, Demelza. I didn't mean to make this about my own insecurities. I hadn't seen you since you told Dwight about us--and we hadn't spoken either--I was afraid, just for a moment I thought...maybe it was possible you’d changed your mind.” As soon as he spoke the words he saw how wrong he’d been to entertain any doubts about her feelings. Of course she was steadfast and true. He knew this about her. His fears came from somewhere else, somewhere darker. “Then today I thought you were gone forever...” he tried to explain.

“Oh, Ross. I’m here, I’m here,” she whispered as he pressed his forehead to hers. “I told you we belong together--and here we are.”

“Demelza, good god, I’d do anything for you...” His lips brushed against her damp hair.

She reached up to wipe his tears away, then lifted her face to kiss him. It was a slow and tender kiss, a kiss of reunion and reassurance. It was the first time they’d kissed since she left him the previous afternoon, their first kiss as a new couple truly free to be together--with no one and no guilt to hold them back.

A first, yet already their love felt ancient, time-tested.

“I wish we could stay like this forever,” she whispered barely moving her lips away from his.

“We can.” He exhaled slowly, then once again held her to him. 

*My love, we can.*

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“Did you reach him? Did you speak to Ross?” Agatha asked desperately.

“No ma’am. I did speak to his housekeeper, though. There’s been some sort of accident with Verity’s friend, Dr. Carne, so Mr. Poldark can’t come ‘round tonight. But he’ll come see you tomorrow,” the companion replied and dared to venture close enough to straighten the wrap that had slipped from Agatha’s shoulders.

“Tomorrow?!” Agatha roared then lowered her voice and began to look about anxiously. “Tomorrow isn’t soon enough! I’m not safe, I tell you! Without a Poldark in the house, I’m an easy mark! They’ll get me, I know they’re after me!”
“Shall I get you your night sedative?”

“No! I’ll not be sleeping tonight! I’m locking my door and keeping an ear out for footsteps, I am!”

“You’ll agitate yourself, Miss Poldark. Don’t you think you should…”

“Don’t tell me what to do! Don’t you know if they kill me, you’ll be out of a job?”

“Of course, of course. I’ll go fetch you some herbal tea…”

“No, bring me that single malt what’s in the cabinet by the dining room.”

“But, ma’am, Mr. Warleggan keeps that locked and I’m afraid I don’t have the key,” the young woman replied timidly.

“Oh but I do!” Agatha smiled slyly and lifted the black cashmere draped around her neck to reveal a velvet ribbon--also black--strung with Trenwith keys of various sizes.

“There’s no room nor cupboard in this place they can keep me from,” she murmured triumphantly.

----

Demelza was trying her best to stay awake and alert. She knew if she showed any signs of drowsiness they’d whisk her off to hospital and the last thing in the world she wanted was to be amongst any strangers tonight. But Ross’s arms were so warm and despite his strength, his embrace was so soft, that she found herself tumbling into such a still calm that at any moment might bear her away into full sleep.

Finally, she mustered her resolve, and mostly pried herself free to sit up straight on the bed.

“Do I still smell like Sunday’s roast?” She sniffed her arm with a smile.

“Are you sure you are alright? I just wonder whether you should be checked out by a doctor?” Ross asked her. He still had not loosened his grip on her arm.

“Ross, I said I’m fine. Don’t you trust me?” She meant it lightly but saw that Ross hesitated in his response.

“To be honest Demelza, I’m not sure what to think.”

“What?” She had not expected that and pulled away further to look him in the eye.

“To plunge into the frigid sea, to try to swim to safety…”

“Try?” she scoffed. “I did manage, actually.” She tried to laugh. Surely he must be joking.

“It was impulsive and pigheaded. What were you thinking?” he went on.

“What? Ross? You seriously ask me that?”

_Poldark mood #439_, she thought. She sighed and tried not to roll her eyes. _Really? This conversation again?!_

“Ross, I thought I if I stayed in that cave overnight I’d…” she began.

“I’d have come to get you. I did come, in fact,” he interrupted again.
“And now how would I know that?” She laughed but looked him in the eye again. “You’ll forgive
me, but having someone looking out for me is a new concept. Besides, you don’t really mean I’m
pigheaded, because you know that’s exactly what you would have done. Admit it.”

