

Nicola May

STARRY SKIES IN FERRY LANE MARKET
(a/w to come)



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For Georgia, Trinny, Jake & Amy

PROLOGUE

‘I’ve told you before, Mum,’ Star Bligh said irritably. ‘I don’t want you doing this if you’re stoned.’

Ignoring her daughter, the woman with braided grey hair carried on laying out the well-worn Tarot cards.

‘I can see a man,’ Estelle Bligh said slowly. ‘In fact, I can see two.’ Her long, slim fingers began to circle the crystal ball in front of her.

‘Huh. Isn’t that just your wishful thinking?’ Reverting to her sulky five-year-old self, Star began to twirl a strand of her long blonde hair around her finger.

‘Shhh,’ her mother hissed, then went on. ‘Choose wisely, for one of them may break your heart . . .’ a dramatic pause ensued, ‘. . . and the other may *shake* it to the core.’ Her Cornish accent trailed off in an ominous whisper.

‘I don’t suppose you saw Skye in your crystal ball, did you?’ Star asked. ‘I mean, that was the reason for my coming up here this early – thinking that my wayward daughter might have sought solace here with her even more wayward grandmother.’

Estelle tutted. ‘She’s a big girl now, Steren. You really do need to let her go.’

‘Let her go? She’s only seventeen, Mum.’

‘And at that age, you were a single mother with a one-year-old, already out working all hours at Sibley’s.’

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Star looked up at the metal clock in the shape of a black cat that was hanging on the wall. ‘Noo, is that the time?’ She shimmied sideways out of the bench seat in her mother’s kitchen and went to fetch her coat and hat. ‘I need to get back to the market,’ she said, and shivered. ‘It’s bloody freezing in here. How do you stand it?’

‘Oh, to me it brings back lovely memories of all three of us cuddling up under a blanket when our Skye was a baby.’

‘Yeah, right. Those happy days when we had no money to mention, and you still convinced me that having a baby when I was in my last year at school was the right thing to do.’ Star couldn’t keep the bitterness out of her voice.

‘That’s not fair.’ Estelle looked pained. ‘Do you regret it now?’

‘Of course not,’ Star snapped. ‘I just don’t want to see Skye following in my footsteps. She needs to have a life before she even thinks of starting a family.’

‘You’re a great mother to her, love. A much better mum than I ever was to you.’ Estelle gave a sigh.

Star looked up at the ceiling to suppress her tears. ‘Anyway, don’t you want to be moving to a proper house, now that you’re getting older?’

‘And leave this perfect little commune – are you mad? As for the temperature, I’ve got proper electric heater things now. Haven’t sussed out how to work the timers on them, that’s all.’

Star looked out across the amazing clifftop view to see the horizon cutting the early October sky and steel-grey sea perfectly in two. Seabirds on the wing, ready to dive down and catch their fishy breakfast, squawked in anticipation. There was no denying that the Hartmouth Head residential static home park was set in an incredible location. And

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despite having been subject to ‘trailer trash’ taunts from some of the kids in her schooldays, Star thought that being brought up in such a close-knit community, and against such a stunning backdrop, had had its advantages.

‘Can’t your new boyfriend do it?’ she asked now, grateful for Skye’s regular updates on her grandmother’s unpredictable love life.

‘Sort the heaters, you mean?’ Estelle raised her eyebrows meaningfully, then laughed. ‘Harley’s about as useful on the DIY front as a chocolate teapot.’

‘Maybe if you dated someone who wasn’t just out of college . . .’

‘For your information, he’s thirty-two.’

‘Oh, just the thirty-year age gap this time, then.’

‘You’re just jealous. When’s the last time you had any fun, eh, my girl?’ Opening the door to her static home, painted a dark green that reflected her pagan love of nature, Estelle picked up and lit the half-smoked joint that was resting in an ashtray on the steps of the decking area. Then, after taking a large drag on the fragrant tobacco, she said, ‘I named you Steren because it means Star. Now that your daughter is grown and can stand on her own two feet, don’t you think it’s time for *you* to start shining?’

Chapter 1

‘Try this.’ Big Frank Brady placed a small sugar-dusted pie in front of the woman who was sitting on a high stool across the cafe counter from him.

