

Come Yell or High Water

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Blurb

Stranded on the Isle of Yell, Cara Drayton dreads the thought of sharing a cottage with former soldier-cum-entrepreneur, Max Kempton. The Viking look-alike flicks switches she never knew she had, but he's an arrogant jerk who uses her friend, Fiona, for sex whenever he's between girlfriends. Max merits her grudging respect for his service in Afghanistan, but his judgmental comments about her brief marriage make Cara want to whack him with his prosthetic leg. How dare he accuse her of cheating on her ex? Her best option is to avoid all contact until the harbor reopens—so why does she ache for Max's touch every time he glances her way?

Max might have to put a leash on his libido when he's around Cara, but he'll be damned if he will allow his unwanted attraction to obscure the truth about her character. Since the night they met, the full-figured socialite has shown she's a vacuous snob who cares only about herself. And what's all that about him 'using Fiona like a sex toy'? The woman is deluded, and yet thinks nothing of insulting his integrity. And as for his war injury, Cara can swear she never said he deserved it, but should he believe her? It seems someone's been stirring their animosity, and as they're stranded on Yell, it's up to Max and Cara to unravel the truth for themselves.

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Chapter 1

Propelled by a gust of wind, Cara Drayton gritted her teeth and dragged her suitcase into Yell Island's harbor terminal. She was frozen, nauseous, and her legs didn't seem to understand she was on terra firma. The rusted ferry had slammed against the North Sea waves like a frolicking whale and she'd spent the crossing from Mainland Island bent over a basin, regretting her decision to spend Christmas away from home. 'Going rustic' seemed ridiculous when she and Steve could have escaped to her country manor in the highlands, but it was too late to turn back, and she should be grateful she'd arrived on Yell in one piece—minus the contents of her stomach.

The terminal was empty except for an elderly clerk in the brown uniform of the ferry staff. Behind him, a notice flashed in red electronic letters: *December, 23rd –all crossings between Mainland Island and Yell have been cancelled until further notice.* Cara rushed up to the clerk. "Please tell me that's a mistake. My friends are supposed to arrive on the five p.m. crossing."

He gazed at the heavy rain and tumultuous sea, and clucked sympathetically. "Unless your friends are selkies or mermaids, lass, they'll no' be arriving on Yell."

'Yell' was exactly what Cara wanted to do. Ironic, really. She'd often wished she could escape to a remote and deserted island, open her lungs and scream until she was hoarse and here she was, wish granted. Sort of. Yell was certainly remote—one of the Shetland Islands off the north coast of Scotland—but she wasn't alone. A population of circa nine hundred people divided themselves between the main village and various farms dotting the coastline.

And then there was *him*. Cara stared at the tall hunk of blond hair and solid muscles standing outside on the pier. Maxwell J. Kempton was the last man she wanted to be stranded with on a remote island, even for one night. Her best friend Fiona's on-off lover was arrogant, unfeeling, womanizing...and a bundle of other unsavory things, including impervious.

Wind and rain buffeted Max's muscular frame, but he continued talking into his mobile as if immune to the elements. Had they blown off part of his brain along with most of his leg in Afghanistan? Guilt flitted through Cara at the uncharitable thought, and she dragged her gaze away.

The clerk stretched out his hand. "Angus Elliot, at your service, Miss, and you must be the tourists come from Inverness. Graham Dudley told me you'd be asking for the keys to his cottage. Sea View, am I right?"

Cara smiled bleakly.

"Now, Jane Dudley normally cleans Graham's rental properties for him, on account he lives in Edinburgh, but she's still in hospital on Mainland—it's a hernia this time, poor dear—and the place hasn't been seen to since the summer holiday season. Jane didn't have the heart to tell Graham before he rented Sea View to your party, but I hear you've come up early to get it ready for Christmas, aye?"

Unfortunately. "When do you think the ferries will start running again?"

"Cannae' say for sure." Angus took out a manila envelope from his desk and handed it to Cara. "Keys to the cottage and the 4X4 outside. It's best if you stock up at MacBryde's before you head west. The market closes at midday on Fridays and there's no shops where you and your husband are staying."

Cara followed his gaze to Max. "Oh, he isn't my—"

"Young couple like you will have an excellent Christmas on Yell," Angus continued. "We were once featured on the BBC, y'ken? Number nine on Britain's Best Unspoiled Island Retreats. Och, and there's me, forgetting the most important thing. That leaflet on the counter has a wee map of the island. That way you won't get lost if you join us for the Christmas Eve *ceilidh*. It's at The King's Arms, the only pub on the island. The publican is my nephew, Colin

Lochie. Tell him Angus sent you and he'll give you and your husband a free drink.”