“Demelza…”

“Ross,” she quipped back. “Besides, did you not say your father swam in the sea every day? Even in
the winter?”

“He did, so I might have said that. You remembered that?”

“I listen to everything you say, Ross, so be careful you don't say something you later regret.”

“I regret nothing. And you are pigheaded,” he said and kissed her again. “But you are also brave and
I love you.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter title comes from Rilke’s Book of Hours:

This is what the things can teach us:

to fall, patiently to trust our heaviness. Even a bird has to do that

before he can fly
In different circumstances Demelza might have felt a bit more self-conscious of her comically mismatched attire, but this evening she felt detached and indifferent. The pajama bottoms she had on, which were quite long and needed to be rolled a few times at the cuff, were a dark blue plaid. The shirt she had finally managed to button up was a red plaid—also belonging to Ross and also too large on her. Over these she still wore the dressing gown, a Black Watch pattern. With the best of intentions, Prudie had sought out all Ross’s flannel things, things that would be soft and warm. Demelza had no cause to object but did recognise for a fleeting moment that she had been dressed in borrowed clothes more times in recent weeks than any other time in her life.

And on another occasion Ross or Dwight might have teased her for such an overabundance of tartan, but tonight neither dared. They were simply pleased that she was finally warming and had made it downstairs on her own.

Now she sat at the Nampara kitchen table, a steaming bowl in front of her. They all anxiously watched as she brought her spoon to her mouth. She managed to keep her hand steady and not dribble anything down her front, so she felt satisfied with this little victory. Prudie’s broth was bland but after the briny water Demelza had swallowed during her swim, she found she didn’t mind it so much.

When she saw Demelza wasn’t rejecting what was on offer, Prudie nodded with satisfaction and turned away to attend to some urgent business at the sink. She wiped her eyes with the same grimy tea towel she’d been clutching for hours and hoped no one noticed.

The clock ticked, a radiator hissed. Garrick exhaled a long expressive sigh, that sounded more like creaking gears, to signal his hard work of the day had officially come to an end. But no one said a word. The watchful silence began to grow uncomfortable. Finally Demelza could bear it no longer and spoke.

“Oh, in all the excitement, I forgot to tell you both," she said putting down her spoon for a moment. “I found the answer. We don't need to find Stephen Carrington to prove that the Warleggan report was fraudulently done!”

“Stephen Carrington, the CPE ecologist? Why would we...okay, yes?” Dwight said, shaking his head as though he was snapping out of some dream. For the past few hours he had forgotten all about the business of ecological impact assessments, mining consortiums, and George Warleggan.

“It was the birds! I tried to text you--I also forgot to tell you, I left my mobile in the cave. Maybe I can entice Jinny Carter or even Benjy Ross to harness up and retrieve it for me!” she laughed again.

Ross and Dwight shot each other looks.

“Demelza, about your mobile…” Ross began.

“Oh and my laptop is in the Defender! When did Sergeant Martin say we can get that back, Dwight?”

“He couldn't say, but Demelza your laptop wasn’t…” Dwight replied.
“It was so obvious, once I saw it,” she went on. “You know how that is, like the way a crossword clue can be once you finally solve it? Anyway it wasn’t what was different between the first assessment and the second, but what was the same. In Warleggan’s, the data on nesting birds is identical to that in the first report. Nesting birds? In October?”

“What? Why didn't I see it?” Dwight clapped his hand to his forehead in disgust.

“Or me. It was hidden in plain sight, among tables and tables of data. But you’d think that, well, I might notice dodgy data on birds of all things. Really, you should fire me...” she laughed, then put the whole bowl to her lips to take a slurp of the broth.

“The other members of the consortium will be thrilled,” Ross said flatly.

“And you?” she asked looking up. There was something curious in Ross’s voice she didn't understand.

“Ross, haven’t you told her?” Dwight asked.

“Tell me what? Ross?”

“I’ve withdrawn from the consortium,” Ross said.

“What? Ross!” she cried. “After all these years? Why?” Of course she knew why. It hit her like a ton of bricks. If Ross’s friendship with Dwight had been seen as a conflict of interest, then his romantic relationship with Demelza would be compromising as well.

“This way everyone can carry on and no one can pry into my personal connections…” he continued.

