

A CORNISH  
CHRISTMAS  
AT THE FARMHOUSE  
BAKERY

Linn B. Halton



*An Aria Book*

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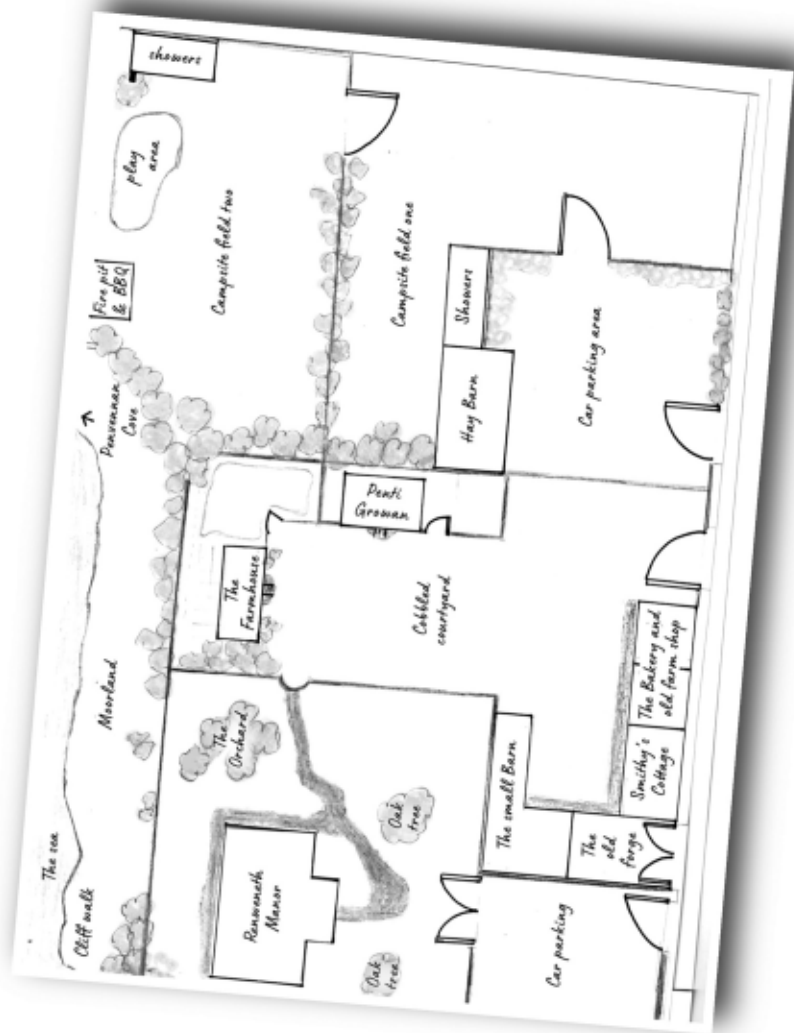


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To my dear friend Nicholas,  
whose take on life is truly inspirational.



# Renweneth Farm, Cornwall

## Prologue

Gabe Newman (Cappy)

Saturday, Twenty-Fourth September – Renweneth Farm’s End of Summer Celebration

‘Cappy, I had no idea Jess was going to...’  
‘Surprise us all by announcing that the two of you are a couple?’ I chuckle, noting the pallor on Riley’s face.

‘Well, yes... I... um... meant to have a word with you about it before—’

He’s a serious young man but if I was going to entrust anyone with my wonderful granddaughter’s – and great-granddaughter’s – future happiness, it would be Riley Warren. The poor chap looks a little shell-shocked but Jess obviously felt the timing tonight was right and I totally agree.

Celebrating how far Renweneth Farm has come since I handed over the running of it to Jess, is also a tribute to how hard Riley has worked as our resident builder. Following her divorce I feared she’d never find a man she would be willing to entrust her heart to again, and yet, against all the odds, I’ve been proven wrong. And my great-granddaughter, Lola, already regards Riley as a friend, which is a wonderful way to ease himself into her life on a permanent basis.

‘It’s obvious that neither of you were expecting this turn of events,’ I admit, placing a hand firmly on his shoulder to reassure him. ‘But I’ve seen the changes in you both and I couldn’t be happier. Now, take a deep breath and get back to the party. Renweneth Farm is in good hands with the two of you at the helm. I know you have a few problems still to iron out before

your new life falls into place, but together you'll get there. Of that I have no doubt at all.' And with that, I thrust out my hand to him; his handshake is firm and unwavering.

