

Freya's GOLD

FIONA LONGMUIR



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*For Niall,
who holds up the world
so I can create new ones.*





One

In summer the Bright and Breezy B&B lived up to its name. The rocky beach out front glistened with tiny pools, falling gradually away to the golden curve of the sandy beach on the other side of Edge. The horizon was bookended by the glint of the lighthouse on one side and the craggy black face of the cliffs on the other. With only the wooden planks of the old boardwalk between its front door and the beach, the B&B offered views of the sparkling sea from almost every room. More importantly it also offered the best cooked breakfast in town.

In summer the B&B buzzed with families and holidaymakers, who travelled from the city to stretch out on the warm sand and breathe the fresh sea air. It became a living, breathing thing, crammed with battered suitcases and sandy babies and sunburnt noses.

Freya liked living in the B&B with her Granny Kate in summer, liked sweeping floors and washing dishes to earn a bit of pocket money. Most of all she liked the travellers who came to the B&B with stories of far-off places and grand adventures. At twelve she had never been further than the neighbouring city. Even when her parents were alive, they'd lived only a few streets away. Visitors would smile warmly at her and tell her how lucky she was to live in such a beautiful place, what a picturesque life she must lead.

“Yes,” she'd tell them, silently adding *in summer*.

Freya loved Edge in summer, but it always felt like a trick. It was like a little kid in its Sunday best, sitting up straight and smiling angelically at the grown-ups. As the days started to shorten and the holidaymakers drifted back to the city, Freya

knew a whole other Edge was on the way. The breeziness of the B&B turned frigid. The wind flew down narrow streets, rattling shutters and tweaking mischievously at noses and scarves. It whipped the sea into frenzied foam, coating the town in freezing sticky salt. Clouds sat heavy in the sky and some days it felt like the sun didn't bother to rise at all. No one came to Edge in the off season.

The transformation always set Freya on edge. It felt like proof that even the loveliest things were hiding something dark and secret. Edge turned eerie and strange, full of looming silences and shadowy corners. And Freya's imagination always seemed to fill those corners with something terrible. She wondered what the smiling tourists would make of Edge in February.

She shivered despite the fire roaring in the grate beside her. She was perched at the reception desk of the B&B because it was the warmest place in the building. The sleety rain that had soaked her on the way home from school battered against the windows. Her coat was slung over the chair in front

of the fire, steaming as it dried. She curled her toes further into the fluffy belly of Sir Lancelot, the B&B's enormous orange cat.

She swiped at her foggy glasses and tried to focus on the pile of maths homework in front of her. But her attention was snagged by the ticking of the clock on the desk. She'd been thinking about building an alarm clock but wasn't sure how to go about it. She snuck a look behind her to check that Granny Kate was nowhere to be seen, picked up the clock and popped off the back. The inside of the clock was alive with whirring cogs and wheels. Warmth spread through Freya all the way to her fingertips. It never failed to amaze her that something as simple as a clock could contain this whole world of moving parts. She sat very still, watching the pieces turn. She was so absorbed that she almost toppled clean off her chair when the door to the B&B was flung open.

A tall dark shape filled the door, and Freya's brain instinctively yelled, *Monster!* In February that seemed about as likely as a person arriving. But as the figure stepped through the door and pulled it closed behind

them, Freya saw that it *was* a person. A woman. She was tall and was wearing a long green coat that swished behind her as she moved. The hem was dark where it had dragged along the wet ground. The woman moved like a dancer, seemingly unbothered by the huge suitcase in her hand or the fact that she was soaked to the skin. She glided towards Freya, baring a mouthful of even white teeth as she approached the desk. The cold was coming off her in waves and goosebumps raced across Freya's skin. Sir Lancelot wriggled out from under Freya's feet and hopped up on to the desk to hiss at the stranger. Freya pushed him out of the way with difficulty.

She almost asked "Are you lost?" but in the end settled for "Can I help you?".

"Goodness me," said the woman. "Receptionists are getting younger every day."

Freya placed a polite smile on her face. Why did grown-ups think that joke was funny?

"My Granny Kate runs the place," she said. "I'm Freya."

"Freya! What a beautiful name."

“I guess.”

She reached for the bell. The woman gestured at the pile of maths books on the desk. “That looks dreadful.”

Freya shrugged. “I like maths.”

“Oh. Then lucky you.”

An awkward silence fell. Freya pressed the bell. From the next room there was the distinct sound of someone heaving themselves out of an armchair.

“Freya, if I have to tell you one more time about playing with that bell –”

Granny Kate stopped as she spotted the woman in front of the desk. Judging by the fact that her hair was pinned in pink rollers, she hadn't been expecting anyone either. She pursed her lips and visibly decided to style it out. She drew herself up to her full height, which was still absolutely tiny. “Can I help you, dear?”