“Ross,” she said weakly. All the vitality she’d felt returning to her had drained away in a flash. She gripped the table for support.

“Demelza, are you okay?” Ross asked cautiously.

“Demelza,” Dwight said. “I think you and Ross need a minute alone. Come on Prudie, let’s go see if we can close some of those windows in the parlour by now. It’s getting rather chilly in here.”

“Course, Dr. Enys. Mebbe you can make us a proper fire then,” Prudie replied and scurried after Dwight, pulling the kitchen door shut behind her.

“Oh Ross! You really did this for me?” Demelza cried softly.

“And for Dwight but yes, for you.” He joined her at the table and put his arm around her.

“I’m so ashamed I hadn't even thought of it after we’d...and after I scolded you for only thinking of yourself. But really? Are you sure? It's such a big sacrifice,” she fretted.

“Not really. It may only be a temporary business arrangement. Whereas you and I are not,” he said and kissed her temple.

“And you had that faith in me? I mean for all you knew I could have been planning to leave here next week? You just said you weren’t sure where we stood.”

“No, Demelza. I was wrong to have entertained any doubt. You belong here and are going nowhere. You said so yourself. So yes, I have faith in you.”

“Oh Ross,” she said again. “But I could just recuse myself from the project then you might still...”
“No, I couldn't do that to Dwight. You mean too much to him as a partner. And I can't come between you and your work, Demelza. I never will.”

“So my big discovery is for nought?” She tried to smile but her eyes were growing wet again.

“I wouldn't say that. If you’ve uncovered evidence that George--or someone acting on his behalf--acted outside the law, you have no idea how much satisfaction that brings me.”

“Oh,” she said and twisted her mouth as she thought carefully about what she was going to say next. “Maybe, Ross, it is time to put those personal animosities behind?” she asked cautiously.

“Yes, of course you are right. But even if it isn’t personal, there's still a question of justice. You must see that.”

“I do, Ross,” she replied and rested her head against his shoulder. “I do.”

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It was dark and cold when George Warleggan entered Trenwith. He’d come into the kitchen, through the rear service entrance, but the whole house seemed particularly deserted this evening. He saw no security outside and inside, none of the housekeeping staff were still around. The dishwasher’s steady blue light signaled the dishes had been attended to and everything else seemed in order.

It was a good thing he’d supped before he left Truro. He doubted he could scrounge for a morsel in the stingy pantry here. With the rows of antique bottles lining the shelves and the banged up copper pots and bundles of dried herbs hanging from hooks, others might find the place charming or rustic. But to him, it was just run down and outdated. All he saw was dust and the sort of experienced thrift that comes from years of poverty.

He walked on towards the grand hallway and was met with only more ancient stillness. It was better this way. Whenever he returned to Trenwith, he dreaded being met with traces of the Poldark ladies--Agatha’s empty tea cups and tarot cards or the wilting flowers Verity was always shoving into quaint old vases. He supposed it would be even worse when Geoffrey Charles came home from school--he was not only messy but loud. Of course his own son, Valentine, could be accused of such behaviour, but it was different with a young child. Geoffrey Charles was old enough to know better, really. Elizabeth had mentioned something about the boy spending a few weeks sailing with a friend this summer. George hoped for all their sakes those arrangements had been finalised.

Elizabeth and Valentine were staying in Truro this evening, so George was alone. He had some local business he needed to attend to, and if all things unfolded efficiently, then he might still be able to join his family in time for Saturday dinner the next day. Already he was feeling impatient to leave. And he had a lot on his mind.

Why isn’t Tankard answering his email? George knew he’d been traveling but it didn’t sit well with him. Tankard should have arrived in Riga yesterday so the man had had plenty of opportunity by now to respond to the many messages George had sent throughout this wretched day.

Damn Ross Poldark and his blasted friends! Why was it that Ross seemed to accumulate such loyalty without even trying, whereas his whole life, George had had to work hard, and pay in one form or another, to gather any followers?

Right now, George urgently needed Tankard’s assessment of the latest consortium development. Should the Warleggans continue their objection to a third impact assessment or just let things play
out? George was beginning to feel as though the costs—at least the demands on his time anyway—were no longer worth it. He could always expand his business in other ways and in other places outside of Cornwall.