For me it's a blessing, but also the end of an era as I doubt Jess will be needing my input once Riley is living here. What am I going to do with myself now? I wonder.

OCTOBER





# IVY

Stroud, Gloucestershire



## It Never Rains but it Pours!

‘Morning, Jess. What a way to kick off October. This is the greyest, murkiest start we’ve had to a Saturday in Stroud for a while. There’s a threateningly dark band of clouds gathering on the horizon that doesn’t bode well. Rain would just about cap it off,’ I say with a sigh. ‘Our customers will be wanting to scurry back home, not stop for coffee and cake. What’s it like looking out over the beautiful Cornish coastline?’

‘It’s a little breezy here, Ivy, but the sky is blue, and the sun is out.’

I make a little moan. ‘Oh... rub it in, why don’t you?’ I laugh. But it is good to hear my best friend’s voice.

‘The sea will be freezing, of course,’ she concedes, ‘but it looks so inviting as I gaze out the bedroom window. I’ve literally just grabbed my phone and was about to give you a call. I’m not long back from dropping Lola off at her friend Daisy’s house. Erica has been rushed off her feet this week and I’ve been doing the school runs, so she’s repaying the favour.’

In the sixteen months since my childhood friend, and her daughter Lola, left Gloucestershire to take over her granddad Cappy’s farm, Jess and Erica have become firm friends. I have a lot of admiration for Daisy’s mum Erica; she’s trying to set up a small business from home on a shoestring budget.

‘Oh... how I wish I was there with you. Give Erica my best regards, won’t you,’ I ask.

'I will. It's hard to believe that this time last week you and Adam were here in the garden of Renweneth Manor joining in with the celebrations for our first end-of-summer party,' Jess remarks, wistfully.

'We had an amazing time! And announcing that you and Riley are planning a future together put a big smile on a lot of faces,' I exclaim.

'I think it raised a few eyebrows, too.'

That included my husband, Adam. Even I only recently discovered that what began as a simple friendship, formed by working together as employer and employee, had secretly turned into quite a passionate affair. It's always the quiet ones who surprise you the most, I smile to myself. 'Lola was jumping around, she was so excited and the way Cappy embraced Riley, made me a little tearful.'

'It's true to say that a lot has happened in a short space of time but I've never been more sure of anything, Ivy. Ironically, it's Riley who is still adjusting to being treated like one of the family and not just the hired help. I don't think that will change until he's sorted out the problems with his ex and decided what to do with his beautiful cottage.'

'That's understandable, Jess.' Without realising it I let out a sigh. 'Life is seldom straightforward, is it?'

'You sound like you're flagging, Ivy. That's not like you.'

'I am a little.' My determination to stay upbeat didn't last long and now Jess is wondering what's up.

'Vyvyan was under the impression you were due to sign your new lease a few days ago.'

'Me, too,' I admit. Vyvyan is Jess's marketing manager at Renweneth Farm. Jess has already refurbished The Farmhouse and completed phase one in repurposing a series of old stone cottages set around a cobbled courtyard. She also runs an extensive campsite. Being set in the middle of moorland, and a stone's throw from the sea, it's the perfect place to reconnect with nature. Vyvyan has been helping me with my lease renewal

negotiations on the shop I rent, as her career began in property management.

‘Fingers crossed my landlord, Mr Williams, will be dropping the papers in today for me to sign. When I opened up this morning there was a trail of muddy footprints from the hallway to the back door. Which means he was obviously in last night and has finally cleared out the two rooms on the first floor that he’s been using as storage space. I’ve just finished mopping the floor and I’m seething. I left it spotless when I locked up yesterday. Still, it’s a positive sign and a bit of a relief although I’d have felt even better to see an A4 envelope waiting for me to open as he promised.’

‘He caved in and is going to rent you the whole building, then? You’ll be able to double the number of tables, which is wonderful news, Ivy!’

It is, but my nerves are now beginning to get the better of me. Mr Williams is a difficult man when it comes to communication. We’ve always received post here for him and once a week his assistant calls in to collect what is often quite a little pile. The man himself is notoriously hard to contact. His phone always goes straight to voicemail, and he seldom replies if you leave a message.

