

Linda Mitchelmore

The Little
B & B
at
Cove End

A perfectly uplifting
holiday read!



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‘The perfect book to take on holiday!’ Pretty Little Book Reviews on Summer at 23 The Strand When Cara Howard’s husband passes away, she and her teenage daughter, Mae, are left with nothing except their beloved family home at Cove End. Overlooking the sparkling sea, Cara decides to renovate the house in time for the summer season, turning it into a gorgeous bed and breakfast for visiting tourists. But with the arrival of the B&B’s first guests and secrets tumbling out of the closets, it’s clear that everything could be about to change for Cara and Mae... Could this summer heal their hearts for good? A wonderfully uplifting holiday read, perfect for fans of Lilly Bartlett, Tilly Tennant and Eve Devon. Praise for Linda Mitchelmore: ‘I promise you’ll be hooked!’ ‘By the end of the book I wanted to sit on the veranda with a glass of wine, eat fish & chips and visit the local cafe!’ ‘The perfect book to take on holiday!’ ‘What a fabulous read. So many characters to fall in love with’ ‘This is such a delightful, uplifting and heartwarming read’ ‘Loved Summer at 23 Strand, wish I had some where like that to escape to.’ ‘One of the most enjoyable books I have read.’

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The Little B&B at Cove End

LINDA MITCHELMORE



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Readers love Linda Mitchelmore

‘The perfect book to take on holiday.’

‘It’s inspired me to go on a little holiday of my own.’

‘By the end of the book I wanted to sit on the veranda with a glass of wine, eat fish & chips and visit the local café.’

‘A wonderful summer read.’

‘Charming and uplifting.’

‘Such a delightful, uplifting and heartwarming read.’

‘A lovely book to read on holiday.’

‘Fabulous.’

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Mike and Barbara Adams – for a lifetime of support, generosity, and love.

Chapter One

‘But Mae, we have to eat!’ Cara said, standing in the hallway, the flyer for the art festival in her hand: LARRACOMBE TO CHALLENGE ST IVES 3rd–7th AUGUST, it said in fancy script. There was a list of artists who would be showing their work and giving talks and workshops – Elisabeth James, Janey Cooper, Stella Murphy and Tom Gasson-Smith amongst others, although Cara hadn’t heard of any of them. The festival was six weeks away, but she was thinking fast. She would have enough time to get her B&B up and running, and a bit of experience under her belt. August was high summer when high prices could be charged. There would be lots of people coming from further afield to the festival, people wanting somewhere to stay. There was even a number to ring for anyone able to host artists. Cara would ring just as soon as she had calmed Mae down a bit and reassured her that Cove End would still be very much their home, even though they’d need to take in paying guests to survive.

‘Didn’t Dad leave *anything*, Mum? Anything at *all*?’

Mae was practically screaming the words at her.

‘Sssh. Don’t shout, darling. We don’t want everyone to know our business.’

‘Huh. *You* tell Rosie everything.’ Mae tossed her head of auburn curls and dragged her fingers through her hair, straightening and then tweaking the curls she loved and hated in equal measure, depending on her mood. Cara had a feeling she hated those curls at that moment.

‘Keep your voice down. It’s not nice to talk about people behind their backs. Rosie can probably hear you.’

Mae gave a couldn’t-care-less shrug and Cara did her best to remember how it had been when she’d been on the cusp of womanhood herself – the moods, the angst, the lack of self-confidence sometimes.

Cara’s friend, Rosie, was still in Cara’s kitchen. She’d come over for Sunday lunch as she often had since Cara had been widowed, and the three of them – Cara, Mae and Rosie – had created a family of sorts. Yes, they were good friends and looked out for one another, but Cara did not tell Rosie *everything*.

‘I do not tell Rosie everything,’ Cara said, keeping her voice calm. ‘But to answer your question, all your dad left us was the house.’

And that had always been in my name anyway in case of bankruptcy, but there was no need for Mae to know that.

‘I want to believe you, Mum,’ Mae said, screwing her eyes up tight, which Cara knew was just so the tears that were threatening didn’t fall, ‘I really do, but I can’t quite. I mean, Dad loved us, right?’

In his way, Cara wanted to say. But just not enough to stop gambling; not enough that he didn’t sell anything he could to fund his addiction; not enough that he wasn’t open and honest with us both.

‘He loved you very much, you know that.’

Cara hoped that would be the answer her daughter needed and wanted in that moment.

‘Yeah,’ Mae said, slowly, letting the word out like a sad sigh. And there was a tiny twitch at the corners of her mouth, the beginnings of a smile as though she was remembering the good times with her father and all they had been to one another. And then she took a deep breath and pulled herself up tall. ‘Yeah, well, try and remember it’s my house, too. I’m not moving out of my bedroom for any stupid B&B guests. Dad would never, ever, have wanted me to do that. Okay?’

‘Of course I won’t move you out of your room. Don’t worry,’ Cara said, weary of the fight she was having with her fifteen-year-old daughter over her new venture.

‘Couldn’t you get a job or something?’ Mae asked, arms folded across her chest, a pout on her face. ‘Go back to working in a bank or something, like you did before you had me?’

‘No, I’ve been out of it too long for that. Things have changed so much in fifteen years I’d need too much training to even get in at the lowest level. I’m not computer-literate enough for a start.’

‘Making stuff, then? Clothes. You’re good at that. The vintage dresses Dad bought me and you copied when I’d worn them and worn them and they were falling apart in the end because I’d worn them so much and the material was, like, ancient anyway, or I’d grown out of them ... you always did that brilliantly. You could start a business – haute couture or something.’

‘It’s a lovely thought, darling,’ Cara said, hugging her daughter’s compliment to her because they came so rarely these days. But in her heart Cara knew it would be an impossible business to get into with just a now very ancient Singer sewing machine. She’d need a machine to do overlocking for a start and she just didn’t have the money. Or, as she’d said a moment ago, the computer skills to sell her product online, although she could learn that if she had to. ‘But I’m no Stella McCartney.’

‘Duh!’ Mae said, slapping her forehead theatrically. ‘You don’t need to *be* Stella McCartney, or anyone else, Mum. You just have to make good stuff that people want and ...’

‘Enough, Mae,’ Cara interrupted. Mae was making a very decent argument about what she could do to get them out of the financial mess they were in, but Cara had already thought of all that; been awake night after night thinking those same things and if she could get any of them to work. ‘Now go and meet Josh and have a lovely time.’

‘I’m already gone,’ Mae said, hurrying towards the door, not stopping to peck her mother’s cheek as she usually did.

Cara followed more slowly, stepping out onto the terrace. She pressed her lips together, forcing a smile she didn’t feel as Mae turned round for a brief moment before scurrying off. Mae was so pretty and never afraid to be different from her peer group. She was wearing the ballerina-length, black cabbage roses on a white ground, antique dress that had been her favourite since the day Mark had bought it for her from the vintage shop in Totnes. The fabric – starched to within an inch of its life – crackled as Mae walked. A black cardigan was draped over her shoulders, a simple, fine wool but faded.

‘Don’t be too late, Mae,’ Cara called after her, stepping out onto the terrace. ‘Please.’ But the breeze off the sea snatched her words away, blew them back in her face.

But perhaps Mae had heard because she turned, teased some tendrils of hair down each side of her face – a habit of long-standing – and Cara resisted the urge to rush down the path and hold her daughter to her lest it be the last time she ever saw her. Mae pointed at the sign Cara had painted, clapped a hand over her mouth to indicate suppressed laughter, then disappeared from view.

The hastily made sign – COVE END B&B – that Cara had made using some old paints of Mae’s she’d found in the toy cupboard, on a square of hardboard that had been propped up against the garage wall for as long as Cara could remember, swung back and forth, banging against the slim trunk of the lilac tree as Cara returned to the kitchen. She’d managed to find two hooks, screwing them into the bottom of the board on which hung a strip of hardboard with VACANCIES on one side and NO VACANCIES on the other.