“I was wondering if it would be possible to check in.”

Freya's head jerked up. “Here?”

The woman laughed, the sound like a teaspoon tinkling in a cup. “Do people often arrive looking to

check in elsewhere?”

“Oh. No. They don’t often arrive looking to check in in February at all.”

Granny Kate stepped pointedly in front of Freya. “What my granddaughter means to say is that you’re very welcome. I’m Kate Lawson and I run the B&B. And you’ve met Freya already. Can I take your name, please?”

“Vivien Oleander.”

Granny Kate pulled out the visitor book and started to take down Ms Oleander’s details. Freya took the opportunity to study her more closely. She was elegantly dressed despite the wild weather. Her hair was gathered and pinned on one side with an enamel clasp, spilling over her shoulder. Neat square fingernails drummed gently on the desk. She didn’t look much like their usual visitors.

Freya glanced at Ms Oleander’s name in the visitor book, the only one on the page. She was their first visitor of the year, and the first for quite some time before that. Freya knew that Granny Kate worried during the winter, when bills were high and there

were no guests.

She supposed she should make an effort. “Are you on your holidays then?”

The woman’s smile stretched further. “Something like that.”

“Something like that?”

“Freya, hush,” said Granny Kate. “And how long are you planning to stay with us, Ms Oleander?”

“Two weeks at least.”

Freya frowned. “You don’t know how long you’re on your holidays for?”

“Freya,” said Granny Kate, and there was an edge in her voice now, “would you throw another log on? The fire is looking a little low.”

It wasn’t, and Freya opened her mouth to say so, but Granny Kate fixed her with a death stare. She sighed as loudly as she dared, which wasn’t very loudly, and slid round the desk. She watched as the woman slipped a bundle of crisp notes out of her purse and handed them across the desk to Granny Kate.

Granny Kate counted them briskly and wrote out

a receipt for two weeks' stay. "Breakfast is served in the room to your right. You're our only guest at the moment, so if you let me know what time you want it, I can have it ready for you."

"I'm an early riser."

Freya shuddered. *A morning person.*

Granny Kate gave a curt approving nod. "Very good. Eight?"

"Perfect."

"Any allergies?"

"Just penicillin."

"Don't worry, that doesn't feature on our menu," said Granny Kate, returning the visitor book to its drawer.

Ms Oleander's eyes swept the reception as Granny Kate disappeared behind the desk. She almost looked hungry as she took it all in. Maybe she was thinking about breakfast. But somehow Freya didn't think so. Something about those bright hungry eyes made the skin on Freya's neck start to creep. Freya's imagination began to colour Ms Oleander as a monster again, ready to swallow the B&B whole the second Freya

turned away. Freya pressed her back against the wall, keeping her eyes fixed on Ms Oleander. She pictured Ms Oleander as a jewelled green dragon, and saw herself with a sword in her hand valiantly protecting her home.

“And you’ll have your pick of the rooms, of course,” said Granny Kate.

“Room Three has the best view!” Freya chirped.

The death stare returned. “All the rooms have the same view,” said Granny Kate.

Freya wracked her brain. What did grown-ups care about? “And the best ... shower?”

“Freya! Stop badgering Ms Oleander!”

Ms Oleander shook her head. “That’s quite all right. Room Three sounds perfect, thank you.”

Granny Kate plucked the key from the board behind her and tossed it to Freya.

“Why don’t you hang up that wet coat and come through to the breakfast room for a cup of tea? I’ve got a fire going in there already, so it’s nice and warm. Freya can take your case to your room.”

Ms Oleander’s knuckles tightened on the handle of

her case but she turned and set it down in front of Freya. “That’s so kind, thank you.”

Freya picked it up, trying not to wince at the weight. She hefted it against one hip and bumped her way through the doors on the far side of the reception. It was slow going. The case was excruciatingly heavy and the stairs were narrow and twisting. At one point Freya found herself wedged between the suitcase and the wall and had to give it a good kick to get it moving again. She hoped Ms Oleander didn’t notice. She almost regretted not suggesting a room on the ground floor.

After what felt like an eternity she shoved her way through the door of Room Three. She dropped the case with a thud and leaned against the door, breathing heavily. Sweat cooled on her skin, making her shiver. She eyed the suitcase. It was one of those big old-fashioned ones. Brown leather with two enormous buckles and a large combination lock. There was a luggage tag attached to the handle but it didn’t say anything.

She poked the case with her toe. Maybe she could

just have a quick peek inside. She could always say she was trying to be helpful and get Ms Oleander unpacked. She thought of the way Ms Oleander's hand had tightened on the handle. Maybe not. Besides, she wasn't nosy. Not really. She shoved the case over by the bed and turned back towards the door. She glanced down at the vent in the wall. The one that fed through to her room on the floor below. Total coincidence, of course. She'd completely forgotten it was there.