‘I can’t relax until I’ve signed on the dotted line, Jess. Honestly, that man is so disorganised and my patience is wearing thin.’

‘At least things are moving in the right direction, Ivy,’ Jess points out. ‘Although it’s cutting it fine, which isn’t fair on you. Doesn’t the old lease run out at the end of the month?’

‘Yes. To be honest, if he hadn’t agreed to letting me have the first-floor space too, I would have been forced to look elsewhere. As you know, it’s a prime spot but it’s a small building wedged between two bigger retail outlets. While The Cake and Coffee Emporium is making a profit, I desperately need to expand the business, or Adam and I will never be able to afford to buy our own home. When the weather is good, having the tables outside can double my daily take, but when the weather is inclement, some days I’m only just covering the bills.’

‘That was going to be my next question. How’s Adam doing?’

A wave of sadness hits me full-on as my mind begins to wander. I instantly picture Adam’s face as he leant in to kiss me goodbye this morning. He was trying so hard to appear upbeat as he headed out for the day.

‘Adam got a phone call late yesterday afternoon to say that the job he was due to start on Monday has been postponed. Money problems, apparently. Honestly, Jess, it’s totally out of order for someone to pull out at the last moment. Either the funds are in place or they’re not, and what’s the likelihood of an unexpected change of circumstances happening so close to the start date? It’s mean, that’s what it is. Adam had already purchased a lot of the materials he needed to make a start.’

‘Heck! It was a big job, too, wasn’t it? How did Adam take it?’

‘He put on a brave face but he’s out doing the rounds today, desperately trying to find some work for the next three weeks.’ I can’t help feeling both gutted and angry on his behalf.

‘Oh, Ivy. I’m terribly sorry to hear that. It was the last thing you needed right now. Adam just can’t seem to catch a break, can he?’

I let out a soft groan. Jess thinks the world of Adam, and she knows this is yet another setback when he’s trying to go it alone. Having walked off a job when the building company he was contracted to decided they were only going to pay him for four days’ work, on a job that was already in its fifth day, I was proud of him. And rightly so. The company were doing the same thing to his mates, too, and someone had to make a stand. At least we don’t have children yet, and we’re not tied into a hefty mortgage, so I guess we’re lucky in that respect.

‘It doesn’t seem like it, Jess. Once I’ve signed the lease that’ll lift his spirits. I’ll get four, four-seater tables in each of the two new rooms and one of them looks out over the main thoroughfare. It’s going to make a huge difference to our income and, hopefully, will take the pressure off Adam for the time being.’

‘Adam said that starting out on his own again was going to be tough, but it’s been brutal, Ivy, hasn’t it?’

‘Yes. It reminded him why he got into contract work in the first place. But they’re always putting pressure on the guys to speed up and that means cutting corners. It’s wrong and we all know it. Often, it’s simply to boost their bottom line so both the customer and the contractors lose out, just in different ways, and yet the profit margin increases.’

Jess tuts. ‘I’ll keep my fingers crossed he finds some work to tide him over, quickly. And, Ivy, text me when you’re holding that lease in your hands, won’t you?’

I laugh, picturing myself doing just that and, if I’m lucky, within the next hour or so now that Mr Williams has officially vacated the property.

‘I will. I’m leant against the windowsill in the now-empty first-floor room at the front, waiting for the floor to dry but from the sound of it there’s a queue downstairs. That’ll teach me to work backwards from the door!’

Jess gives a little half-hearted laugh at my attempt to lighten the moment. ‘Don’t worry, Ivy, I think you’re due for some good luck, so let’s hope today is the start of it. Speak soon, my dear friend!’

Adam never works late on a Saturday, but it’s almost five o’clock when the sound of the front door opening makes me rush out into the hallway. I watch as Adam hangs up his jacket.

‘What’s up?’ He looks at me askance.

My frown relaxes a little, but not the tension in my neck and shoulders. ‘Your phone has been going straight to voicemail,’ I chide him.

‘Oh. I expect it’s out of charge. It’s been a rather depressing day chasing my tail and getting nowhere. Sorry, Ivy.’

Adam pulls me into his arms, and we stand there hugging each other, trying to shake off the troubles of the day. He places

his hand under my chin, tilting my head back a little so he can gaze down into my eyes.

‘You look weary, honey.’

Suddenly, I can feel the tears begin to well up and his look intensifies. ‘What’s wrong?’