‘Tea? Coffee? Something stronger?’ Rosie asked.

‘Tea, please. How sad would it be if I turned into a dipso widow-slash-single mother?’

‘But you’re not going to,’ Rosie said. ‘And you didn’t have to let her go. She’s only fifteen for goodness’ sake. You could have said no, you know. Mae is way too young for Josh Maynard. Or Josh is way too old for her. Whichever way you want to look at it.’

‘Not in Mae’s opinion,’ Cara said with a small sigh. ‘Or Josh’s, I suspect. If I forbade her to see him, she’d only find a way, behind my back, to meet him. Forbidden fruit and all that.’

‘How long have they been seeing each other?’ Rosie asked, arms folded across her chest and her hands tucked firmly under her armpits. Cara saw it for the gesture it was – disapproval. And Rosie wasn’t going to be moved on her opinions either.

‘Not long. Three months. Maybe four. Only at weekends because of school. Anyway, what is this? The Spanish Inquisition?’

Josh was good about bringing Mae home on time and Cara had to be thankful for that.

‘It’s only because I love you both,’ Rosie said. ‘I wouldn’t want more angst and drama dropped on you. You know, young girl who thinks she knows it all but doesn’t, and older man who knows it all and doesn’t give a fig who he uses to get his own way and ...’

‘Rosie, you are ...’

‘I know.’ Rosie thrust out an arm, traffic policeman-style, to halt Cara’s objections. ‘I’m out of order. Way out of order. But I’ve been that girl, done that, got the bloody T-shirt. It doesn’t alter the fact that Josh is twenty. He gets through girls the way most lads his age get through hair gel or whatever the latest fad fashion is these days. Ask anybody in this place and they’d say the same about Josh.’

‘Oh God,’ Cara said. ‘That’s the trouble with this place: everyone knows everyone else. Mae’s almost sixteen – she has to grow up sometime. If all I had to worry about was Mae seeing Josh Maynard, I’d be a happy woman.’

It was common knowledge in the village that Josh had been a bit of a rebel in his teenage years, railing against everything his father, a vicar, believed in. He’d left school in the middle of his A levels, stopped going to church on Sundays with his mother and sister, and loped from part-time job to part-time job with no real vision of his future. He was a regular at both village pubs and rumour had it he’d smoked pot for a while. Cara rather hoped he wasn’t doing that any more, but was wary of asking Mae if he was. But Cara knew Josh wasn’t the only one who had done these things. Hadn’t Cara herself gone through life to date with no clear vision? She’d even smoked pot – just the once because it had made her very sick and frightened the life out of her. Time, she decided, to shift the focus from Josh Maynard in this conversation.

‘Who else knows, do you think? About Mark, I mean, and his gambling.’

Cara bit the insides of her cheeks to stop her tears. She was sick of tears. Sick of the reason for them; Mark had spent every single penny of their savings on internet gambling, or down at the bookie’s betting on horses or dogs or both. The dinghy Mark had bought for Mae, and which she loved with all her heart, had been sold. Cara’s little Fiat 500 had been sold. Anything of any value had been sold so that Mark could gamble. Things disappeared – almost without Cara noticing sometimes – piece by piece. Mark had been crafty, taking a painting then regrouping the others so that it had taken Cara a while to notice it was missing. Amongst them had been three paintings she’d inherited from her great-grandmother, Emma. Two woodland scenes and a harbour scene. Emma’s first husband, Seth Jago – a gifted but amateur artist, so family folklore had it – had painted them back in the early 1900s. The only painting of Seth Jago’s that Mark hadn’t taken was a portrait of Emma that had been at the picture framer’s in Sands Road having a repair done to the corner of the frame where Cara had knocked it off the wall when she’d been dusting. Thank God she still had that because on that fateful night, Mark’s car had spun out of control at a roundabout and he’d been killed. Every other painting Cara had collected during their marriage – all fifteen of them – had been ruined beyond any hope of repair when the car had caught fire after Mark had been pulled free by the fire crew. Stuff in the boot had been saved, but not all the things on the back seat, the paintings amongst it. Cara often wondered where those other paintings of Seth Jago’s might be, but in a strange way she was glad they hadn’t become victims of Mark’s fatal accident, because they’d vanished from Cove End a long time before that.

Tell me, Rosie,’ Cara said as she sipped the tea her friend had made her, ‘is the whole village talking about me?’

‘Well, yes. Of course they are. Not as much as when Mark died because that was a shock to everyone I expect, but you’re probably still good gossip fodder.’ Rosie’s reply was swift and honest. ‘You’re only thirty-nine. You’re a widow. They’re sad for you, that’s all.’

Cara studied Rosie's face as she spoke, trying to see lies in her friend's eyes, the way she'd known there were lies in Mark's eyes every time he'd said he hadn't gambled that day, nor the day before, and that he wouldn't gamble tomorrow. Whenever she'd challenged him, demanding to know where her silver, or her paintings, or her household goods had gone, Mark always said he'd replace everything just as soon as he'd won enough on the next throw of the dice. Always the next throw of the dice would sort everything. Except it never did. It was all lies, lies, lies. But Rosie's eyes were wide and clear as they focused on Cara's almost royal blue ones.

'But they know?'

'I think some of them do, yes. When a man starts selling his own household goods down the pub, people are going to know something's up. Andy Povey at the Beachcomber has a pretty good idea what Mark was up to because he bought Mark's watch off him. Amongst other things, no doubt.'

'Oh great. The pub landlord knows so now the whole village knows.'

Cara never went in the village pub, so at least she'd been saved from any knowing glances, and she felt oddly glad of that now.

'Not necessarily. A pub landlord's a bit like a priest at confessional but without the divine right to dish out Hail Marys. I expect with Andy, most of what he hears goes in one ear and out the other. He's a good bloke.'

'Did Andy tell you he knew about Mark?' Cara had to know. She was no shrinking violet, but now she'd need nerves of steel to walk down the street if Andy had told all his customers.

'He had a quiet word with me in Sainsbury's. Because he knows we've been friends forever, you and me.'

'In Sainsbury's? With the world and his wife listening in?'

'I'm not going to answer that,' Rosie said. 'I can do discreet, you know. As can Andy Povey when he sees a need.'

'Of course. I'm sorry,' Cara said. 'I don't know how you've put up with my outbursts at times.'

'Because I'm a saint,' Rosie laughed. Then she looked serious. 'No, I'm no saint, as you know. But you *are* my dearest friend, and I *am* Mae's godmother, and I care about you both. And I would, quite literally, give an arm for you not to be in this situation, but we both know that can't happen.'

Cara nodded.

'Thanks,' she said, 'for being there for me.'

'No worries. Now, if you don't need me to give you more advice on how to bring up your teenage daughter, I'd better buzz. I've got two eyebrow tints, a leg wax, then two Brazilians followed by a manicure on the books. And a thirty-minute drive to my salon, so ...'

Rosie had hit on the idea of opening her salon on Sunday evenings for women and girls who worked nine to five and couldn't make weekday or daytime appointments, and who – perhaps – didn't want to cut into their weekend time off by going to a beauty salon on a Saturday when they could be shopping or out with their mates. It was really taking off. But if she was honest, Cara was missing Rosie's company; needing it now more than ever. The first six months after Mark's death had been a mad scramble to sort the legal aspects that result from a sudden death, and Cara had got through it on automatic pilot almost. Then came the year of 'firsts' followed by a time of mourning for the good times she and Mark had shared, and a feeling of loss that they would now not have a future.

'No, I'm fine,' Cara said, feeling anything but. 'You go. I need to sort out bed linen and crockery and so on. Then I've got to think of something to send to the paper about putting in an ad for the B&B. With this art festival coming up, I can't fail to get guests, can I?'

Cara took a deep breath. *And I've got to try not to worry about Mae being with Josh Maynard and whether he is pushing Mae into having underage sex, and work out how many rooms I will need to fill to pay the rates and the supermarket and for Mae to go to Paris with her school in September,* she thought. Her head was a maelstrom of random thoughts, and she was starting to get a headache between her eyes.

