

## SLIP KNOT

By Hayley Spurway

### CHAPTER 3

From: ange@mediaeye.co.uk  
Date: 17 January 2008 15:44 GMT  
To: lena\_1976@hotmail.com

*lena. are you okay sweetie? i don't believe for a moment you and dan are over for good. it'll just be a little blip, wait and see. you just need a break, that's all – but cornwall?! at this time of year! what on earth were you thinking?! you need to drop all this eco-warrior stuff and get your bony ass south of the equator where your worries will simply melt away. anyway, call me and talk things over soon – you know i'm always here for you. cocktails at the red bar are on me just as soon as you've been rained off your quirky little island. ange x*

– send –

Her best friend Ange was wrong, this was no little glitch in her relationship. It was over. For so long Lena had feared what her friends and family would think if they found out the truth about her and Dan. And she wondered how and when she would have to admit that her perfect life was just a mirage; the real story, ugly and bruised, concealed under long-sleeved tops and heavy foundation. She wasn't ready to tell them everything yet.

She lay there, listening to rain tickle the windowpanes. Stray tears trickled down her cheeks, as if the fitful night's sleep had never put a stop to them. Her bleary eyes stopped on the purple and black bracelets smudged on her thin wrists and upper

arms; bruises for which she knew Dan wasn't entirely to blame. He'd suffered enough in the knowledge he'd never be a father. Yet now she'd thrown it back in his face, hanging the burden of their failures on his mighty shoulders. Picking drunken fights, letting her emotions spin out of control, pushing and prodding until he snapped. Dan deserved better, and so did she. At least she still had a stab at a future Dan could never have.

The sun rose above the crown of one of the islands, beckoning her as it winked a lazy greeting through the bedroom window. Lena hid the brutal evidence under the duvet, letting her head fall back on downy pillows. In a couple of days she would go home and face the carnage, but now she was here she resolved to find solace outside of her city walls.

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A bell tinkled as she stepped inside the stone barn converted into a 50's-style deli, its shelves lined with pots of jam topped in gingham cloth, tins of biscuits finished with hand-tied ribbons and wicker baskets filled with homemade loaves and pastries. Lena watched the overweight shopkeeper shuffle between the aisles and the cash register, imagining she was the sort who still wore a petticoat beneath her floral skirt.

Having popped a warm baguette and a bunch of plump vine tomatoes in her basket, Lena made a beeline for the counter where cheeses and chutneys were laid out for free tasting. As the first morsel of Cornish Blue was about to meet her lips, a shrivelled-up prune of a lady, her hunched body draped in mismatched tie-dye,

hobbled over. Lena sidestepped politely, trying hard not to stare at the bizarre combination of moccasins and stripy socks on the woman's tiny feet. But the slippers only shuffled closer, squinty green eyes looking up over horn-rimmed glasses and scrutinising Lena.

"What you doin' ere?" The voice was fierce and masculine, not frail like her wilting physique. Lena dropped the piece of cheese, feeling like a child caught stealing from tuck-shop. "What you doin' ere?" the woman repeated.

"Erm, shopping," Lena's voice was high-pitched and edgy.

The woman tutted. "On the islands. What's your business 'ere on Tresco?" she demanded, her demeanour unnerving for someone who looked fit for a care home.

"I'm on holiday," Lena snapped back.

"No one holidays 'ere at this time of year. These 'ere are summer islands for the likes of you lot."

Lena turned away, flustered.

"You're one of them moneyed developer types, aren't you? I can tell." She said to Lena's back, the pronunciation of 'are' and 'eye' heavy and long. "Sniffing around for plots of land to fill with yer second homes for more of the likes of your sort. Well, you won't find no land 'ere 'cos it all b'longs to the Lyonesse Estate. So you might as well go 'ome."

Lena swivelled round and looked down at the grey ringlets clinging to the sides of a wrinkled, pallid face. "If you're on the welcoming committee, it's a wonder people come on holiday here at all. Now if you wouldn't mind just leaving me alone." Her voice shook and her tired eyes welled up as she strode to the till, desperate to be outside, away

from this pesky old lady. She snatched two bottles of wine off the shelf before mechanically unloading her shopping, eyes lowered, as if she was back in a London supermarket.