I swallow hard, forcing myself to regain control. ‘Mr Williams has decided to sell the shop, rather than lease it.’

I didn’t think I had any tears left in me, but it seems I could be wrong about that. When I got the call late afternoon, I’d locked myself in the cloakroom at work and literally sobbed my heart out for about twenty minutes. Poor Rach didn’t know what was going on. Tears won’t solve my problems though, and I promised myself I wouldn’t add to Adam’s worries.

He looks understandably shaken for a moment, then I can see his mind frantically ticking over. ‘I know that’s not what we planned, Ivy, but if we use our nest egg... with your increased earnings maybe we can—’

‘Not to me.’

He shakes his head, looking confused. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Mr Williams already has a buyer. His assistant called to inform me that contracts were exchanged yesterday and I need to vacate the premises at the end of October.’

‘What?’ The word erupts from Adam’s mouth like a pistol shot.

I grab his hand, leading him into the kitchen.

‘Come on, the kettle is boiled. I’ve been well and truly played, Adam. Mr Williams cleared his stuff out last night because he’s too cowardly to face me.’

‘Can he back out of your negotiations just like that?’

Adam slumps down onto a chair, undoing the laces on his work boots as I shovel coffee granules into two mugs. I so wanted to be able to give him some good news and I don’t have the heart to turn around to see his expression. Keeping my back to him, I continue talking.

‘Negotiations are just that and it’s not a done deal until both parties have signed on the dotted line. If he was renting it to



someone else maybe I could have... I don't know... offered to up the rent. In all honesty, he's been utterly useless from day one. He didn't want to tell me until he had the deposit in his account; I was the backup plan if anything went wrong. It's immoral but not illegal. However, I feel like a complete and utter fool.'

Our eyes meet as I carry the coffee mugs over to join Adam at the table.

'It should be you sitting here, Ivy, and me making that for you,' he mutters, softly. 'I'm sorry about my phone, I really mean it. It was selfish of me. My charging lead wasn't in the pickup, but I knew it was a big day for you and I let my own problems block out everything else.'

'Hey, I understand. Everything happens for a reason. You know I truly believe that, but right now it's hard to see the *why* of it.'

Adam looks just as devastated as I feel. 'Me neither, Ivy. It's one knock-back after another. So what's the plan?'

'I spent over an hour this afternoon phoning around various rental agencies but there's nothing at all on the market in my price range in the centre of Stroud. My budget for the fitting-out costs just wouldn't stretch to a full-size retail unit. I did get a call-back about some available space in a garden centre, though. It's the other side of Stonehouse, so further to drive, but it's an interesting one because all that's required is a couple of days' notice to take up occupancy.'

'Hmm... that might be a bit of a red flag. Even so, it's worth taking a look at it.'

I shrug my shoulders. 'In truth, it's that or – come the last day of October – working from our impossibly tiny kitchen here to honour the hamper and party food orders I have booked in via the website.'

He puts his hand up to stop me. 'Hang on a second, you're not shutting the business down, are you?'

It's horrible to watch as Adam begins to realise what this means. Suddenly, my business is worth nothing.

‘Wherever I work from, if it’s not in the centre of town I’ve lost eighty per cent of my income overnight. It’s all gone, just like that!’ I click my fingers in the air. ‘I have no choice in the matter, Adam. What I desperately need is access to a commercial kitchen and quickly, to fulfil the click-and-collect orders already in the system for November. If I start letting customers down, there’ll be no point setting up somewhere new, even if I can find the right property at the right price.’

Adam raises his eyebrows, letting out a huge sigh. ‘Strewth, Ivy, no wonder you’re reeling. I’m having trouble taking this in.’

Sitting back in my chair, I lift the coffee mug to my lips and gaze at him over the top of it. That impossibly curly blond hair of his that he constantly sweeps away from his eyes always melts my heart. He is my gentle giant, my rock. Solid muscle from the hours he spends in the gym, but inside he’s a softie with a heart of gold.

I’m immediately transported back eighteen months to the day of our wedding. It was the lavish affair that our parents and, at the time, both Adam and I wanted. Now I wonder whether it was an extravagance for which we’re about to pay the price. Back then, our future was looking rosy.

‘Have you... do you have any plans for this coming Monday?’ I ask, hesitantly. If he’d had good news, Adam wouldn’t have greeted me wearing such a dispirited look.