“He’s not—”

“Or maybe you’d prefer to spend Christmas Eve alone. Sea View Cottage is the perfect place for a romantic...”

Cara allowed his words to wash over her. What was the point of explaining? On an island seventeen miles long and six wide, it was unlikely she’d bump into anybody who cared what the “Drayton Heiress” did, or with whom. Besides, engaging in tabloid-worthy antics with Max would be laughable unless they wanted pictures of her murdering someone.

When Fiona mentioned a new love interest, and that she’d booked the cottage on Yell for a double-dating Christmas holiday, Cara had happily paid her portion. Then she’d found out that Max was Fiona’s weekend fling and had tried to cancel but it was too late. Eventually, Steve had convinced her it would be fun despite her and Max’s mutual antipathy. As a busy lawyer in training at Fiona’s firm, he’d been looking forward to a few days away *and* he wanted to keep his boss happy.

But what about her? Could she cope with seeing Max for three entire days? She’d always considered herself a polite, cultured woman. Constantly in the public eye due to her parents’ high-profile lives, she’d learned at an early age to present a smooth, neutral façade. Effortlessly, usually, but for some reason that ability faded after only a few minutes in Max’s company. Staying civil would take all the social skills she possessed.

Four years ago Max had broken Fiona’s heart when he’d told her he loved her, then he’d had sex with her and promptly dumped her. Worse, he seemed to think what he’d done was acceptable behavior and had asked her out again a few months later. Against Cara’s advice, her besotted friend had forgiven him, and since then the pattern had repeated itself. Every six months or so she’d get a tearful phone call from Fiona and spend hours listening to her ramble on about the beautiful woman Max had dumped her to pursue. Or, she’d be somehow cajoled into offering moral support when Fiona needed it. Like now.

Groaning internally, Cara studied the map Angus had given her. Why had she come up to Yell with Max to get the cottage ready? She shouldn’t have reacted to Fiona’s comment that he thought her too much the spoiled princess to help clean out anything other than her father’s bank account. Pique had spurred her decision to change her flight and now here she was, stuck with a man she abhorred.

Cara stared at Max’s wide back and frowned, trying to understand Fiona’s fixation. Sure, he was successful—a twenty-eight year old former army officer turned entrepreneur with a growing international business. Nothing to sneer at by any means, and he wasn’t bad on the eyes either. A tall, blond, and muscular predator with piercing blue eyes a woman wouldn’t know she was drowning in until it was too late. Cara had almost succumbed to his magnetic pull the first time she’d seen him, at Fiona’s twenty-third birthday party four years before. The celebration had been in full swing when Max arrived with Fiona’s older brother, Dave.

“He’s the guy I told you about, the one who’s going to deploy with Dave,” Fiona had whispered, a blush on her happy face. “I think he is ‘the one.’” She’d rushed forward and kissed the newcomer on the cheek—one of the most heart-sinking moments in Cara’s twenty-two years of life.

No, her mind reminded her, that had been when Max had returned Fiona’s kiss and his gaze had crossed with hers. Excruciating, to tear her eyes away from a sea that seemed deeper than any she’d ever sailed.

Anger, though, had quickly replaced her fascination. How could Max have continued staring at her as if he wanted to sweep her away and not care that Fiona clung on his arm, obviously in love? Cara had tried to avoid meeting him, moving around the crowded flat according to where they were standing. Her luck had eventually run out at the drinks table when she’d been talking to Dave, and Fiona had brought him over. For the first time in her life

Cara had envied her friend's slender frame, auburn hair and sparkling green eyes, and felt ashamed of her jealousy.

Fiona had introduced her as 'the Drayton Heiress' and made a fuss about her father's international shipping empire and her latest charity ball appearance. God, she'd hated that, but worse had been the icy expression on Max's previously appreciative face. Confusing, but then he'd clasped her hand in a firm, warm grip that had sent her pulse shooting to the sky. Tongue-tied and dismayed at her physical reaction, Cara had yanked her hand away, at which point he'd visibly stiffened and excused himself. Their relationship, if she could call it that, had gone downhill from there. In the days that followed, she'd had to listen to Fiona enthuse about their dates and how good Max was in bed.