Startled by how loudly his footsteps seemed to echo in the silent hall, he almost softened his gait then thought better of it. He was master of this house and if he woke the sleeping Trenwith mice, then so be it.

“Harry?!” he called, his voice ringing out. He laughed to think how that would surely startle the old woman had she heard it in her chambers. “Harry!” he shouted again, now with even more ferocity, and walked on to the parlour. Someone had left coals glowing in the grate. This annoyed him.

“Daisy!” He now called out. “Daisy?” This time he was met with a quick flurry of footsteps as a young woman in her early twenties emerged from a dark passageway at the other end of the room.

“Mr. Warleggan? That you, sir? We wasn’t expectin’ you…” she said breathlessly.

“See that this is put out at once.” he sneered, gesturing towards the hearth. “It’s far too warm tonight for a fire. And dangerous to keep it lit. Is the old woman well?”

“Yes sir, she’s just a bit…”

“Well that’s too bad,” he muttered cutting her off mid sentence. “Tell me, where is Tom Harry? There was no one at the gatehouse when I drove up. Who’s on duty this evening?”

“I dunno sir. I’m just charged with watchin’ over Miss Agatha and I don’t mix with the boys in security…”

“Oh, I bet you don’t. But maybe you try to catch their eyes all the same? Do you like that they watch your backside as you exit the room? he thought.

“Yes, well, that’s enough, Daisy. You may go.”

“Thank you sir. And...it’s Angela. My name is Angela,” she said before she swiftly exited the room.

He didn’t catch the slight edge in her tone but didn't really care. If that was her best attempt at sass it was poorly delivered. She was none of his concern as long as she followed his orders and attended those hot ashes, preferably straightaway.

Next he pulled out his mobile and rang Tom Harry.

After several rings, Harry hadn’t picked up but George listened carefully and thought he heard something curious down the hall. He tried again, this time while walking towards the study adjacent to the parlour. Now it was clear—Harry’s buzzing mobile sat on the desk by the window.

What sort of negligent fool abandons his post and leaves his mobile behind?

George picked it up and scrolled through the log of recent calls, then opened Harry’s contacts. Right between Mum and Newquay Taxi, he saw it.

‘My Private Mobile’.

Good god, what an idiot, the man is! George almost laughed aloud. So Tom Harry had another phone—one that he evidently wanted to keep secret—but hadn’t even bothered to carefully conceal it. And where the hell was he?
George rang this other number and immediately got Harry’s voicemail.

“Yes, this is Warleggan. We had business to attend to this evening, did we not? So I suggest, Harry, that if you’d like to continue being employed, you ring me at once,” George sputtered, then threw the mobile down in frustration.

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The wind that had been growing fiercer all afternoon now held nothing back. It slammed against the old house, rattling windows and finding all the cracks in the floorboards and the spaces between door jambs for the biting draughts to slip in. Rain followed—as expected—pounding the roof, splashing the panes. A persistent drumming now joined the wind's low roar and occupied the silence of the evening.

Yet to Dwight and Ross as they sat watch in the Nampara parlour, the storm felt welcome. They’d still felt uneasy, and as much as they tried to find comfort in the fact that Demelza was safe and in loving company, it didn’t take much for the edge to return. The sound of Prudie closing a door elsewhere in the house or the unexpected snap of a spark crackling from a log on the hearth, was enough to startle them. The adrenaline that had fueled them for hours had not entirely receded. But now the storm came and with it, the promise of release, lustration, and the hope of real peace.

“Tell us whatever you can remember about the men who ran you off the road,” Ross asked Demelza gently.

She was sitting beside him on the sofa, her legs tucked under her, her eyes on the glowing fire. Ross was worried the memory of that moment might be traumatic, upsetting. Aside from a few warm tears and some purposely conjured laughs, Demelza had been eerily calm thus far. Ross wondered if she was always so masterfully in control of her emotions or if she was shutting down. He hadn’t considered a third option—she was simply too exhausted to feel anything anymore.

“Yes...yes I suppose I must,” she said almost dreamily, then turned her attention towards Ross. “The car I can recall easily. It was a Ford Ecosport—I didn’t catch the registration number. But it was bright yellow. It was like...I don’t know, almost official? Like it wanted to be noticed. The men I can’t remember as much. Now if they’d only had feathers...I’m not nearly as good at recalling people's facial features as I am distinguishing birds!” She tried to force a laugh then closed her eyes concentrating once again on what she could remember.