‘No. A couple of my contacts said they’d keep my number handy in case they need any extra help, or someone lets them down, but it’s a waiting game. I’m all yours.’ The depth of his smile is enough to make my heart skip a beat. He’d do anything for me.

‘If you could step in for me at the café for a couple of hours after lunch, while I drive over to scope out the garden centre, that would be amazing. I’ll ring the agent first thing Monday morning to confirm the time of my appointment. I’m sure some of our customers will appreciate having a hunky builder serving them coffee and cake for a change,’ I quip – anything to brighten this dire conversation.

Adam grins back at me. 'Really?'

'You'd be surprised.' I wink at him. 'If it's dry, in between, do a little sweeping up outside while you're there. Who knows, you might entice a few first-timers through the door.' The moment I say that it hits me square in the gut that whatever I do between now and the end of the month is wasted, because after that the café is going to be turned into a shoe repair shop.

Increasingly this world we live in makes less and less sense to me. I don't deserve this any more than Adam deserves what he's been put through. All we've ever done is work hard and yet unscrupulous people like my landlord, and his former boss, trample over us for the sake of making an even bigger profit. Maybe we're just naïve and it's time to wise up.

'Ivy, it's only me. Sorry it's late... you aren't in bed, are you?'

'No, but not far from it, Jess.' I stifle a yawn. 'I did mean to text you but, uh... hang on a sec.' I pull the phone away from my ear to shout up to Adam. 'I'm just on a call, babe. I'll be up in a few minutes.'

'Okay,' his voice filters back to me. 'I'm going to read for a bit.'

I saunter out to the kitchen and shut the door behind me. 'Sorry, Jess. It's been a fraught day all round.'

'Oh no...'

'Yep. Mr Williams has sold the shop. The snake – he never even breathed a word of that to me and I'm fuming. I was obviously his backup option if the sale didn't go through. Unfortunately for me they exchanged contracts yesterday, which is why he cleared his things out overnight. His assistant made the call to inform me and I could tell he was really embarrassed about the way I've been treated.'

'What on earth will you do? Time isn't on your side,' Jess blurts out, sounding scandalised on my behalf.

'There's only one option on the table and it's a long shot. It's not even a shop, it's in a garden centre several miles away.'

It used to be a small in-house café, but they shut it down. The thing is, I have a stack of online click-and-collect party catering and bespoke hamper orders booked through until the end of November. I wish now I hadn't started the new initiative. All that advertising and effort wasted; come Monday, I'm going to have to turn people away. I can't cope with a delivery service but unless I have an outlet up and running, I can't even honour the bookings I have in the pipeline. As for The Cake and Coffee Emporium, without a town-centre location it's dead in the water.'

Jess's sharp intake of breath fills my heart with dread. She immediately understands the full impact of what I'm telling her.

'Assuming you can set up some sort of kitchen at this garden centre, there's bound to be some passing trade. Maybe you'll be able to continue to run the click-and-collect service via the website and kick-start the café at the same time?' Jess suggests, hopefully.

'Most of the leads came from the flyers I put in the café directing people to the website. It's too new; there's not enough traffic to begin with. I have a fitting-out budget I'd set aside for the two rooms I thought I was gaining at the old premises, and some capital expenditure earmarked for additional equipment for the kitchen, but online advertising is costly. My budget would probably be spent before I'm able to see enough of a return to pay the bills and keep out of debt. That's assuming I have a proper commercial kitchen to work from, of course. I have no idea what the set-up is like at the garden centre.'

'You can't give up on your dream, Ivy. There must be a way around it. Can you rent kitchen space from a bigger concern, or find some shared space until something else comes on the market?'

'There's no point in kidding myself, Jess. Every agent I've talked to has been straight with me. They all said that small units are few and far between and I should double my budget, which isn't an option.'

My mind hasn't switched off and I think I've considered every idea, no matter how crazy, and ended up back at the same place. 'The hard truth of it is that unless I can remain in the centre of Stroud, I no longer have a viable business. I'm going to check out the garden centre on Monday as a short-term solution and I have agents promising they'll call me the minute they take on a new rental. But there's no point if I can't afford it anyway.'

'Oh, Ivy...'