‘It’s hardly St Ives here,’ Rosie said. ‘I mean, Larracombe? Two pubs, one church, a harbour that holds about a dozen boats, two gift shops and a handful of cottages. And a half hour drive to a decent supermarket. I don’t know what all the fuss is about. It’s all over the village that some famous painter is coming. I mean, now this house is denuded of paintings, do you really want an art festival thrown in your face?’

‘I need the money,’ Cara said quietly. Just as soon as she was alone she’d ring the number on the bottom of the flyer and register. ‘And I thought you were in a hurry to go.’

Rosie laughed.

‘Bugger off, you mean,’ she said. Rosie reached for her bag, rifling through it for her keys. ‘But think about it, eh? I wouldn’t want you to have any more pain – emotionally that is – than you already have.’

‘I have thought about it,’ Cara told her. She glanced at the darker patches on the kitchen wall where her beloved paintings had been, knowing the walls in every other room in the house looked the same. ‘Anyway, how hard can cooking bacon and eggs and a few rounds of toast be?’

Rosie had found her keys and jangled them at Cara.

‘For me, my love, it would be akin to penal servitude – a fate worse than death. Oh God, sorry. I didn’t mean death as in Mark, you know. I meant death as in the worst possible thing that could happen to a person and ...’

‘Stop! You’re digging yourself in deeper. You’ll need a sparrow’s crane to get you out if you carry on. Go!’ Cara laughed, feeling the ripple of the laugh ease her pain, and the tightness in her chest, just a little. Even the headachey worry lines between her eyes were smoothing out a little. She reached out and held onto her friend’s hands, and for a moment the two women’s eyes locked before Cara looked away, afraid that Rosie would notice Cara was hiding lies of her own. Because what she hadn’t told anybody – not Rosie, the coroner, the police, or Mark’s parents was that as well as all her paintings, Mark had also taken most of his clothes and his computer because Cara, unable to put up with Mark’s gambling any more, had asked him to leave.

And would the guilt of that ever leave her? What if Mae were to even suspect that of her? What then?

Chapter Two

‘Great, Mae,’ Josh said, giving Mae a quick kiss on the lips. ‘Glad you made it.’ He held out a hand and Mae slipped hers into it. How good it felt, her hand in his, especially knowing how half the girls in the village were greener than grass with envy that she was Josh Maynard’s girlfriend and they’d been passed over.

‘Course I made it,’ Mae said.

Sometimes she had to pinch herself that he’d asked her out in the first place. She’d been shuffling along the breakwater, wrapped up against an early spring chill, looking out to sea, thinking about stuff, not really wanting to speak to anyone when Josh had come along and said, ‘Hi’. She hadn’t seen him around much since the time he’d come along to the funeral parlour with his dad, who was supporting her in her wish to see her dad one last time before he was buried in St Peter’s Churchyard. Her mum hadn’t wanted her to go. The funeral people wouldn’t let her in without an adult so on a whim she’d gone to the vicarage to ask if the Reverend Maynard could help. She’d been so surprised when Josh had pitched up that day. His dad had said he thought it might be easier for her if someone younger was with her as well. But she’d only been thirteen then, and Josh a teenager. What a difference a couple of years made.

‘So, here’s the plan,’ Josh said. He began walking away from the bandstand in the park, where they’d met, towards the gates. ‘A little trip to Fairy Cove. Just you and me. I’ve borrowed my sister’s car.’

‘Cool,’ Mae said.

‘Parked up over there.’ Josh pointed towards the car park.

Mae’s mind fast-forwarded and she could already see them, kissing and cuddling in the car in the lane that went down to Fairy Cove.

‘Love the frock, by the way,’ Josh said. He held Mae out at arm’s length. ‘Give us a twirl.’

Mae obliged, doing a couple of spins as he twirled her round.

‘Thanks. My dad bought me this one, you know, before he died.’

‘Well, he’d hardly buy it after, would he?’ Josh said. But he said it with a grin to show he was only joking. ‘You’ve not told me much about your dad.’

‘I thought you knew,’ Mae said. Hands clasped, she and Josh were meandering slowly to wherever it was in the car park his sister’s car was. ‘You came with your dad that day ...’

‘He said I had to,’ Josh said. His grin had dropped now. He looked more angry than sad that he’d been made to go with his dad and Mae to the funeral parlour.

‘I’m glad you did come,’ Mae said. ‘But you could have said no.’

‘No? To my dad? You have got to be kidding!’

‘At least you’ve still gone one,’ Mae said in a quiet little voice. Her dad hadn’t been perfect and he got cross sometimes if she interrupted him when he was doing stuff on the computer, and almost never remembered to buy her mum a Valentine’s card and stuff like that. But still she wished she could say, ‘My dad’s picking me up from school today,’ or something.

‘Yeah, but it’s not easy,’ Josh said. ‘You should have heard the fallout when I *did* say no to him. About going to uni. He quoted, chapter and verse, how much he’d spent on private education for me and how I was an ungrateful so-and so. He wanted me to do theology like he had. And his father and his grandfather before him.’

‘And you wanted to break the mould?’

‘Yeah. Gardening’s not his idea of a career move, although I think Monty Don would beg to differ.’

Mae had no idea who Monty Don might be, but she guessed he was a famous gardener or something. Mae often didn’t know who or what Josh was talking about but wasn’t so stupid as to ask

because it would highlight the differences in their family backgrounds and their education. She didn't want to sound too much like a schoolgirl even though that was what she was.

'Mums and dads don't always know what's best for their kids, I shouldn't think.'

'Your mum? Does she give you grief about going out with me? Being older?'

'Yeah. Calls you Granddad!' Mae giggled.

'She doesn't?'

'No. I'm only joking. But she's been pretty cool about stuff since Dad died. Her friend, Rosie, was there when I was getting ready to meet you, huffing and shrugging and letting me know by her body language she didn't think I should go, but Mum's a right pushover at the moment. Doesn't want me to be hurt any more, you know. Anyway ...'

Mae let her words fade away. Some date this was turning out to be; her anger over her dad's death and now her mum wanting to turn Cove End into a B&B was threatening to bubble over. Josh was going to get pretty fed up of her in a minute.

'But you came anyway,' he said, giving her hand a squeeze. 'Like I said just now, I know your dad died, and how. My dad's version of it anyway. You can tell me if you want. I think you've got anger over your dad just under the surface the same as I have over mine. Yes?'

'Probably,' Mae agreed. 'But since you ask, just for the record, Dad made me angry a long ago before he went and got himself killed. He sold the dinghy without telling me and I loved going out in that with him. I don't know why he did that. And then he sold Mum's car and she couldn't drive me into Totnes for my Saturday dance class any more. Like he didn't care about me, you know. And there's not been much cash for Mum and me since, which is why she's got this stupid idea about turning the house into a B&B.' Mae sniffed back tears.

'If this was an old black and white movie, I'd whip out a pristine white handkerchief and offer it to you to mop up your tears.' Josh dangled an imaginary handkerchief in front of Mae's face.

'Idiot!' she laughed, pretending to take it. She felt a bit better having told Josh about her dad, although she doubted she would have if he hadn't slagged his off a bit. It felt good that she could do that – that they both could.

'I'm glad that's off your pretty little chest,' Josh said.

'Yeah, sorry. Didn't mean to be a drain.'

'You're not. But it must have been awful for your mum, too.'

Had Josh said that a few minutes ago, she might have snapped that he would say that, what with his dad being a vicar and everything – that he'd been brought up to say stuff like that whether he believed it or not. But now ... well now she knew a little bit more about Josh, she could see the big house he lived in, the private education he'd had and the foreign holidays they went on meant nothing if he and his dad were at loggerheads all the time.

'Did you mean it?' Mae said. 'About me telling you about my dad?'