The clattering of cutlery as a couple finished off a huge fried breakfast and the shrieking of a toddler having a tantrum in the corner were only slightly drowned out by Audrey Hepburn singing ‘Moon River’.

‘She’s singing your song, Kara Moon,’ Frank teased the pretty redhead. Then the towering, dark-haired Irishman, who had owned and run Frank’s Café on the Hartmouth Estuary seafront for the past eleven years, went over and twiddled with his beloved jukebox in the corner.

‘So,’ he said, coming back to the counter, ‘what do you think of the mince pie? I’m testing it out ready for the Christmas trade.’

Licking her lips, Kara took a big bite into the succulent-looking pastry. She began chewing, then shuddered and made an ugly face. ‘Ew! That taste, it’s so bitter.’ She reached for the water bottle in her bag and washed down the alien-tasting filling fast. ‘What the hell have you put in there?’

‘Thought I would try an age-old, revered mince pie recipe. You are my guinea pig.’

‘It’s only just October,’ Kara objected in her faint Cornish accent.

‘You know me – I like to be ahead of the game. I found it in a drawer at my old mammy’s place after she died, God bless her, and then came across it by chance yesterday in the back kitchen. It had mice teeth-marks all around the edge.’

‘What – the mince pie or the recipe sheet?’ Frank laughed his deep throaty laugh as Kara continued, with a huge grin. ‘Or maybe you just put a dead mouse in it?’

‘No, just a slosh of Guinness, as well as the usual brandy.’ He took a bite himself, then gagged. ‘Jesus! Me old dear must have been on the black stuff herself when she made these, so she must.’ They both laughed. ‘My Monique already said to just get some of the home-made mincemeat from Alicia in The Sweet Spot. I think she’s right; it’ll be a lot easier.’

‘Your Monique is *always* right,’ Kara said, ‘and sensible too. I’d follow her advice if you want to keep any of your customers.’ She swallowed a bit more water before exclaiming, ‘Shit! I need to get going. I’ve been waiting on an extra delivery of gypsophila and it should be arriving soon.’

‘How’s it going up there at the market now that you’re Miss Passion Flowers herself?’

‘Really good, thanks,’ Kara said happily. ‘I’m so lucky to be working at something I love, and now that the business belongs to me, I cannot tell you how good it is not being ordered around by Lydia Twist. Old Twisty Knickers was a horrible boss.’

‘Living the dream, young Kara. And you deserve it, you really do.’

Kara glanced through the cafe window and saw the *Happy Hart* car ferry heading across from Crowsbridge to the Hartmouth quay.

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‘Talking of things I love, I’d better take Dad and my Billy a coffee whilst they load on the cars,’ she said. ‘It’s cold work on that crossing this time of year.’

Frank placed four takeaway cups in front of her in a holder. ‘So, that’s you, your dad, your fella and Skye sorted. I think I’ve got the milk and sugars right.’

‘Brilliant, thanks.’ Kara paid and made her way to the door. Frank ran around the counter to hold it open for her.

‘Feck it!’ the big man said suddenly.

‘What’s up?’

‘There’s me going on about them mince pies and forgetting I needed to talk to you about something important.’

‘That’s OK. Let me quickly message Skye and ask her to open the shop up a bit earlier. She can take the order in then.’

While Kara did that, Frank served two new customers with coffee, then came to sit down opposite her in one of the American diner-style booths. Checking her phone, Kara was relieved to see a thumbs-up emoji from her apprentice.

‘It’s about my brother’s boy, Conor,’ Big Frank revealed. ‘To cut a long story short, he needs somewhere to stay for a little while and I wondered if he could rent your flat – the one above the flower shop, I mean. It is still empty, isn’t it?’

‘Is he in trouble?’ Kara asked instinctively, knowing full well what a colourful family Frank heralded from. In fact, Monique moving him down to the south-west of England had probably saved the big Irishman from a life of crime. Selling hooky booze in the guise of a ‘blackcurrant cordial’ or ‘special iced tea’ was his only vice these days.