“One of the men--the driver--was burlier, like he had no neck just all shoulders, and he had a beard. Sort of dark red, darker than my hair. And these round eyes that looked like they might pop out of his head.”

*The eyes of a heavy drinker,* she thought.

“He’s the one who...who seemed familiar but I can’t say from where. The other man was younger, taller, he wasn’t as stocky but I could tell he had a lot of muscular strength just by watching him move. He was the one with the cricket bat. His hair was... sort of dark blonde? But really short about the ears, like it had been shaved.” She opened her eyes and looked up at Ross. “Ross, you think I should tell all this to Zacky Martin, don’t you?” she asked.

Demelza had explained all about Selina and Katie, so at least now Dwight and Ross better understood where this sudden wariness of the police had come from. Ross had a hard time believing that Zacky could be involved but didn’t want to come across as dismissive of her feelings.

“Well, Demelza, I trust him but I can't ask you to if you don’t...” he said slowly. Demelza seemed to
have good instincts about people and he wanted to show her he trusted her as well.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “If you trust Sergeant Martin, then I can too. Maybe he can help us figure out why Katie was so worried. Dwight, you haven’t been able to reach Caroline yet?”

“No, I haven’t. It’s odd. She left some urgent messages and some vague texts but now isn’t answering her mobile.”

“You never got my texts, did you?” she asked. “Of course you didn’t, I never did get a signal.”

“Erm...speaking of mobiles,” Dwight began and placed Demelza’s smashed phone on the table beside her. “I’m frightfully sorry.”

“Oh...is that mine? I’d left it behind. It made no sense to ruin it in the sea but I guess it wasn’t safe amongst the shags either.” Demelza couldn’t recall what she had said in the message she’d left on it for Dwight. It was in some ways a goodbye letter—in case she didn’t make it. That already seemed a lifetime ago.

“It was me. I stepped on it,” Ross admitted sheepishly. “But you should know we didn’t find your laptop in the Defender. Just your camera.”

“Also smashed,” Dwight said with regret.

“Oh no! Our new camera? Why did they...and what do they want off my laptop?” she cried. “Please, we have to tell this to Sergeant Martin!”

“Okay, I’ll ring Zacky and tell him to hurry back. Demelza, I may not know who stole your laptop and destroyed your belongings but I know exactly who that yellow car belongs to,” Ross said.

“You do?” she asked.

Chapter End Notes

“He in his madness prays for storms, and dreams that storms will bring him peace”
— Mikhail Lermontov
Morning Libations

It was not until quite late that Dwight and Demelza got back to the engine house. Demelza spent some time speaking to Sergeant Martin who, as a favour to Ross, returned to Nampara and hadn’t required her to come in to the station. She repeated what she had shared earlier—every detail she could remember. And although both Zacky and Ross had a strong suspicion of who was driving the yellow car, they didn’t want to compromise her positive identification by sloppily suggesting suspects, so they remained silent on the matter. She did promise to come to the station the next day to take a proper look at some photographs of men who might be the driver and do an EFIT of the other man who had threatened her. In truth she would have preferred to get that over with on the spot so she could start to put the whole incident behind her, but had to agree with Ross and Dwight—and Prudie—who insisted she take her convalescence that night quite seriously.

As the hours wore on, it was clear that Ross was reluctant to part with Demelza. He only let her out of his sight to use the toilet and he continually fussed over the fire or the blankets wrapped around her, making sure she was warmed through. He would have liked to have offered her some of the Yellow Spot single pot still whisky he picked up the previous day, but did not want to risk upsetting Dwight again, so instead he made sure Prudie brought in plenty of hot tea.

Eventually Ross drove them both home since they did yet not have the Defender back in their possession. Even then he made certain Demelza was settled into her bed—and the engine house locks were secure—before he was satisfied to finally leave them on their own.

“I know I don’t have to say this to you, Dwight, but humour me. Keep a close eye on her tonight…” he said before he left.

“Of course, Ross, that was my plan. She has no idea I’ll be waking her up every few hours to check her vital signs,” Dwight whispered.