Mae hadn't had anyone to talk about it to really – what went before; before he'd died. There had been a couple of teachers who'd kept her back after a lesson when she'd been thinking about stuff and unable to concentrate who'd said if she needed someone to talk to, then she only had to ask. But what could they do?

'Sure,' Josh said. 'Shall we sit for a bit?'

They were nearing a bench that was in the sunshine, a willow opposite dipping its frondy new growth almost to the grass.

'Yeah. Okay.' She took a deep breath and sat down, her hand still in Josh's. 'I don't know if your mum and dad row ...'

'Big time!' Josh interrupted. 'Language too. Some of it very Anglo-Saxon!'

'Really?' Mae said, stunned.

'The image of the benign reverend can be a myth!'

‘Right. Okay. Well, mine rowed but not big time. No bad language as far as I could hear. Most of it was sort of theatrical whispering, in the dead of night. It went on and on sometimes although I couldn’t hear what they were saying exactly. And sometimes I’d hear raised voices when I came in from school or something and they’d stop abruptly when they heard me shut the door, and it would be all false smiles and ‘Hello, darling, good day?’ and all that.’

‘Same in our house,’ Josh said. ‘They’d be arguing for England about something, then there’d be a knock on the door and I’d answer it and shout through that it was old Mrs Ellis or someone come to talk about her husband’s funeral and they’d appear in the hall, arms around one another, all smiles. I don’t know if there’s ever been a couple who hasn’t had a row or ten.’

‘No,’ Mae said. She and Josh hadn’t had one. Yet. She’d tackle that hurdle when she came to it. But right now, Mae thought that they’d exhausted the subject of rowing parents and how it affected their children. ‘But I don’t want to talk about it any more. Okay?’

‘Okay,’ Josh said.

He stood up, pulling Mae with him. He let go of her hand and put an arm around her shoulders instead. Mae snuggled into him, feeling loved. Feeling safe. They began to walk more quickly towards the park gates.

‘What time have you got to be in?’ Josh asked, which only served to make her feel less like Josh’s girlfriend and more like a small child he was looking after. It knocked the wind right out of her sails for a moment.

‘Eight,’ she said.

‘Right.’

They were navigating the car park now.

‘Can we get a drink on the way?’ Mae asked. She quite fancied a glass of chilled Pinot Grigio – Rosie always brought a bottle or two when she came to visit and her mum always let her have a glass with dinner when she did.

‘Ah, Andy Povey won’t serve me wine for you. But we can pick up a bottle of something and take it down to Fairy Cove.’

‘Just the one bottle?’ Mae giggled – already she could taste the Pinot Grigio she knew Josh would buy on her tongue. Rosie didn’t like her mum letting her have a glass of wine and read her mum the riot act when she found out. Then Rosie gave Mae a lecture on the dangers of alcohol and how it altered your thinking, your rationale. Rosie used a lot of fancy words like that ... rationale.

‘Yes. For now. You’re underage.’

‘Oh God, not you as well!’ Mae said, making a mock-cross face. ‘You should have heard the lecture Rosie gave me when Mum went out of the room. “Having sex with a minor is a major offence, Mae, so best remind your boyfriend of that in case he gets ideas. And so is buying alcohol for the same minor. Which means you in this instance, Mae. Don’t forget that will you, Mae? I know you’re fifteen going on fifty-one, but I don’t want you bringing any more worry on your mum’s shoulders, okay? End of lecture, Mae.”’, Mae repeated, in a posh sing-song voice. ‘And she said “Mae” that many times it was like I’d forgotten my own name or something. Just because she’s my godmother doesn’t mean she can rule my life!’

‘She sounds like quite a woman, this Rosie,’ Josh laughed. ‘She’s got you fired up anyway!’

‘A force to be reckoned with,’ Mae said, doing her best not to sound angry and bitter. She was failing miserably because all the hurt and anger had bubbled up again.

God, but this growing up lark was hard. No one in her class at school had a father who had died. No one had a mother who was going ahead with turning their home into a B&B against their wishes. No one knew just how horrid it was to go to sleep at night and dream about their dad and then wake up in the morning to realise he wasn’t there any more. No one knew how it felt to have a sort of house brick sat permanently on their chest. It all singled Mae out as being different, although she was anyway through the clothes she wore. She smoothed down the skirt of her frock and bent to

finger out the netting petticoat that peeped out from the hem of it. It had a sweetheart neckline and a band of black crepe around the waist. Like she'd told Josh just now, it was the last frock her dad had bought her before he died. She knew she was wearing it to death because the seams were beginning to look strained, but wearing it somehow made her feel closer to him. Anyway, anyone could wear ripped jeans and a T-shirt two sizes too small and most of the girls in her class did at the weekends, like they were in a team or something. Mae didn't know she wanted to be part of any sort of team.

'It's what godmothers are supposed to do – toe the moral line. That's the whole point of being one,' Josh said, dragging Mae's wandering mind back to the present. She thought she'd been thinking less about her dad lately, but somehow it was the other way round.

'Yeah, but I still think she was out of order. We're not even related. She's just Mum's friend from way back. And then there's the fact she's a bit of a slapper is Rosie. Two divorces, three live-in lovers – what sort of moral guidance is that?'

'It's life, Mae. And neither of the divorces might have been her fault. And has anyone ever told you that you're very beautiful when you're cross?'

'That line's got whiskers on it,' Mae said, but she was glad Josh had said it all the same. And she knew she was probably boring him to death carping on and on about Rosie, who Josh hadn't even met. She should stop. She'd try.

'Comes from being an old granddad,' Josh said, the skin at the corners of his eyes crinkling deliciously as he smiled. How dark his eyes were – 90% cocoa solids chocolate or something – and how Mae loved looking into them. 'Shall we go and get that wine?' Josh said as he unlocked the car door.

'Yeah,' Mae said, 'I might die of thirst if we don't!'

'A vicar's son, a murderer? That would never do!' Josh said. He opened the door for Mae to get in, handing her the seatbelt. God, but how chivalrous. How very grown up it made her feel.

Mae stood on tiptoe and lifted her face up to Josh for a kiss. When his lips came down on hers, she got a brief whiff of alcohol. Not beer. Not wine. Spirits maybe, definitely alcohol. Had he been drinking already? A glass of something with dinner, which she knew a lot of people were in the habit of having? Whatever, he was far from drunk, not even tipsy. But Mae thought it best not to ask as their lips met.

They were soon at the corner shop on the road out of the village. Josh took no time at all choosing a bottle of wine. Pinot Grigio. And a bag of crisps. They joined the end of a small queue, and Mae was amazed to see she knew no one in it. At least no one who would tell her mum she was buying wine with Josh Maynard.

But her relief was short-lived.

'Well, well, well,' a voice behind them said. 'If it isn't our local baby-snatcher.'

'Shove off, Bailey,' Mae said, not bothering to turn around.

She and Bailey Lucas had been at infant school together, and now at senior school as well, although Mae was in a higher tutor group. About six months ago, Mae and Bailey had gone out a couple of times: to the cinema once, and to drink endless glasses of coke in the Oystercatcher Café. They hadn't even got to the hand-holding stage, never mind kissing or anything else. And then Josh had asked her out and, well, she hadn't even bothered to tell Bailey she didn't want to go out with him again – she'd just stopped answering his texts and he'd got the message in the end. She wasn't proud of that now, but it was done and dusted. Josh had taken her to the cinema on their first date and they'd snogged their faces off in the back row. Her lips had been red raw when she got home, and she'd slathered on Savlon before she went to sleep in the hope her mother wouldn't notice in the morning. She'd moved on. She wished Bailey would too. He wasn't a bad bloke – just a bit boring, especially compared to Josh.

'You heard her, Lucas,' Josh said. 'Shove off.'

'When I'm ready,' Bailey said. 'And not before.'

A frisson of unease rippled, cold, across Mae's shoulders. Bailey took a step closer to Josh, squaring up to him. Josh was tall – just under six feet – but Bailey was taller by a good couple of inches. Thicker set too. He was easily the tallest boy in their year.

