



**POLES APART**  
**ANNA AND JACQUI BURNS**

*To Harry Edward Conway,  
who encapsulates all our hopes for the future.*

## **Pole Dancing Fitness Classes!**

With Feather Starr

*Find your inner goddess*

A chance to lose the pounds, firm up those problem areas  
and spice up your sex life!

Only fierce, fearless and feisty women allowed

Morlan Village Hall  
Thursdays 7.30–8.30 p.m.  
Starting 10th April

*Leave your inhibitions at the door . . .*

# Chapter One

Gwen

Gwen puts her foot down, taking her chances on the treacherous bends in the steep cliff road. Her white Audi A5 convertible is totally impractical on these bloody village roads. She's lost count of the times she's clipped her wing mirrors on some overgrown hedgerow. When Gareth told her to choose a new car for her fiftieth birthday, vanity got the better of her. She saw herself driving to St Davids, the roof down, and the salty sea air ruffling her hair. The gasps of envy she would draw from the residents of Morlan Village. Truth is, Pembrokeshire weather is erratic at the best of times and in the last six months, she's only had the top down once and her hair ended up like a particularly unkempt Bearded Collie.

Up ahead, Gwen can see a tractor trundling up the hill, Gwion Morgan at the wheel with his ruddy cheeks and flat cap. He is turning into the lower field and, if she's lucky, she'll miss the back of his tractor by a whisker. The post office is closing in ten minutes and Lydia has a pile of her trashy clothes to send back. With the Easter Bank holiday weekend looming, Gwen is determined to get these sent off. As if she doesn't have enough to do. She feels like Lydia's personal assistant sometimes rather than her mother. Never mind, this time next year Lydia will be in uni. God willing! She barely did any work for her GCSE or AS levels, pleading how

tough it was on her generation with Covid. Tough? Gwen thought back to Lydia lying in bed until midday and then joining her surfer friends mid-afternoon, her exams the very last thing on her mind.

Gwion draws into the field, blissfully unaware of how close he's avoided a collision. Gwen glances at the sea to her left, grey and sullen today. When she and Gareth first found the plot of land above the village of Morlan, they'd been enchanted, gasping every time they caught a glimpse of the coastline, marvelling at their good fortune. Now, she barely noticed. She supposes if you slept with George Clooney every night, you'd soon get used to him, those melty brown eyes having little effect on you after a while.

Gwen reverses into the small space next to Morlan's post office, reaches for the packages on the back seat. Feeling a twinge in her back, Gwen curses the fact the car is a two-door. The bell rings behind her as she enters the musty little shop.

'You've missed the last post, I'm afraid,' Hannah Thomas says with glee. 'They won't go until Tuesday now.'

'Oh, well,' Gwen smiles, 'at least they're out of the house.'

She's far too houseproud, of course. The price for owning the biggest and most ostentatious in Morlan. All the others, two hundred or so, are tiny little fishermen's cottages, clinging like lichen to the cliff. Some have been modernised, with appendages clad in that ubiquitous grey. Grey is everywhere these days, every wall in every new build, every show home in that estate in Haverfordwest she and Gareth had visited when they were looking to buy somewhere bigger in Pembrokeshire.

Gwen's house is not grey. It's a riot of colour, rich jewel-red walls, modern navy units in the kitchen, emerald green sofas and scatter cushions in shades of turmeric, terracotta and clashing pinks. It's Gwen's way of injecting a bit of colour into her life. She loves to survey her territory every morning and it is *her*

territory. This architect-designed house with windows reaching from the bottom to the very top, maximising the spectacular view. She'd had to have her Norwegian spruce Christmas tree specially delivered from John Lewis in Cardiff at an eye-watering price. She'd hidden the credit card bill from Gareth – he'd have had a coronary. Totally worth it when she sees people stopping whilst driving up over Morlan's hill to reach the main road to Fishguard. They often point to their house and Gwen feels a glow of pride just imagining their conversation. 'Wow! What an incredible house! Must have cost a fortune.'

Gwen's nose tingles. Burnt coffee. Hannah Thomas has tried to expand the post office and has a few rickety tables in a corner covered with wipeable floral tablecloths and stainless-steel Ikea pots in the middle. Fancies herself as a barista. She has slabs of Bara Brith, rich fruit cake, on the counter and some dry and floury Welsh cakes. Neither look particularly appetising. An elderly couple sip their coffees. Visitors for the day, by the looks of it, doing the Pembrokeshire Coastal Path. Their oversized rucksacks, stuffed, no doubt, with Swiss army knives, guy ropes and Marmite sandwiches, are propped against the post office counter. Morlan is Welsh for lagoon, and this is what draws the visitors, the shallow pool protected by a wall of rocks at the headland. Lydia and her friends are always swimming there. Lots of the teenage boys from the village enjoy a spot of 'tombstoning' further up. Gwen was horrified when she learnt what it meant. It puts her worries about Lydia vaping with her mates into perspective. The lagoon seems to have become the property of the teenagers of Morlan. Gwen had only swum there once about fourteen years ago when they'd first moved into the new house. It was freezing cold and Gwen remembered screaming when she stood on a piece of seaweed. Gareth laughed his head off. Now,

he barely raises a smile at anything Gwen does.

‘So, more packages to go back?’ Hannah says superfluously as she opens the side window when Gwen hands them over to her. Can she inject any more venom into that question? Gwen knows she thinks her children are spoilt.