Not even flinching at her comment, Frank replied, ‘He’s not now.’ Then he put his huge hand on top of Kara’s pale

freckly one and added, 'And you know I would never put you in a difficult position. He's a good lad, I promise you.'

Kara trusted Frank like family. 'The flat is empty, yes. I use it more as a stockroom and hadn't even thought about renting it out, to be honest. But why's he not staying at yours?' she asked.

'He's a youngster, like you – he'd be bored stiff living way up on the moor with me and Monique. Let me know how much you want, and I'll pay you three months upfront. Cash, of course.'

Kara thought about it. 'It's not very plush and I've only got a sofa up there at the moment, so we'll need to get a bed . . . and it needs a good clean throughout.'

Frank patted her arm. 'Just tell me what you need, little lady, and I'll get it sorted.'

'OK, if you're sure. Any idea when he wants it from?'

'Yesterday.' Frank grinned his lopsided grin. 'You know us Brady boys, we don't mess around.' He stood up. 'Come on, let me get you some fresh coffees. These will be cold.'

Kara took a sip of hers. 'They're still OK. Don't worry.'

'Grand, grand. Right, I've got to get everything ready for my end-of-summer-season party on the quay.'

'Will there be fireworks again?'

'Oh yes.'

'You're so good, doing that every year.'

'I'm not sure if I'll make it to the Pearly Gates though, as I do have an ulterior motive. True, it's a thank you to the locals for coming here throughout the summer, but it's also a PR ploy to remind everyone that I'm still here all winter long.'

'That's allowed and we'd all come anyway. Right, I really must go.'

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‘I’ll catch up with you later re. the logistics of the flat. And thanks a million, Kara.’



As Star drove to the end of Ferry Lane, she noticed Kara about to hotfoot it up the hill towards the market. Tooting loudly right behind her, she stopped and beckoned her friend over to her Smart car. ‘Get in,’ she called. ‘I’ll take you.’

‘You scared the life out of me,’ Kara told her, climbing in carefully so as not to spill the coffees she was holding. ‘What are you up to, tearing around this early, anyway?’

‘Skye didn’t come home last night. I know she’s officially a grown-up now, Kar, but I wish she’d had the decency to let me know where she was. I didn’t sleep a bloody wink.’

‘Oh, love. Well, she’s at the shop now. She’s just messaged me. Is this the first time she’s done this – stayed out all night, I mean?’

‘Yes, but—fuck!’ Star braked suddenly as a stray melon toppled from a box that Charlie Dillon was carrying and hurtled their way. It was only thanks to her quick reflexes that it avoided being crushed under her wheel.

Kara jolted forwards, causing hot coffee to spill out of the cups she was clutching and onto her jeans. ‘Bloody hell, mate. Be careful!’

‘Don’t you be having a go at me too.’ Star suppressed a sob as she pulled up outside the florist’s.

Oblivious to all this, Charlie Dillon bent to retrieve the runaway fruit and stuck it up his jumper, along with another one. ‘Don’t get many of these to the pound,’ he said in a falsetto voice, mincing around, and then catching

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sight of an old lady looking, he quickly put them back in the box.

‘Oh, Star, I’m so not having a go. I’ve got to do an early hotel drop, so how about we meet for lunch at Tasty Pasties, and you can tell me what’s really the matter. Say twelve thirty, all right?’

‘You know me so well.’ Star smiled weakly.

‘What is it they say? Sister from another mister, or something like that.’ Kara put one of the coffees in the car’s drinks’ holder and got out. ‘Get that in you,’ she said. ‘I’ve already had a sip and there’s sugar in it, but it’s wet and warm.’ Then waving goodbye, she turned and made her way through the glass-fronted door to her personal domain: the beautiful and sweet-smelling florist’s called Passion Flowers.

Chapter 2

Star yawned as she made her way inside STAR Crystals & Jewellery, the market unit she had rented and run in Ferry Lane Market for the past six years. Gagging at the sweetened coffee, she then cranked up the heating. She hated the winter, mainly because it reminded her of those freezing days living in the static home with her mother and a young baby. The memories of all three of them cuddling up together under a blanket were not quite as romantic as the version her mother had fondly recalled. Probably because Estelle Bligh had been warmed through with brandy or cannabis at the time, Star thought grimly. The experience had done one thing: made her determined that, as soon as she could afford a place of her own, she and her beloved only child Skye would never be cold again.