'You just mind how you treat her, Maynard,' Bailey said. 'That's all.'

'Explain yourself,' Josh said.

He let go of Mae's hand. Her right one. Surely he wasn't going to throw a punch at Bailey here? There were two people in the queue in front of them – chattering away for England so Mae didn't think they'd heard the threatening exchange. She glanced towards the counter where Meg Smythson was rapidly scanning the contents of a customer's basket.

'In case you need reminding,' Bailey said, 'you did the dirty on my sister, Xia. More than once from what I've heard.'

'None of your business,' Josh said. He turned to Mae. 'Ignore him.' He put an arm around Mae's shoulder and swivelled her round to turn their backs to Bailey. He leaned in and whispered in her ear. 'He's just jealous.'

Mae hadn't told Josh she'd been out with Bailey a couple of times, but in this place she probably didn't need to – everyone seemed to know about everyone else or who knew someone who did.

'Jealousy is a totally useless trait,' Bailey said, coming closer – so close Mae felt his warm breath on her neck.

Mae turned around to face Bailey.

'Back off, Bailey,' she said. 'Please. I'm sorry I didn't answer your texts if that's what's troubling you. Okay?'

This was getting uncomfortable now and they were no nearer the counter than they were when they came in. Meg Smythson was looking their way now, forehead furrowed with puzzle lines as though she was sensing trouble brewing in her shop.

Bailey shrugged.

'You heard her,' Josh said, his voice low. 'Back off before I make you back off.'

Bailey stepped back a few paces.

'Let's just say, Mae, if you get any bother you know where to find me.'

'Your knight in shining armour, Mae,' Josh laughed, leaning closer to Mae.

'Who I won't need,' she said, catching a whiff of Josh's slightly alcoholic breath again.

This was all turning into some sort of old-fashioned film scenario, with two men fighting over her – it was sort of flattering really in a strange way. She felt a bit princessy. And there he was – her dad back again in her mind because he'd always called her his little princess.

Mae smoothed her hands down over the roses on the 1950s full-skirted dress, a lump in her throat ... remembering.

'But if you do, Mae,' Bailey said, 'the offer still stands.'

Mae wondered what sort of terrible time Bailey's sister might have had with Josh. Two-timing wasn't the best way to go about things, but hadn't she done it herself when she'd been sort of going out with Bailey and not told him she didn't want to see him any more before starting to go out with Josh?

'Ignore him,' Josh whispered. 'He's not worth brain space.'

Mae nodded – too full up to speak.

It was their turn to be served.

'Sorry about the wait,' Meg Smythson said.

Josh placed the bottle of wine on the counter and Meg Smythson reached for it, and the scanner beeped loudly as she ran it through. The crisps followed.

Josh reached for the wine, but Meg got there first, grabbing it firmly at the base and pulling it back towards her.

'Buying wine for a minor is an offence,' Meg said. 'But I don't need to tell you that, Josh, do I?'

'I'm fairly conversant with the law on that matter, Mrs Smythson,' Josh said.

Conversant? Mae suppressed a giggle – Josh sounded so much older than his twenty years saying that. It made her giggle.

‘Something funny, Mae?’ Meg Smythson asked.

‘Not really,’ Mae said. She pulled a mock-glum face.

‘Well, lovie,’ Meg said. ‘I’ll say the same to you in case you didn’t hear the first time ... buying wine for a minor is an offence. That is all. There are other people waiting to be served.’

Mae looked behind her and saw that three other people had come in, one was stood behind Bailey and the other two were filling up baskets with goods.

‘In that case,’ Josh said, ‘I will part with the readies and we’ll get out of here. And just for the record, this wine is for my old man and my ma. For later. Okay with that, Mrs Smythson? Honest. On the Bible.’

‘You would say that!’ Mrs Smythson said, laughing now. She blushed.

‘I would. Oh, and that turquoise top you’re wearing really suits you, by the way, Mrs Smythson.’

‘Flatterer,’ Meg Smythson said, as Josh turned to go. Mae started to turn, but Meg Smythson reached out for her, and held onto her wrist – just for a second – before letting it go again. ‘You just watch it, Mae. I wouldn’t want my licence taken away. Get my drift? About the wine?’

‘Yes,’ Mae said.

She turned to join Josh, who was already walking towards the door.

As she passed Bailey he said, *sotto voce*, ‘He got my sister rat-arsed, which wasn’t pretty. Then he did the dirty on her. Just saying. Just so you know.’

Mae couldn’t think of a single thing to say to that, so didn’t. She was so fed up of everyone telling her how to live her life. Fed up with being treated like a little kid, like she didn’t know anything, anything at all. God but she needed that drink now.

Chapter Three

The house was quiet now that both Mae and Rosie had gone and Cara was glad of something to do. She went into the hall, picked up the flyer for the art festival and rang the number.

'Hello, Cara Howard here,' she said quickly, the second it was answered. She felt nervous, stepping into the unknown as a landlady. Ought she not have rung on a Sunday and waited until the morning? Oh well, it was done now. She'd taken the first step towards her new venture – well, the second if you counted her handmade B&B sign – and there was no going back now. 'I live at Cove End. I'm interested in offering accommodation to people coming to the art festival. Am I speaking to the right person?' She knew her words were tumbling out like water over a weir, but that's what nervousness did for you.

'You are,' a friendly voice said. 'I'm Laura Pearse. What sort of accommodation do you have?'

Cara wondered if she knew anyone called Laura Pearse, but she didn't think so.

'Two doubles and a single. One en suite. All with basins. Two with sea views. Oh, and a breakfast room that would be exclusively for guests' use.'

'Lovely. Perfect actually. I'll just take your details. I'll have to get back to you nearer the date. Oh, hang on a minute. Actually I've had a couple of enquiries already from people thinking I'm the Information Bureau taking general bookings, and I'm not. One couple and a single male, wanting B&B accommodation in a few days' time. Would you be up for that?'

'I would,' Cara said with a confidence she didn't feel because she'd have a lot to do to get all the rooms ready.

'Great. I've still got their details so I'll get back to you and tell them they can give you a ring. Landline and mobile numbers. Okay with that?'

'Fine,' Cara said.

It had been as easy as that. The potential guests had got back to her within half an hour and Cara had booked them in. Three guests in three days' time. She was well on the way now!

She put the radio on low so as to have another voice in the house. She went upstairs, then down again, peering into all the rooms trying to see them with a stranger's eye. Cove End had five bedrooms – two en suite, and there were two other bathrooms. Three of the bedrooms had sea views and the other two looked out over fields. There were three reception rooms – one of which Cara had always used as a breakfast room because it faced east and got the morning sun. She thought she could squeeze a couple of small tables with chairs in there and the guests could use that rather than the formal dining room that Cara rarely used because the table in there seated at least eight. Even when Mark had been alive it had rarely been used because Cara always thought it felt too stilted to be eating there, and so cold somehow. The kitchen was large, with room for a table and chairs and a small couch. There was also a downstairs cloakroom. Cara's head was suddenly full of plans for her new venture. She'd need more tables and chairs for the breakfast room. And possibly some side tables and an easy chair or two for the bedrooms for guests. There was a homes section in one of the charity shops in Totnes that sold furniture cheaply. She'd ask Rosie to drive her over.

'How much will two tables and some second-hand easy chairs, and a couple of cans of paint eat into my meagre savings?' Cara said out loud, then clapped a hand across her face.

She was talking to herself now. A sure sign of madness. Or desperate loneliness. But at least she had the house. And she was going to make it earn its keep. One of Mark's perks as a bank manager had been a ridiculously low mortgage rate. When they'd first married, Mark had accepted every transfer posting he'd been given. They'd lived in just about every town in Devon that had a bank, and in each one they'd upgraded their properties. For one terrible moment after Mark had died, Cara had wondered if he'd embezzled money from the bank. The police had been one step ahead of her, of course, and had got into the hard drive of his computers – home and work. The extent of

Mark's gambling – telephone number amounts – had stunned Cara. The WPC who had been assigned to her after the accident had been very kind and understanding.