Her body nearly vibrating with exhaustion as she hit her mattress, Demelza did sleep well, and didn’t wake once, despite the frequent checks from Dwight.

After he was content her body temperature had neither risen too high nor fallen too low, Dwight just felt her pulse and listened to her breathing every few hours.

Sleeping flat on her back, spread eagle as though her muscles needed to be stretched, she had occupied the whole of her bed and found a sleep that was thankfully restorative—and dreamless.

Demelza woke a bit after nine to the familiar sound of wind and rain splattering on the hazy window pane. Dwight stood in the doorway peering in cautiously to see if she was awake. She sat up and smiled.

“You know, you looked like a child making a snow angel just now. The way your arms, even your hair was spread around you,” he said softly.

“Oh, please don’t mention snow!” she shivered.

“Are you still chilled?” he asked in alarm.

“No, no. I’m fine, really,” she tried to reassure him.
When she’d left Nampara she’d bundled her in layers of warm clothing. She hadn’t bothered to change when she got home but had pulled on a pair of leggings underneath the rather roomy flannel pajama bottoms before she slipped under her duvet. The rest of her body was coming around, but her legs still felt achey, as though her very marrow was frozen. Still, the soft layers and Ross’s familiar scent that lingered on all the plaid had been a comfort.

“I feel as though I’ve slept for days. Is it late? I can’t tell by the…”

“Grey sky?” he laughed. “No, it’s not late. Maybe by your usual standards but considering yesterday’s ordeal you should probably lie in today.”

“Nonsense. We’ve so much to do, Dwight! I’d better get a move on...what is that you have in your hand there?”

“A cup of tea--a libation for the goddess.”

“Oh Dwight. No need to wait on me! But aren’t you supposed to pour it out if it’s a libation? By all means, please don’t do that…” she said and reached her hand eagerly out for the cup.

A voice echoed in her mind, the first time he’d brought her tea as an offering, so many years ago in Leeds. The first time she’d invited him to her bed. A turning point for them then, another one now. 

*He doesn’t know where he stands with me,* she thought. *He needs me to take the lead.*

“I suspected you might prefer coffee but somehow tea seemed more medicinal,” he apologised.

“Thank you Dr, Enys, that’s an order I can manage to follow.”

Dwight was heartened by her cheer. He looked her over carefully before he walked closer to hand over the steaming mug—her eyes were bright and her smile was genuine, natural. There was an ease about her that he felt was contagious. He exhaled and walked over to the window.

In the distance, waves boomed against the rocks and shore. He couldn't see the foam and spray from where he stood but heard the roar and imagined it all the same. Like a growling dog that might prove to be a faithful guardian or a vicious monster—the sea had to be respected for its vitality. He wondered if it was angry to have been denied its prize or if, after having delivered her safely, it had given Demelza up to the shore willingly.

“You look good,” he said turning to her.

“I feel good. And you can stop fretting about me, you know. Did you get any rest yourself?”

He smiled but said nothing and returned his gaze to the window. It wasn’t really the time to say he’d had trouble sleeping again. Alone.

His back was turned so he didn’t see her hands busy next to her pillow, nor did he notice the devious smile spread on her face.

Just then from down the hall Dwight’s mobile rang. He left to go get it and came back laughing.

“What? It’s you?!” he cried.

“Yes, well as you know, the screen is smashed—I just wanted to test if it still worked otherwise. And I can't read anything in my contacts. Yours is still the only number I know by heart.”

He laughed again.
“And if I’d happened to change my number all those years ago you’d still be stranded in Snowdonia.”

“Maybe I’d have been very happy working at the hostel,” she suggested.

“You’d most likely be the proprietor by now.”

“I’m still grateful to you for that night, you know. And now you’ve rescued me twice, Dwight.”

“I didn’t rescue you yesterday,” he said.

“Well you tried! You raised the alarm—that mattered. Still chivalrous after all these years.” She took another sip of her tea and closed her eyes with a satisfied smile.

“And hope to remain so. Even when I’m old and infirm, you can always call on me to fight your dragons. Which you are more than capable of slaying yourself, of course, but I’m happy to assist or at the very least, to drive you home afterwards.”

“Dwight?” She opened her eyes suddenly and put down the mug. She seemed to recall something. “That Rosina you were involved with back then, did you ever tell her that you drove all night to pick up an old friend trapped in North Wales? What ever happened with you two?”