“Don’t you be worrying about Old Pollack Face.” The shopkeeper spoke in hushed tones, the scent of lavender drifting from the heavy, aproned bust she leant on the counter. “She doesn’t mean no harm. Mad as a bag of badgers she is.”

Lena said nothing, conscious that prickles of embarrassment were flushing her neck with shades of red.

“So, how long are you staying with us, love?”

Didn’t these people ever let up being nosy, she wondered? She kept her eyes lowered, warding off any more questions, begging the woman’s chubby hands to work faster as they placed her items in a canvas bag with *Welcome to Tresco* printed on it.

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Lena paced along the beach, each step an attempt to outrun the woes that dragged at her heels, her eyes scouring the blue abyss of the ocean, looking for answers it didn’t have. At least it didn’t crowd her like the towers of grey that banished nature from the city and asphyxiated her as she walked its streets. Here the wild beauty engulfed her, breathless after last night’s storm. Lobster tags, buoys and bits of plastic were scattered like hundreds and thousands on a wall of seaweed; debris carried by the tides and currents, washed up on the island’s shores, battered and broken from their journey. Much like Lena.

The shells in her pockets dug into her thighs, her thoughts adrift, as once the lengths of wood she tucked under her arm had been. As she walked she conjured up homely scenes played out in the chocolate-box cottages: scenes where children ran amok, mothers had time to cook muffins and pies, while Grandmas knitted by open fires. A false reality, even in this old-fashioned island community, but one she was content dreaming up as the antithesis of her city life.

More telling of the modern climate was a striking display of abstract paintings – subtle strokes of colour depicting the different moods of the ocean – exhibited in the floor to ceiling windows cut into one of the houses. Lena thought she recognised the distinct style of an artist whose work caught her eye in a London gallery. But the memory, the place, was too distant to pinpoint. As Lena brought her nose up closer to the glass, a wiry, middle-aged woman removed a canvas from its easel, surprised to see a young lady peering in at her. Without hesitation the woman’s expression broke into a wide smile and she tickled her fingers through the air by way of a greeting. Embarrassed to be caught snooping and keen to avoid another run in with the locals, Lena was tempted to bow her head and keep walking. But curiosity, and the lady’s insistent beckoning, drew her inside.

Little more than a glass-fronted box, the gallery was tiny inside. Mrs Green – Alice, she insisted, as her bony fingers worked loose strands of greying-brown hair back into a bun – had converted the front room of her late father’s cottage into an exhibition space some seven or eight years ago, she explained. “Oh, I rarely open in the winter dear, just getting it straightened up before our Clarissa returns.”

“Clarissa?”

“Clarissa Dennis. Lord Dennis’ daughter. She’s the reason I set up the gallery in the first place. Oh, ‘er art is a beauty as you can see. Of course she moved up to London, where she’s done well for ‘erself, so they say. But she’s coming back soon, to live ‘ere on the islands again. Want to ‘ave it all shipshape by then.”

Clarissa Dennis. The name nudged a door to her faraway memories. “I’m sure I’ve seen her work exhibited in a gallery in Covent Garden. The colours and textures... so precise... as if the rain has blurred a real photograph. So, does Clarissa live on Tresco?” Lena was surprised that it was her turn to do some prying.

“Does she ‘eck. Her pa, Lord Dennis, lives in that great turreted mansion in the Abbey Gardens. He’s the owner of all the Lyonesse Estate – that’s pretty much all the land across the islands. As far as most of us are concerned, he’s the big chief. Collects our rent, controls our businesses and has the say-so on all developments over ‘ere.” Her voice was matter of fact.

“A powerful man then?” To Lena it sounded like the sort of aristocratic rule that could only be a hangover of medieval times.

“Very, very rich. And ‘andsome as well wouldn’t you know it. Still, he can be a tyrant, you know. Should’ve seen ‘im when young Clarissa fell for one of ‘is gardeners. Split ‘em up he did and we reckon that’s what sent ‘er packing to London. That and ‘er art, of course.” Evidently a practised storyteller, Alice emphasised the beats of her tale with a nodding head and the rising and falling of her eyebrows.