'I knew he gambled,' Cara had said. 'I tried my best to get him to stop, but ...' Cara shrugged as if to show how hopeless it had been begging with him, arguing with him, threatening him to face up to his addiction.

'You couldn't?' the WPC said.

'No. Perhaps he thought he was doing it for the times he did win and he bought a new car, or changed the TV for one with a bigger screen or something, bought our daughter a whole load of new clothes – things to give us a better life.'

'You are in no way to blame,' she'd told Cara gently.

But Cara did blame herself because a bank manager's salary should have been more than enough to send Mae on school trips and she, Cara, ought to have challenged him about his gambling long before she had.

'These trips aren't supervised enough,' Mark had said once when Rosie had offered to pay for Mae to go on a trip to Amsterdam. 'I'm not allowing my daughter to roam about some foreign city at night, un-chaperoned, while their teachers are in a bar somewhere drinking their heads off, whoever might be paying for it.'

And Cara had given in. But what do you do when you love someone as much as Cara had loved Mark? He'd been a good husband in other ways – a fantastic lover for a start. And on Cara's birthday there had always been another painting, or some other present that Mark knew Cara would love.

Now Cara knew different. Mark preferred to risk money that should have been spent on Mae in the hope of making more. And with that knowledge, her love for him had dimmed. And the original paintings had only been an investment, hadn't they? Mark had said as much, wanting her to sell a painting he'd bought for one of her birthdays once he realised the artist was on the up and her painting was making four times the amount he'd paid for it.

It was the car full of paintings, now smashed, and burned, beyond saving, in the back-seat area that had alerted the police to the fact that this was not just another sad, speed-induced accident. Mae had been at school and Cara, unable to bear seeing Mark leave, had walked down the hill to the harbour as he loaded his car with his clothes, his favourite CDs and his computer. She hadn't known he would be taking the paintings.

When she'd got back, she'd almost stopped breathing when she saw all the darker patches on the walls where her beloved paintings had been.

A knock at the front door jolted Cara back to the present, and glad in a way that it had. She raced down the hall, making a mental note to get the polisher out and give the parquet a thorough going over very soon. She could see the silhouettes of two people – a man and a woman at a guess – through the stained glass.

'Have you got a double room?' the woman asked the second Cara opened the door. 'Two nights?'

'Oh,' Cara said. She hadn't been expecting guests so soon. 'Well ...'

She had two nights with no bookings before the people she'd just spoken to arrived. A whole host of butterflies was doing a dance in her stomach – this was all happening so fast. What had been just the germ of an idea was being made a reality.

'Have you?' the man said. 'It does say B&B on your sign. And vacancies.'

'Yes, I know it does,' Cara said. 'But it was a try-out with the sign, and really I'm not quite ready for guests. I was just about to put the polisher over the parquet.' She opened the door wider so that the middle-aged couple could see the tatty state of the hall floor and her still-denuded walls. 'I'm in the middle of redecorating,' she lied.

'Well, it looks clean enough to me,' the woman said, 'so can we come in? We've tried the pub but they don't do rooms, and that place called... what was it, the Lookout?... is fully booked, and the Information Office is closed. I know I sound desperate and really we would be so ...'

Cara took a deep breath. She hadn't really prepared herself for how it might feel to have strangers in her home. But she had to start her fledgling business some time. She hoped Mae wouldn't be too shocked – or cross – to find strangers in the house already when she got back from her date with Josh.

'A double,' the man said, as though to remind Cara of what she'd been asked.

'Yes, I've got a double room,' she said. 'Do come in, if you don't mind the fact the walls are less than perfect. My paintings are in storage while I redecorate ...'

'A bit of faded wall won't bother us, will it, Eddie?' the woman said.

Cara did a mental inventory of the linen cupboard. The best was an Egyptian cotton duvet cover and matching sheets and pillowcases, which was on her own bed – a luxurious treat to herself, a bit of spoiling now that Mark was gone. But the lilac floral was clean and aired and would have to do. No matching towels, but she couldn't worry about that now.

'I'll get a room ready for you as quick as I can.' She opened the door wider and ushered them in. 'I'm Cara, by the way.'

She proffered her hand first to the woman, and then the man.

'Pam and Eddie Hine,' the woman said. 'Pleased to meet you, and I mean really pleased. We thought we were going to have to sleep in the car, didn't we, Ed?'

'Yes, love,' Eddie said, looking fondly at Pam as a flush reddened the side of his neck.

Well, well, well, Cara thought. *I'll bet my last £223.26 that these two aren't married, despite making a good display of being newlyweds.* She glanced at Pam's wedding finger where a wide gold band shone brightly in the lights from the hall. And that look, and that flush of Eddie's, brought a lump to Cara's throat that was threatening to choke her. She saw herself trapped, in limbo, between fifteen-year-old Mae's calf-love for Josh, and Eddie and Pam at the other end of the spectrum.

And her own love for Mark stripped bare, sucked from her by his gambling.

'Will you want the full English breakfast?' Cara croaked.

'Lovely,' Pam said. 'We don't usually have a fried breakfast when we're at home, do we, Ed?'

'No, love,' Eddie said. 'But we're not at home now, are we?'

'No, we're not,' Pam giggled, which made Cara's oneness more painful, and she felt herself invisible, a not-really-wanted witness to their coupledness.

'Right,' Cara said, battling to look like a real B&B hostess, 'I'll show you where the sitting room is and then I'll make you a cup of tea while I get your room ready. The downstairs cloakroom is over there,' she went on, pointing, and metaphorically crossing her fingers it was as squeaky clean as it usually was. 'After that, I'll need to pop to the shop to get the wherewithal for a cooked breakfast because, as I said, I wasn't expecting guests so soon.'

At least the sitting room was nicely appointed. Mark hadn't had room to take the flat screen TV or what was left of the silver that had been Cara's grandmother's, although Mark had already squirreled a fair bit of that out of the house and sold it, much to Cara's annoyance at the time.

'You do that, Cara,' Pam said as Cara ushered them into the sitting room and urged them to make themselves comfortable. 'We'll be as happy in pigs in muck here while we wait.'

'I'll make you a cup of tea. Then ten minutes to sort your room, another fifteen or so while I pop to the shops and ...'

'Don't panic, Cara,' Pam interrupted, laying a gentle hand on Cara's arm. 'We'll be just fine while you pop out or our names aren't Pam and Eddie Hine.'

'Lovely in here it is, Ed,' Cara heard Pam say as she walked towards the door that led into the hall. 'Quality. Lovely curtains and everything. Comfy cushions. Very high end, designer.'

A warm glow spread across Cara's shoulders. She'd made those curtains. And the cushion covers. Rosie was always telling her she should take up sewing and make a business of it ... well, maybe if the B&B business didn't take off, she would. She left Pam and Eddie Hine cooing over her lovely sitting room and went to make the tea.

Cara ran along Higher Street praying she'd catch the corner shop before it closed for the night. The sky was beginning to darken, that lovely indigo shade shot through with fuchsia pink that Cara loved, and which usually meant that tomorrow would be a fine day. She speeded up as she saw Meg Smythson walk towards the door of her shop, as though she was about to lock up. But Meg had seen Cara and held the door open for her to go in.

'Well, fancy,' Meg said. 'I had your Mae in here earlier. Lovely girl, your Mae. Where does she get those dresses she wears?'

Mae had been to the shop? Cara wondered what for, and what she might have bought, not that she had a lot to buy anything with, but the bank was paying Cara a small widow's pension, even though it wasn't stretching very far and Cara liked to give Mae a bit of pocket money.

'Charity shops,' Cara said. 'And a stall in Totnes Market. And she's had some of it for ages, waiting to grow into it.'

'Well, she looks stunning in them,' Meg said. 'And is going to be more beautiful still once she's finished her growing. With that Josh Maynard, she was.'