Her salacious comments had made Cara want to slap her dearest friend, just as she did now, at the thought of them in bed together on Yell. Crazy, or what? *Disloyal*, her mind answered, and she felt ashamed of her momentary jealousy. Tiny, maybe, but how could she feel even a sliver of attraction to Fiona's off-limits lover? And if that weren't deterrent enough, the man was an arse-wipe.

As if her thought had carried on the wind, Max jerked his head up. Damn it, she hated getting caught looking his way, even if he probably couldn't see her face. Max pocketed his mobile and walked to the terminal. Only his slightly uneven gait hinted of the prosthetic limb attached to his left thigh—the result of a mine that had detonated near his leg. An involuntary shiver travelled down Cara's body as she watched him advance. But for his modern clothing he could easily pass for a Viking arrived on Yell to plunder and raid.

Raid *her*? The disturbing thought refused to be dislodged, as did the image of Max, naked and rising over her, thrusting into her as she moaned and writhed in pleasure. Heat rushed to Cara's face and tightened her nipples, then sped to her pussy. What the hell? The North Sea swell must have rolled away her brain and left only the tingling organ between her thighs. She was not going to lust after Max, not when he belonged to Fiona and not when she despised him. Not when the only man she should want to have sex with was Steve—if they ever managed to take that step.

Max strode into the terminal and with a flick of his eyes he perused Cara's wet and shivering body. Did he have to frown at her like that? No, she wasn't wearing hiking boots and winter gear, but what was wrong with her black wrap dress, high-heeled leather boots and designer coat?

Angus intercepted him and both men looked her way, only one of them smiling. Maybe Max objected to full-bodied women. Fiona had once told Cara that Max thought she should lose weight if she wanted to keep a man in bed. As if she were desperate for sex or needed his advice! If he preferred nymph-like models that was fine. Absolutely none of her business. She had no gripe with slender women and didn't feel threatened by their perfect proportions. Not much, anyway, but she'd be damned if she'd feel bad about her large bust and hips. Well, maybe her hips. They were as wide as the English Channel, but she didn't think they merited such a disgusted look. Cara glared at Max, and his frown deepened as he approached.

"I managed to get through to Fiona, but she and Steve are no' flying to Shetland tonight. They're stuck in Inverness." His soft Scottish brogue seemed more pronounced than usual, the only evidence the news wasn't to his liking. "The blizzard forecasters claimed would bypass Northern Scotland is scheduled to hit in the next few hours and all flights have been grounded. It's possible they'll re-open the airports tomorrow, but we can't be sure."

"You have got to be kidding me," Cara said, not bothering to disguise her dismay. "What if they can't fly out at all?"

Overhearing, Angus winked at Cara. "More alone time for the two of you."

"I can't wait."

Max sent Cara a sharp look but didn't comment. He asked Angus a few questions about

the island forecast over Christmas and hearing his answer, Cara grew hopeful the blizzard wouldn't hit them. Angus liked to talk, all right. He followed up with a long monologue about Yell, interlaced with directions to the village. Blah, blah, and don't forget to seal-watch on the way to MacBryde's Market. Oh, and once they hit the coastal road to Sea View Cottage they should watch for sperm whales. Cara sighed and looked at the sea, wishing one of them would appear and give her a ride back to Inverness.

Max grabbed her suitcase handle and his weekend holdall. "Thank you, Angus," he said, and walked to the door without waiting to see if Cara followed.

"Make sure to come to our Christmas Eve *ceilidh* tomorrow night," Angus reminded them cheerfully.

Cara dashed into the rain after Max, stopping abruptly when she saw their hire car. No wonder Fiona had said it was cheap! The mud-splattered 4X4 looked as though it doubled as a farm vehicle. She went to the passenger door, then changed her mind and sat in the driver's seat while Max loaded their bags into the boot. Inside, the cabin stank of wet sheep and animal feed, but at least the heater worked and it was dry. Max walked to the driver's door. Couldn't he see she'd laid claim to the steering wheel? Irritably, Cara raised her brows and lowered the window so she could hear him.

"Angus said the road might be icy."

Translation: *I don't trust you to drive.* "I can handle it, thanks."

But could she handle the rest of the day in his company? It was almost lunch time and they had to find somewhere to eat, then shop for food, drive across the island and clean the cottage. And at night...Cara sighed, thinking of the evening ahead. Trying to make nice with Max instead of making naughty with Steve was not how she'd envisaged her first night in Yell. Sex was what she'd wanted, and plenty of it. What about her taciturn passenger? Was he also thinking of his lonely bed tonight? A sideways glance before she pulled onto the road showed he'd pushed back his seat, stretched out his long legs and shut his eyes. Rude, to ignore her, but she should expect no less from a man of his ilk.