Unable to comment on local gossip, Lena shuffled uncomfortably

“You’ll have to meet Clarissa when she’s back, dear.” Without asking, she sounded sure her visitor wasn’t leaving the islands in a hurry. “Anyway, best not be keeping you

dear.” Alice clapped her dusty hands and wiped them on her old-fashioned paisley smock. “Have you been to the gardens yet? They’re a beauty this time of year. Nice afternoon for it. Why not get yourself a bike from Nancy? She’s the lady that runs the grocery store.”

Although the outing sounded like a welcome prelude to another long evening penned up, Lena was unsure about setting foot back inside the village shop. But being the only shop on the island there was little choice.

“I’m sorry about Old Pollack Face, dear.” Nancy’s apology was genuine. This time Lena smirked at the omission of the old woman’s real name. “Lives over on Bryher, where there’s no grocers at this time of year. Twice a week she comes over and stirs up some sort of trouble. Keeps her alive, they reckon. But like I said, she don’t mean no harm. And you’re welcome here on Tresco, whatever’s your business.” Kind, wise eyes asked Lena for more information, but she pretended not to notice, so Nancy plugged the silence with small talk, an occupation of sorts, Lena supposed – a way to pass the time in this rare little place where there seemed no shortage of it. “So, off to the gardens are you, dear? Might find Olly Perkins over there, went off that way with his young son Michael not so long ago. He’s the one to ask if you need to know anything about the place. Worked there for years he did, for Lord Dennis – at least until all that fiasco with his daughter.”

Wending her way beneath a canopy of trees, swerving around potholes, Lena was glad to have something to fill the empty hours she’d wished for in London. Towering stone pillars announced the entrance to the gardens, through which she propped the bike against a bench in the deserted courtyard. In the city Lena’s bike had been

hacked out of its D-lock in broad daylight, but when she'd asked about a padlock Nancy had laughed out loud. "People leave doors unlocked and keys in ignitions out here, love," she'd said.

Her footsteps crunching on loose gravel, like Alice in her private wonderland, Lena wandered through a cacophony of colours, aromas and exotic shapes. Here winter bloomed like the crimson flowers of the New Zealand flame trees. Inhaling the sweet scent of eucalyptus, her mood lifted to the tops of sky-scraping topiary hedges, where wands of silver leaves shimmered overhead. Her gaze drifted along a corridor of palms to a sun lit sculpture of a boy and girl holding a child in bronze, outstretched arms. Faced with a symbol of love and happiness, a hammer of loneliness struck Lena once again. She slumped in the shelter of a stone roundhouse, where shards of winter sun broke in and streaked shell mosaics that covered the walls. She should have known that running away wouldn't change things. It was time to go home. To shut Pandora's box and throw away the key. Accept life wasn't going to be everything she expected it to be.

A male voice from outside her hideaway interrupted her thoughts. "Even now, in the middle of winter, there are hundreds of plants in flower. Plants from all over the world that don't grow anywhere else in the country."

She peeped out to see a man who looked just a few years older than her – rugged in his weathered skin, faded jeans and muddy work boots. For all his wild gesticulations that made the cuffs of his flannel shirt flap, the young boy at his side offered only a grunt in return. But this didn't stop the man's passionate spiel to the only member of his audience. "Isn't it amazing? Look, there's species from South Africa, Australia,

Mexico, Chile, the Canary Islands, New Zealand – all over. Places I'll take you to one day, lad."

Another grunt. Lena smiled. Nervous they might catch her spying, she crept out of her hiding place, feigning interest in a furry Yak Hair tree on the opposite side of the roundhouse to where they stood. She was dismayed when she heard the man's footsteps immediately close in behind her, followed by those of his more reluctant companion.

"So, hello again. How's the holiday going?" His voice was gravelly. Thick eyebrows and the carpet of stubble did little to hide his chiselled features. Lena recognised him as the man who'd offered her a lift when she'd just arrived on Tresco.