Cara didn't like the way Meg had put the word 'that' in front of Josh's name, as though he was something best left in the gutter.

'I know. She's going out with him.'

'Bit of a disappointment to his dad is that Josh,' Meg said. 'Wanted university for his son, he did, but all that was in Josh's head was surfing and earning money and he was having none of it. Never going to get rich gardening, is he?'

Cara suddenly felt defensive of Josh. She didn't like his character being ripped to shreds by Meg, any more than she'd liked it when Mae had been dismissive of Rosie.

'Monty Don seems to do very well from gardening on TV,' Cara said. She had a 'bit of a thing' for Monty Don as she imagined many viewers did.

'Another world, that, TV,' Meg countered, her voice dripping with disdain. 'Hardly Larracombe, is it? A bit of lawn-mowing for the Thrupps at Barley Mead, and a quick strim around the edge of the graves up at St Peter's.'

Cara's blood seemed to chill in her veins at that last remark – Mark was buried in the graveyard at St Peter's. She hadn't been there for a while to lay flowers or just to stand there and talk to him, tell him how sorry she was for everything that had happened between them. She wondered if Mae had. She could ask, of course, but Mae thought questions like that were an intrusion so Cara tended to hold back. But right now Cara didn't really have the time or the inclination to be getting into any sort of philosophical argument with Meg about gardening and TV and she could only think that life wasn't too exciting amongst the pre-packaged potatoes and the newspapers and the bars of Cadbury Milk, and that when Meg did manage to get an audience she liked to share an opinion or two.

'Have you ever asked Josh if he wants to be rich?' Cara asked. 'Or if, perhaps, he's happy working the soil, growing things?'

Meg Smythson bridled.

'Well, all I'm saying is,' Meg said, leaning closer towards Cara as though someone might overhear her even though there was no one else in her shop, 'I know I'm telling tales out of school, and that Josh can charm the birds from the trees, but it was alcohol he was buying.'

'And is legally able to do so,' Cara said. 'He's over eighteen.'

'Ah yes,' Meg said. 'I know that.' She tapped the side of her nose. 'And he assured me it was for his parents' consumption, if you know what I mean.'

Cara knew. Meg Smythson was implying that Mae would be given a share of the wine and none of it would be going back to the rectory.

'Eggs,' Cara said. 'I'd like half a dozen large eggs if you've got them. And a packet of best back bacon. Sausages – chipolatas if you have them. Oh, and a thick sliced loaf. Please.'

There were, Cara knew, a couple of tomatoes in the salad box of the fridge that had gone a bit soft but which would be perfect to go with a fried breakfast, and there was an unopened jar of marmalade in the cupboard, won at Mae's school winter fair, and neither of them liked marmalade, so that would have to do.

'And a dozen or so mushrooms,' Cara added, as she spied a basket on the counter with milky-white button mushrooms in it.

'Got guests, have you?' Meg said, taking a packet of bacon from the fridge and handing it to Cara. 'I saw the sign. You've had the council people in, hygiene and that, I expect?'

'Er, yes. Of course,' Cara said, hoping Meg wouldn't realise the word 'yes' wasn't the answer to both questions. How had she completely overlooked the possibility that she might have to be registered to take in B&B guests and have her kitchen and bathrooms passed for hygiene?

Well, that's what widowhood did to you, wasn't it? It deprived you of rational thinking for a while at least. And widowhood, mixed with the terrible guilt that Mark wouldn't have died had she not asked him to leave, was threatening to overwhelm her now. She made a show of examining a tin of chicken curry on the shelf beside her, just for something to do – so she wouldn't have to look Meg Smythson in the eye and run the risk that Meg would know she was lying.

'Good,' Meg said. 'Because if you haven't had the hygiene people in *before* guests arrive, then they take a very dim view of the whole thing. A *very* dim view.'

Meg reached for the mushrooms to weigh them out. She sniffed, giving her head a shake and her shoulders a shudder as if envisaging the dire consequences for Cara if she'd failed to register with the council.

'And they take a very dim view of underage drinking around here as well,' Meg finished. 'No matter it might be the vicar's son what offered that drink.'

Oh dear, Cara thought, *Meg Smythson didn't like me stopping her telling tales about Josh and Mae, did she?*

'And that'll be four pounds and ninety-seven pence,' Meg said. 'Shocking the price of things today, isn't it? Money goes nowhere, does it? And I expect with you being a widow now it's even ...'

'Here's the money,' Cara said, certain that there had been knowing in Meg's voice and it was a crowing sort of knowing rather than a sympathetic one. She couldn't get out of the shop fast enough.

And if anyone from the council should turn up in the morning, she'd tell them that the Hines were personal friends and that she wasn't charging them. *There, stuff that in your pipe and smoke it, Meg Smythson!*

Chapter Four

‘Josh, no!’ Mae said. ‘You can’t drive. You’ve drunk almost the whole bottle.’

She lunged towards him and tried to snatch the car keys from him, but he jerked his hand away, held them over his head so that Mae couldn’t reach. The car was parked at the bottom of a rough, narrow lane that led to a secluded rocky beach – a perfect place for courting couples although theirs was the only car there at the moment. How she was going to get herself out of this predicament she didn’t know yet, but she’d think of something. Foremost in her mind was stopping Josh from driving.

‘You want it all, you do,’ Josh said, slurring his words slightly. ‘Or don’t want it in your case.’

Josh slid a hand between her knees, and began to slide it up her thigh, but Mae pushed it away. ‘No, Josh. Don’t. Please.’

Josh had never done that before and Mae wondered if it was the alcohol affecting his judgment – he knew she was underage for sex and she’d told him, right at the beginning, that she wasn’t up for that and he said he understood. Mae shifted sideways on the car seat to put a bit more distance between her and Josh, wondering why alcohol seemed to change a person’s personality the more they drank. They either became louder and funnier if they were cheerful people to begin with, but the flipside of that was that some people became nasty and mean. Where had the Josh, who was so kind and understanding when she’d been remembering her dad, gone? She was pretty certain now that Josh had been drinking before they’d met. Bailey’s words flashed through her mind – *‘He got my sister rat-arsed and it wasn’t pretty’*. Well, she wasn’t even tiddly. Perhaps what Bailey had warned her about had been in the back of her mind all the time.

‘Teathe,’ Josh slurred, leaning towards her, but she pushed him away. ‘You’re a teathe.’

‘If you mean sex,’ Mae said, ‘it has to feel right for me and it would only be a drunken fumble at the moment, wouldn’t it?’ And against the law as Rosie had so recently advised her, she thought but didn’t say. Josh knew that anyway. Best not to antagonise him by saying she didn’t want to lose her virginity here in a secluded lane in the front seat of Josh’s sister’s car.

If she kept Josh talking, doing her best to stop him getting the key in the ignition while she did it, then Josh couldn’t be driving, maybe killing someone because his reactions were reduced by alcohol. She was on the verge of tears now, thinking about her dad and how the last time she’d seen him alive he’d been sitting at the kitchen table, his head in his hands, not looking up as she’d said, ‘Bye, Dad, see you tonight,’ as she left for school. She’d assumed he was tired – yes, that would be it, he’d not slept well and he’d been too tired, lost concentration on the roundabout and mercifully he hadn’t killed anyone else in the accident.

‘I can fumble with the betht of them,’ Josh said.

Which Mae took to mean that although she was a virgin, Josh probably wasn’t.

‘Give me the keys,’ Mae said, but it only served to make Josh hold them higher over his head, jangling them noisily, teasingly out of reach for Mae.

Her dad had laid his car keys on the table in front of him that morning, and Mae had often wondered why. He normally kept them in his pocket, only taking them out as he reached the car before pressing the button to open the door automatically.

She wished now she’d asked why, or at least gone back and given her dad a hug, or kissed the top of his head or something. She’d heard her parents talking low – first her dad’s voice, then her mum’s – late into the night. She’d strained to hear what they were talking about, but they’d made a fine art of talking just quietly enough that Mae, in her bedroom, couldn’t catch the words.