“Rosina? There’s a name I hadn’t thought of in years...No, I managed to keep that detail from her but she and I didn't stay together much longer.”

“Oh?”

“I told you she was intense. It turns out she had some rather elaborate plans for us. I came across her Pinterest...”

“Came across?” Demelza raised a brow and reached for her tea.

“No, really, it wasn't prying. She had it open--she was quite desperate for me to see it, I assure you. Anyway I learned a lot from that...her wedding gown was already chosen, she had names picked out for our kids, their nurseries decorated....It was...”

“Intense?”

“Really. We’d only been together about a month at that point and she was planning our future together. Oh god—that sounds familiar,” he laughed tentatively, self-deprecatingly.

This was it. The moment. Would this be awkward and uncomfortable? Or would they...could they push through?

She took the bait and let out a cackle and slapped the bed in her amusement.

Good god, here she was. His friend--his Demelza--back by his side. He felt such immense relief from that. The tensions, the worry that had coursed through him the past few days, were erased with that laugh. That loud, inelegant--and thoroughly charming--squawk.

“Oh hardly the same thing, Dwight! We knew each other ten years and one month before you had our kids names picked out. Which, by the way, we would never have agreed on.”

“What?” he laughed. “I have wonderful taste in names: Drusilla, Hypatia, Petronella...”

She was laughing so hard now she accidentally snorted her tea then laughed even harder.
“Although Petronella Enys does sound a bit like a strain of botulism,” he said.

“Stop, Dwight! You're going to make me pee!”

“I still haven’t told you how I eventually shook her...Rosina that is.”

“How?”

“I told her I was going to the Biodiversity Conservation and Ecosystem Management Conference in Berlin later that autumn, which I was. And was meeting my old friend Demelza there,” he began.

“Which you were,” she nodded.

“And I told her maybe I’d save a little money by sharing a hotel room with my friend Demelza…”

“Which you did.”

“And Rosina--I told you she got jealous easily--did not like that,” Dwight shook his head. “As I knew she wouldn’t.”

“Oh Dwight! That's rather mean…and you never told me that I was a pawn in your devious game.”

Demelza recalled that time clearly. It was just after she’d started at Cambridge and she had fallen mildly in love with a DJ; he was a bit young for her and most decidedly not her type, but so sweet and free. And that trip to Berlin was an instance when she and Dwight did just stay together as friends. They shared a room--but not a bed--and there was nothing physical between them.

We’ve done it before. We can do it again.

“Oh, I paid for it in a lot of nasty words from her--a few I had to look up in the Urban Dictionary, I admit. Then there were the broken dishes...oh yes, and my television as well, if I recall, before she turned tail and left for good. It wasn't pretty,” Dwight explained.

“Nor really honest on your part… “

Good god, had she really said that? Who was she to judge anyone--especially Dwight--for his honesty? She was mortified for a moment but then recognised Dwight’s laughter continuing and she knew he saw the humour in it too.

“Yes, but now it’s rather amusing. And she rebounded quickly. She married a doctor less than a year later that she'd met at the hospital where she worked.”

“Not Dr. Love??” Demelza asked.

“No, but that would have been a rather comic pairing, wouldn’t it? No, she married an orthopedic surgeon and now has three precious, well-dressed daughters.”

“Named?”

“Pansy, Poppy, and Petunia,” he said.

“I think I prefer Petronella. It works both ways, you know. You have to promise you’ll let me help you too, Dwight. Slay dragons I mean.”

“Good god! I hope I’m done with dragons,” he rolled his eyes.
Just then Demelza's smashed mobile rang.

“Is this you?” she laughed, looking at her incomprehensible screen.

“No it’s not,” he assured her.

She picked up and heard a strange woman's voice on the line.

“Dr. Demelza Carne?”

“Yes...who is...”

“My name is Clowance Carrington. I understand you’ve been looking for my husband.”

End Notes

Thanks to https://www.cecenvironment.co.uk for the technical terminology and general gist of things in the ecological consulting field. I beg forgiveness from any reader who sees through my flimsy research. I swear t'was all done in the name of adventure and romance.

I'm nervousladytraveler over on tumblr if you want to continue the conversation.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!