"Oh, hi. Okay. Thanks." She looked back at the information sign beneath the tree.

"I'm Olly." He extended a hand; calloused palms, dirt behind his fingernails. "And this is my son, Michael." The boy lifted his head and gave her a half-smile, revealing wide, grey-blue eyes like his dad's.

"I'm Lena." She said, feeling stiff next to Olly's casual stance, unnerved by the way his eyes relaxed on her as if they were already friends. He looked younger than Dan, not a fleck of grey in the chestnut bristles that climbed his cheeks to meet an untamed crop of hair. She diverted her attention to his son. "So, you've bagged a private guide to the gardens?" she asked.

Michael shrugged. "Gardens aren't really his thing, are they mate?" Olly replied for him, pre-empting another grunt, she supposed. "Prefers the sea. Anything to do with boats and swimming."

“It’s a bit boring here.” Michael mumbled, looking down at his wellies, his voice quiet next to his dad’s.

“You like the view from the top of Abbey Hill though, don’t you Mike?” Michael’s freckled cheeks turned up towards Olly, his eyes suddenly alight. “Come on then, race you to the top, lad.” As the young boys charged off between a gangway of forest pines, Lena was about to mutter her goodbyes. “And you, Lena. Last to the top buys the biscuits,” Olly said, pegging off behind Michael, so all she could do was follow. Puffing and panting they emerged from the shelter of the trees to be battered by the wind. How fast the weather changed here, she noticed. Michael stood on the edge of the grassy plateau, his short arms held out in the stance of an aeroplane.

“Tresco is the most sheltered of the islands.” Olly’s words were whipped away by the breeze. “It’s protected by Bryher over there.” He pointed across the silvery tongue of water to a tiny island, sprays of white-water shooting up from its rocky flanks that fought off crashing waves. “Only about eighty people live out on Bryher,” he said. “A wild place.” Just as she’d witnessed with his son, her lack of response didn’t halt his enthusiasm, he just pushed on, as if she’d encouraged him. “I’m off there tomorrow,” he continued, “to see about a gardening job. Why don’t you come with me and check it out? I’ll show you around.”

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On the short boat ride over, their jeans being spattered by saltwater, Olly gave Lena a potted history of the islands while Michael steered the dinghy. He told her of his friend

Adam, who was born and bred on the Scillies, explaining his dark hair and swarthy complexion – typical Scillonian features attributed to the islands' strong links with North African smuggling circuits during the Middle Ages. As they dragged the boat up onto the sand of little Bryher, Adam drove his Land Rover across the beach and parked by the landing slip. Slightly shorter and stockier than Olly, he bounded towards them dressed in sailing waterproofs.

“There’s a decent weather window so I’ve got to take the boat to Penzance and pick up some engine parts,” Adam said, casually ruffling Michael’s straw-coloured hair. Michael, in high spirits after Olly let him steer the boat, mocked giving Adam a dead arm, grinned and darted away up the beach. Adam looked past the boys, stalling suddenly when he saw Lena in tow. “Hi,” he nodded, his smile much more reticent than Olly’s and hidden behind waves of ebony hair. He turned back to Olly, but he was already off, chasing Michael, rugby tackling him to the sand. “Well... maybe see you later then,” he said uncertainly, not bothering to introduce himself before he hopped aboard a large motor-cruiser and started the engine.

Lena climbed into the waiting Land Rover alongside Olly, Michael and a wet Springer spaniel that sprawled its hulk of sandy fur across the front seat. “Great cars for over here, these Landies. They don’t rust all that easy and can take a battering on these roads. If you can call’em roads!” Olly chuckled as they bumped along the sandy track. “Adam gets them in cheap, fixes them up and sells them on. A lucrative bit of business he does – alongside looking after his folk’s boat hire company.”

Bumping along rugged tracks and pillows of sand – Bryher’s beautiful excuse for a main highway – Lena opened her eyes to a place even more unspoilt than she’d

imagined it from the viewpoint at Tresco. Like a cross between the Scottish Hebrides and the Caribbean, she thought, as they came to a halt on its swell-lashed windward side. No proper roads. No traffic. Nothing between these shores and America but 3,000 uninterrupted miles of Atlantic Ocean. She breathed in deeply, dizzy with the heady scent of liberation.