‘Kids, you know what they’re like,’ Gwen sighs. She gazes absentmindedly at the posters on the wall as Hannah keys in some numbers very officiously. That old one about protecting your passwords. Another about travel insurance. She and Gareth had booked to go on that Caribbean cruise in the spring of 2020. Thank God they’d had their money back. That holiday cottage in Kendal last year was not the same. Jasmine, their eldest, had refused to come, wanting to spend time with her boyfriend and they’d taken Lydia and that awful friend of hers from school, Sophie, who laughs like an apoplectic donkey. It rained all week and she and Gareth had exhausted all conversation after the first day. They had so little in common these days. He could never switch off from the business.

‘Seen this?’ Hannah asks, pointing a finger at the poster nearest the counter.

‘Pole Dancing Fitness Classes,’ Gwen reads. ‘In Morlan? Feather Starr. That can’t be her real name. Come to a sleepy Welsh village to inject some life into it, is it? Trying to modernise us Neanderthals?’

‘It’s sparked quite a lot of interest. I said I’d keep a list of names for Miss Starr. She’s quite a character. There’s about half a dozen who’ve already signed up.’ Hannah tilts her head to one side. ‘Fancy it, then, Gwen?’

Gwen snorts, ‘As if!’ She conjures up a picture of Feather Starr, with her pink hair and nose piercings and an arse you could balance a tea tray on. ‘What about you, Hannah? Fancy thrusting your stuff around a pole?’

Hannah shakes her head. ‘I only had the hip replacement six months ago. Besides, it’s not my cup of tea. It’s more for your age group – fifties – those who need to shift a few pounds.’

Bitch! Gwen snatches the receipt from Hannah and heads outside, the door rattling behind her. She won’t let that woman and her catty remarks ruin her day. She inhales deeply and stops to gaze at the sea. She shouldn’t take it for granted. If her schoolfriends could see her, wouldn’t they just envy all she’s achieved? Make no mistake, Gareth wouldn’t have got half so far in the business without her. The third biggest car showroom in South Wales. She’s an ideas person; Gareth is more practical, lacking in imagination. He used to do up cars in their garage on the side of the house on the estate they lived in in Haverfordwest. The neighbours complained bitterly. The place looked like a scrapyard. But Gareth was good at fixing cars and doing them up. He made a tidy profit but it was small-time. It was Gwen who saw the potential in that warehouse outside town. It was she who persuaded the bank manager to loan them the money. She also did all the advertising and saw to the books. It was Gwen, too, who convinced Gareth to buy some electric vehicles, long before anyone else realised they were a ‘thing’. Now Gareth thinks he’s Elon Musk.

As Gwen heads up the hill, stopping every few yards as she passes another car coming down, she thinks about the pole dancing. Is it seedy? It is certainly a novel way to tone up. It will also piss off Lydia and Jasmine and that has to be worth something! Youngsters these days think they have the monopoly on sex, believing their parents dead from the waist down. To be honest, she and Gareth might as well be. It’s ages since they’ve had sex. God, it was at their neighbours Joe and Sasha’s wedding. She’d had a few too many Proseccos and it got her in the mood.



It was partly watching the happy couple on the dance floor and realising how they couldn't keep their hands off each other.

She and Gareth used to be like that. She does a quick mental calculation as she pulls in to let a motorhome pass. For God's sake, on these roads! Joe and Sasha's wedding was in September. That was seven months ago. Was it really that long?

Gwen slides the car onto the drive and rushes upstairs. Perhaps this pole dancing class is exactly what she and Gareth need. She wonders what the appropriate attire for a class like that is. Tracksuit bottoms and a T-shirt?

Her dressing room always gives her a thrill; it's her favourite room in the house. It has recently been redecorated, with navy and gold roses inspired by the Palace of Versailles. Eighty quid a roll at Laura Ashley. She searches through a drawer and finds a red leotard. She hasn't worn it for a few years. It was when Zumba was all the rage. Pausing, she wonders if it still fits. She can always wear leggings underneath. Peeling off her jumper and white jeans, she slips, or rather rolls and yanks, the leotard over her thighs. Jeez, she looks a mess. More sausage than sexy. Squidgy mounds of flesh have escaped at the top of her thighs, and she looks at least five months' pregnant. The dreaded menopausal middle! There's nothing for it. It has to be thrown and she'll order something new, more flattering.

'Oh. My. God!' Suddenly Gwen hears hoots of laughter from behind, followed by the unmistakable sound of a convulsive donkey. Lydia and that daft friend of hers. 'What the hell are you playing at, Mum? Have you completely lost your mind?'

Gwen flushes 'What are you doing in here? What do you want?'

'Sophie and I are going into Haverfordwest. Can I have some money? I need to get something for Saturday night.'

'What am I, your cash machine?'

‘God, Mum, you always say that. It’s soo old.’ Lydia rolls her eyes.

‘What’s happening Saturday night, anyway?’

‘Don’t say you’ve forgotten? The party?’ More eye rolling. ‘You promised to drive us there.’

Gwen really can’t remember. She doesn’t know whether it’s her menopausal brain or Lydia playing some gaslighting trick on her. Gwen reaches for her dressing gown and then her bag, handing over three twenty-pound notes. Lydia keeps her hand open.

‘You’ve *got* to be kidding me!’ Gwen sighs and Lydia trots out. ‘What time are you back?’ Lydia doesn’t answer.

Gwen hears the pair of them laughing as they descend the stairs, and she vows that she will not be humiliated again. She will go to that pole dancing fitness class and say hello to a new, svelte and sexy body shape. In the meantime, she’d better get the shepherd’s pie on. Gareth will be home in a couple of hours.