Max rubbed his left thigh, and a fleeting grimace passed over his face. Oh, maybe his leg hurt. She'd heard that people who lose limbs often felt as though they were still attached, that they could feel their arm or leg moving normally, or throbbing. Phantom pains, they called it. Was Max the same?

Or maybe it hurt where the prosthetic limb attached to his thigh. Must be difficult to live with a large piece of plastic and metal attached to one's body all day, and maybe the cold weather affected Max more than others. Not that he'd say so, she concluded, even if he was dying of pain. By Fiona's accounts Max was the silent and stoic type—a waste of time in her opinion. Why suffer if you don't have to? She agreed with Steve when he said Max sounded too proud for his own good.

Cara's spirits lifted at the thought of her handsome new boyfriend. When Fiona had invited her to an office party in September and introduced them, the attraction had been instant. Black hair, brown eyes and tanned skin—what wasn't to like?

Their first date had turned into a second, then a third, and over the past three months they'd seen each other with increasing frequency. Steve was smart and funny, and he reminded her what it felt like to be carefree. To laugh. Of course, his athletic body promised to remind her what it felt like to have good, raunchy sex, also. And she was ready, Cara told herself firmly, ready to let go of past demons and live again. Her brief, disastrous marriage to a gold-digging bastard had left its scars, but Steve was nothing like Brian.

You sure about that? her mind inquired. Insecurity and self-doubt niggled at Cara, but she didn't want to listen to their voices. Steve wasn't a gold digger. He wanted to succeed on his own and would never use her to achieve his goals, never hurt her like Brian had.

Wouldn't he? Insidious doubts refused to be dislodged during the coastal drive to the

village. Sheep dotted the hills on one side of the road, and on the other miles of bleak, empty beaches threatened to draw her into the past. She gritted her teeth and resisted the pull. What had happened in her marriage was over. Finished. She was on Yell for Christmas, awaiting Steve and the beginning of the rest of her life. Once they reached the village she'd check her mobile phone for coverage and try to talk to him.

Fifteen minutes later, a small cluster of grey stone buildings came into site and Max straightened in his seat. "Yell Village, presumably."

Cara cleared her throat. "Maybe I should look for a B&B to stay in tonight."

"I knew it."

"Excuse me?"

"When I saw you at the airport and you said you were coming up to clean the cottage with me I was sure you'd bail out at the very first hurdle."

Cara took a deep breath. "Look, Kempton, much as you'd like me to melt away, I'm not going to. I just think that if I drive back after we're finished and stay at a B&B tonight it might be easier."

"On who?"

"Both of us, of course. You and I don't get along. We never have."

"Like I said, the first hurdle."

Cara gritted her teeth. "I'm cleaning the cottage with you."

"Are you sure you won't break a nail?"

Be polite, as you would be to an annoying paparazzo. "I'm quite happy to do my part."

"Dressed like that?"

"What's wrong with my clothes?"

"You look like you're off to high tea at the Ritz."

"No, I don't. Okay, maybe I do, but let's be clear—we're all in this together. I feel responsible for ensuring everything is perfect, so I came with you. My office closed for the holidays yesterday and I thought I'd help."

"Your office." Max hadn't said it like a question, but nevertheless Cara caught the undertone of doubt.

"As in the place where I work."

"You have a job?"

Unbelievable. "Don't pretend you didn't know I'm a Business Development Manager, Monday to Friday."

"I didn't."

"What do you think I do every day?"

"Beauty salon, nails, shopping...whatever women like you enjoy filling their time with."

Women like her? Rich and flighty heiresses, presumably. "I didn't attend university so I could sit on my arse at home," Cara said flatly. "I work hard and I don't object to any task that needs doing, no matter how unpleasant."

"Like spending a day with me?" he said tightly.

"You don't really want me to answer that, do you?"

"Am I that despicable?"

Finally, the chance to tell Max exactly what she thought of him. "Despicable, disgusting, degenerate...all of those and more."

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I don't like being insulted for no reason."

"And I don't like the way you treat Fiona."

Max's body stiffened and he swiveled in his seat. The 4X4's cabin was large, but he seemed to loom over her. "And how is that exactly?"