“Are you sure we’re allowed in?” she asked, a peculiar sensation creeping up on her when he opened the door. Michael wandered off, taking a path that led around the rundown exterior of the hotel, where paint flaked off grimy walls and blue-grey shutters.

“Ey. Nobody will even know,” said Olly. “There’s been no viewings for months. I just come and tidy the gardens.”

“It’s for sale?”

“The lease is up for grabs, yeah. Can’t buy nothin’ around here outright, it’s all Lyonesse Estate. Accountable to the big chief – or at least that’s what he thinks he is – Lord Dennis.”

Inside, a blanket of dust camouflaged oak floors and flagstone tiles. Blank grey walls needed a lick of paint. Wooden tables lay naked. But even in the sombre light of neglect and disrepair, a mosaic of glass and shells still glistened around the hearth; light reflecting from it, tickling Lena’s imagination as the Shipwreck Bay Hotel came to life around her. She saw the fire aglow and the walls adorned with bright canvasses; heard the clattering of cutlery on plates, popping corks and the gentle din of diners.

“Quite a place, back in its day,” Olly said. “Still could be. It’s the only hotel on the island.”

“What happened to the last leaseholder?”

“John Edwards. Wife left him and he hit the bottle. Standards went down, staff turnover went up. He let it get tatty and it all went to pot. Regulars started going to other islands. Then Grimshaw went and got planning for his luxury Seaspray complex – the one going up next to where you’re staying on Tresco. Stiff competition and a few threats scared Edwards off for good.”

“Do you think this place will be open again by summer?” She looked around at the cheerless, neglected interior.

“Be a shame if it was left empty for another season. And a huge deficit to everyone on Bryher. There’s not much else to lure the visitors here apart from a handful of B&B’s and the campsite. Roger and Wendy – they’re Adam’s folks – hire out kayaks and dinghies, but most of their business comes from the other islands these days.”

“It’d have to be snapped up pretty quick to be ready for the summer, wouldn’t it?” The urgency of Lena’s enquiry surprised her.

“It wouldn’t take that long to fix it up. But it would need some damn good marketing after Edwards left it such a bad reputation.”

Lena’s ears pricked at the challenge. A bolt of wild inspiration, thankfully interrupted by Michael rapping on the window. “Dad,” he shouted. “Have you seen the pool? It’s disgusting.” They wandered out onto the terrace, where a swamp of leaves and mulch crawled up the walls of an empty, kidney-shaped swimming pool.

“Looks like you’ve got your work cut out for you.” She gestured from the pool to the riot of shrubs, palms and ragged flowers fighting for space around the unkempt lawn.

“I kinda wish it could stay as it is – wild and romantic – nature growing a barrier against the elements.” For a moment his eyes rested on Lena, making her self-conscious of her windswept hair and bare complexion.

“I don’t think you’ll get paid much if you don’t at least give it a trim.” She laughed, a little uneasily. “How about I take Michael off for a bit, he can show me round while you get on?”

Michael was collapsed on a one-armed sun lounger, looking bored already.

“You good with that, Mike?” Olly called over.

He shrugged and got to his feet. Unused to the frank response of an eleven-year-old, Lena had hoped he would show an inkling of enthusiasm about spending time in her company.

“Great idea,” said Olly, the eagerness of his response over compensating for his son’s indifference. “I’ll get him to show you a couple of the bedrooms if you like – they’re all decked out like mini beach huts. Mike gets to camp out here with me sometimes, isn’t that right, lad? Boy’s night out.” He clenched his fist and knocked it against Michael’s smaller, softer knuckles. A secret handshake between father and son.

A glimmer of excitement passed across Michael’s glum expression as he took the keys from his dad. Olly winked at them both and whistled his way over to the summerhouse to gather his gardening tools.