'Maybe I'm not meant to run a business, Jess. I should imagine it's a bit like having a baby – until you go through the process you have no idea what you're taking on. I'm not sure I want to do it again.'

'Don't say that. It wasn't your fault.'

'I believed what I wanted to believe, Jess, even though I knew I was dealing with a person I couldn't trust. It was probably more hopium than stupidity, but the fault was mine. Anyway, this will put a smile on your face. Adam is going to cover for me at the café on Monday. It will certainly make the day of my regular eleven o'clock ladies – the *coffee before lunch brigade*, they call themselves. They've doubled in numbers in the last year. Not one of them is a day under seventy-five and they're all darlings! It's funny that we get the widows, but not the widowers, for some reason.'

Jess gives a chuckle. 'Men don't really do coffee mornings, not when they're on their own – do they? How many lonely men would benefit from a bit of friendly banter, a cup of excellent coffee and a homemade slice of cake in good company?'

'If a miracle happens, I might try to tap into that market, Jess.'

'Hang out for *coffee, cake and conversation at eleven*,' she muses. 'It sounds like it has potential.'

My best buddy is still the only one who can cheer me up when I'm feeling down; even though she ended up escaping to Cornwall to nurse her broken heart. When you've been married for nine years and your other half suddenly discovers they're no longer in love with you, it's devastating. I've seen that first-hand,

with Jess. But my, she's certainly bounced back. Jess and her daughter, Lola, are now living a dream life. Even though that, like everything else, has its highs and lows their future looks bright.

'Actually, Ivy, I was calling to run something past you.'

'Sorry, I didn't mean to bombard you with my doom and gloom! How is everything going at your end?'

'Great. Riley is struggling a bit, as we begin the next phase of the renovation work. Until he's fixed the roof on the small barn, we're at a standstill and none of his contacts are available at short notice. I mentioned to him that Adam is looking for work, but I don't know how you'd feel about Riley reaching out to him?'

I wasn't expecting that. After her divorce from Ben, Jess arrived at the farm in need of a good builder. They came and went, as often happens until Mr Fix-It – Riley Warren – turned up. He, too, has a child from his previous relationship, so both he and Jess are taking it slowly. But if ever there was a perfect match, they embody it. He lives on the other side of the moor, in what was formerly a derelict cottage that he renovated himself. They live apart for now, but together they're the force behind Renweneth Farm.

'That's so thoughtful of you, Jess. I mean, suddenly we've gone from two fairly consistent incomes, down to one, and whatever work Adam can get is a bonus.' As things stand, my income isn't going to continue for much longer and every penny counts.

Jess tuts to herself, sadly. 'Look, I know the thought of Adam working away from home isn't ideal, particularly when you're going through a traumatic time yourself. That's why I thought I'd sound you out first, Ivy. At a time like this you need to be together – I get that. But Adam wouldn't have to pay out for accommodation or meals and Riley would be very grateful, because I don't do heights. Insulation I can turn my hand to, but plasterboard is heavy and even though I call it the small barn, you've seen the size of it. It'll mean working Monday to Friday,

so Adam would be back with you for weekends. Just think about it and let me know either way. If I don't employ Adam, then it'll be a case of waiting until someone local can lend a hand, but he gets on so well with Riley, I had to ask.'

Ever so discreetly, Jess is trying to help me and Adam. Now that's what a true friend does and it's because of things like that, Jess will always be a second sister to me. On the other hand, my biological sister, Ursula, is a law unto herself and if we speak three times a year, that's a lot. She's the only divorcee I know who still has date nights with her ex-husband. Why, I have no idea, as he's sadly lacking when it comes to common sense, which means he causes a lot of his own problems and I made the mistake of telling her that. However, my gorgeous niece, Tillie, at eighteen months old is a real joy, and when she's with Mum I get to spend time with her. I'm conscious that my dear friend is waiting for my response.

'You're the best friend ever, Jess. I always knew that, of course. I think it might be nice if Riley approaches Adam direct. I'm sure that after one stint working at the café, Adam will be only too delighted to get hands-on, replacing that roof on the barn and hauling plasterboard around!'

'Stay positive, Ivy. You never know what's around the next corner. Just look at my situation. At one point I felt so lost that I didn't think I'd recover. Now I have Renweneth Farm and Riley. No one saw that coming, including me.'

'I know and I will. Promise. Enjoy the rest of your weekend, Jess, and thank you!'