Oh, how hard she had worked to create her own little business and forge her way in the world. Steren Bligh had always been a grafter. As soon as she was old enough, she had put herself on the bus to work on Saturdays and after school at Sibley's, the newsagent in Penrigan that was owned by her great-aunt Florrie and her great-uncle Jim Sibley.

The childless churchgoers had always looked out for their pretty little fair-haired assistant. And when she became pregnant at just sixteen years old, despite their Christian beliefs – or perhaps because of them – they had not turned their

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backs on her; on the contrary, they had taken care of both her and the baby. The couple had kept Star's job open, and they'd also made sure that, when Estelle was working at her 'witchcraft' as they called it, and couldn't babysit, Skye was fed and cuddled in the flat upstairs. Their great kindness allowed Star to carry on working her regular shifts without having to find money for childcare.

Their generosity also meant that Star could save up her wages to buy beads, silk threads and fastenings. Then, staying up as late into the night as possible before her eyes shut without her permission, she would make bracelets and necklaces to sell on Penrigan Beach and along the pier on a Sunday to the many visiting holidaymakers. Putting Skye in a makeshift papoose and ably managing to dodge the council do-gooders, the young entrepreneur did excellent business, with her little white-haired bairn proving a valuable attraction. To the coos of 'what a gorgeous baby', her basket full of trinkets was soon empty, and her money belt was full.

This routine continued until she finished her exams and began helping out more in the newsagent. By then, Flo and Jim were allowing her to sell her handmade jewellery from a stand next to the magazine rack, and she also sold her wares at as many arts and craft fairs as she could fit in around her shifts.

Everything changed when her beloved great-uncle Jim dropped down dead the day before he and Florrie were due to retire. He was just seventy-five.

The Sibleys' retirement plan had been to close down their business but stay living in their modest flat above the newsagent and donate the space below for charitable and church causes. It wasn't until they had both passed away that their heirs – Star, Skye, the RSPB, and the local church – would

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receive their legacies. However, after Jim's untimely passing Star received her generous legacy in advance: the sum of £20,000, which Jim, with the full support of his wife, had left Star in his will.

When the lease of the much sought-after unit on Ferry Lane Market came up for sealed bids, Star's dream of a shop and a home of her own came to fruition far sooner than she could ever have imagined. With the money, she put down a deposit and six months' rent to start with, and was able to buy everything she needed to set up her business.

STAR Crystals & Jewellery was sandwiched between her best friend Kara's Passion Flowers florist shop and the Hartmouth Gallery run by Glanna Pascoe. The feisty stallholder not only exhibited the works of some quite well-known local artists but she also painted seascapes herself. And it was with inward delight that Glanna now acknowledged that the tourists who religiously came to Hartmouth for their holidays had started collecting her work, too.

Here in Ferry Lane Market, Star was completely content. She could get everything she needed from the shops and stalls. The rich variety of products made sure you could fill up your shopping bags here for a bargain price and have plenty of choice – as well as banter from the Dillon family's fruit and veg stall opposite at no extra cost.

Ferry Lane Market was like having the whole world in one small community, and she loved it with all her heart.

Star often thought that if it hadn't been for the passing of her dear great-uncle, three generations of Bligh females would still be living all on top of one another in the small park home up on Hartmouth Hill. When she had inherited the gift of money from a man she had looked up to and loved, and with the blessing of his dear wife, she felt that

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the universe had been listening to her dreams and that she really did have a guardian angel.

Turning on the display window lights against the gloomy autumn day, Star's phone beeped with a text. *My battery went last night, sorry, mum. At work, can't talk. C u later xx*

Star let out a deep breath of relief. If the world were powered by the angst teenagers caused their parents, there would be no need to worry about global warming ever again, that was for sure. As the heater at her feet began warming her up, she set about unpacking the new order of precious stones and crystals, which she would use to make jewellery for her sparkly new winter and Christmas gift collection.