Michael, still silent, led the way up a flight of wooden steps and opened the door to the smell of damp. The interior of the suite was robbed of daylight by the salt-caked windows that Lena flung open to a view of the ocean pounding on rocky outcrops.

Michael sprawled out on the bed, dwarfed by its king-size mattress. “Dad said one day we can swim all the way from here to Tresco,” he told her.

“You must be a good swimmer.” Lena muttered, her mind busy dressing the room for a holiday brochure: pastel throws on the beds, plump cushions on the armchairs, coastal hues brushed on the walls. What if she took over the lease, she wondered? It could be her chance to plot a course away from London. Away from Dan. Sink her inheritance money, her future, into the Shipwreck Bay Hotel. Into the life she once dreamt of, living by the sea.

Stop it, she ordered the mad woman who’d hijacked her prudence. She was just here for a break. A brief escape from the gritty futility of city life. She wasn’t about to up sticks and set up camp on a remote outpost inhabited by Old Pollack Face and her friends. And no fleeting island fantasy – or the charm of Robinson Crusoe – was going to change her mind.

She turned back to Michael. “How about we go for a paddle now?”

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Her skin still tingled beneath a salty crust. A reminder of her daring plunge into the sea; its stabbing cold painfully refreshing. Emerging reborn. She’d watched Michael go in first, then while he frolicked, inattentive to her moves, she’d stripped down to her underwear and, cautious of her bruises being seen, quickly dived under. Rinsing away the stains of the city. Trying to win Michael’s friendship by proving she was every bit as

hardy as he was. Hoping he might run back and tell his Dad she was brave. And fun. Which he did, secretly making her smile.

“Lena and me went for swim,” he’d gasped, running up the garden, his hair still wet.

“More of a dip than a swim,” she’d corrected as she sauntered over, her bare legs dappled blue and purple from the cold. The colours of the flowers Olly was pruning. The colours of the bruises now safely hidden beneath her knee-length cashmere jumper. He looked around, his eye level meeting the goose-pimpled limbs that ended at her long, sandy feet. She stepped back and wriggled into her jeans, the damp sand and salt clinging to the denim and scraping her thighs like sandpaper, making her feel young and reckless.

“Wow, that’s plucky at this time of year.” Despite the cold, she glowed. Her gaze locked uncertainly with his for a moment. She quickly swung it away, towards the hotel. Both views attractive before her eyes.

For the rest of the afternoon she’d secretly analysed Olly. A man who seemed content surrounded only by nature. A father, who evidently cared for son, and cared not for the clothes he wore on his back. Who brought her to this place where her dreams had been re-ignited. And in whose company she bloomed like the rare plants that survived on these islands. Only on these islands.

Later, he’d found her lying on an elephant-sized boulder. The waves echoed in her eardrums. No buses. No trains. Just the sound of the ocean. “So, how long do you intend to stay here on the Scillies?” He stretched out beside her, basking in the simmering winter sun.

“Oh, about as long as the lease on the hotel, I reckon.” She’d said it like a punch line; a joke to suit the playful tone blossoming between them. She hadn’t wanted to admit she’d be gone in a matter of days. Or tell him she’d counted the wads of inheritance money in her head. Seen a ‘For Sale’ sign outside her flat.

He hadn’t flinched. “I guess you’ll still be around for Dave’s disco on Tresco tomorrow night. It’s the monthly social event. Cheesy 80’s tunes, far too much to drink and some silly moves on a makeshift dance floor. Pick you up at eight?”

The thought of going to a disco made Lena cringe, but she was keen to spend more time in Olly’s revitalising company.

“Okay, okay,” she’d laughed. Then.

But now, back in the cottage, the day seemed as if it belonged to another person. After one glass of wine had led to another, then another, the bottles she’d promised not to buy, then promised not to drink, were now empty. In high spirits on her return from Bryher, she’d indulged in her island fantasies, then she’d slowly drowned the blind ambition that dared her to imagine opening the doors of the Shipwreck Bay Hotel. That dared her to see something between her and Olly; something more than just the safety line she’d wanted to the shores of a new life. Now she could see the truth: she was no more than just a fool chasing rainbows.

- End Chapter 3 -