‘Did you let Bailey Lucas do it?’ Josh asked. He leaned sideways and tried to plant a kiss on Mae’s cheek as she sat in the passenger seat beside him, but she jerked her head away from him.

‘I’m not answering that.’

She didn't ask Josh, chapter and verse, what he'd got up to with previous girlfriends, so the same applied – he had no right to ask.

'Yeah, well, I have you down as having better taste than that anyway.'

She was going to have to make a decision about how she was going to get home in a minute. Let Josh drive back up the long lane to the main road, get out, and walk from there was an option. But would Josh stop the car to let her out?

Best keep him talking. Maybe talking would sober him up a bit.

'Bailey's only jealous I'm going out with you now,' Mae said.

Josh shrugged his shoulders. 'He made that pretty obvious! There's all sorts of rumours flying about the place.'

'What sort of rumours?' Mae asked.

'Shtuff.'

Josh jangled the keys high above his head again, and with his other hand began to caress Mae's knee.

Mae pushed his hand away.

'Come here, gorgeous,' Josh said.

'No!'

'You're nothing but a teathe, Mae Howard,' Josh said. 'You were up for it jutht now.'

He was well and truly over the legal limit for driving now, wasn't he? He couldn't say his s's properly.

'Just the kissing, Josh,' Mae whispered, suddenly frightened that if Josh, who was much bigger and stronger than she was, turned nasty down here, with no one to come to her rescue, she could be in real danger. It was the drink talking – she knew that. Josh wasn't a bit like this when he was sober. She wanted the Josh who had come to the funeral parlour with his dad so she'd have the support of someone nearer her own age as she bent to kiss her dad's cold, smooth forehead one last time. He'd come in with her, standing respectfully a step or two behind her even though they didn't really know one another then. The Reverend Maynard had stood beside her, his hand on her elbow. Mae wanted to remember that Josh, not the one who was frightening her. 'And your arms around me like my dad used to put his arms around me, loving and safe,' she finished.

'Well, I'm not your dad, am I?'

Josh turned away from her and began fumbling to get the key in the ignition.

'No, Josh! Don't drive, please. I wouldn't have agreed to come here with you if I'd known you'd drink the whole bottle.'

'You had some of it.'

'Nowhere near as much as you had.' Keep him talking. Perhaps he'd sober up a bit the longer he sat there. Mae reached for her bag in the foot well, and yanked it up onto her lap. Opening it she found a KitKat and a packet of mints. 'Eat these. They might sop up a bit of alcohol. Put you below the limit at least. Please, Josh.'

'Give over, Mae, it was only a few mouthfuls more than you had. I'm fine to drive. I'm used to it. I'm a big bloke. I can take more alcohol than that runt Bailey Lucas before it affects me. *The Leith police dismisseth me*. See, I said that without lipping.'

Runt? Bailey was taller than Josh was, not that that made a person better, or worse.

And then Mae realised Josh had said all of that without slurring his s's and she considered that perhaps he'd been playing games with her before, slurring his words, and he wasn't as drunk as she thought he was. Her mum and dad had often had a bottle of wine on the table in the evenings and at lunch on Sundays, but they only ever had a couple of glasses each, not a whole bottle. She couldn't remember either of them ever slurring their words. There were girls in her year at school who boasted on Mondays how out of their heads on gin or whatever they'd been, but she was never going to be

one of them. She was too scared. What if too much drink turned her into another person, as it was turning Josh into someone she didn't know?

'I still say we should walk, Josh,' Mae said as calmly as she could even though her heart was hammering in her chest now. 'We can tell your sister the car wouldn't start. That you flooded the engine or something.'

Whatever that meant and however you did it, but she'd heard it said on a TV programme only a few nights ago. Maybe Josh would know.

'What? A good vicar's good son tell a lie? What are you asking of me, Mae?' Josh said, looking mock-outraged. 'I know, we could do a bit more kissing while I sober up. How would that be?'

'Hah! You've admitted it. You're drunk.' Mae had had enough now. She closed her bag, did up the buttons on her cardigan, ready to go. 'Well, if you won't walk back, then I will. Mum said not to be late and ...'

'You're listening to your mum?'

Josh made it sound as though Mae listening to her mum was a rare occurrence – rarer than hens' teeth.

'I might be,' Mae said. She opened the car door and tumbled out, but Josh grabbed onto the fabric of her full skirt yanking her back. She heard a ripping sound. 'Josh, no! Let me go. Not my frock. It's the last one Dad bought me before ...'

'Well, he's dead now, isn't he? He's not going to know if it's ripped or not.'

'Don't say that!' Mae yelled. She was a mixture of fear for the situation she was in and anger that Josh, who still had a clump of the material of her frock clasped in a fist, had just said what he had. Besides, there were times when Mae thought she could feel her dad's presence, smell his aftershave, knew that he was somewhere taking care of her, whatever scrapes she might get into.

'I jutht have,' Josh said, theatrically slurring the 's' again, which made Mae certain he was doing it on purpose to frighten her now. 'Oh, bugger off and let me sleep it off.'

Josh let go then and because Mae had been struggling to get away from him, the sudden release of tension made her fall against the door lock, the fabric of her frock catching in it, before she fell out onto the muddy, stony ground. Her knees hit the ground first and there was a searing pain as something sharp caught her below her left knee. She reached out a finger and found blood.

'You've hurt me!' she yelled. She wondered if she'd be able to get back up the lane now. 'Josh ...?'

But there was no answer, so lifting the now-ripped skirt of her dress up over her knees, Mae half ran and half hobbled back up the lane, the heels of her shoes skidding this way and that on the rough, stony ground. If she ran really fast, she could be home in under ten minutes.

But would Josh still want to go out with her after this? Did she still want to go out with him?

Chapter Five

‘Where the heck have you been, Mum?’ Mae said. She was standing by the front door, arms folded. ‘Honestly, you tell me not to be late and I wasn’t, but you weren’t here! And what did I find when I got here? The front door wide open, that’s what!’

Mae’s voice was angry, and if Cara wasn’t mistaken, also a little afraid. One side of Mae’s frock was hanging down a bit; the netting petticoat looked as though the stitching might have come undone. And was that a graze on her daughter’s knee?

‘Mae, what’s happened? Your frock and ...’

‘I’m fine,’ Mae said. ‘Really. I can’t believe you went out leaving the front door open and unlocked. Where have you been?’

‘To the corner shop,’ Cara said. She held up her bag of provisions to show Mae. ‘I’m sure I shut the door behind me. We’ve got guests. Can you believe that? We could be on our way to making money, Mae. But your knee ... Did you fall? I think ...’

‘You don’t want to know, Mum,’ Mae interrupted. ‘But what guests?’

‘Pam and Eddie Hine,’ Cara told her. ‘I think you’d better wash that bloody knee off even if you don’t want to tell me how you did it. There’s Savlon in the cabinet in my bathroom. And then I’ll introduce you to our guests. Okay?’

She ought not to be standing here talking to Mae with guests to see to, but she had an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach that something had gone badly wrong on her date with Josh. Cara made to walk past Mae, but Mae grabbed her arm.

‘Eh?’ she said. ‘What guests? I’ve been in every single room in this house looking for you and there’s no one here.’

‘Oh my God!’ Cara shrugged off Mae’s hand and stumbled into her hallway. She leaned against the newel post at the bottom of the stairs for support. Perhaps Eddie and Pam Hine had changed their minds about stopping and had simply left? Mae had followed her in, so Cara put down her bag of shopping and put an arm around Mae’s shoulders. ‘They said they wanted a full English, but I didn’t have the things for it so I went to shop. I was only gone a few minutes. Fifteen minutes at the most. I made them a pot of tea before I left and I ran all the way there and back. Perhaps they changed their minds?’

And then Cara realised that there had been no car parked outside when she’d left to go to the shop, and they’d had no luggage with them to speak of, only a tartan old-fashioned holdall thing. And she knew, beyond doubt, that if she hadn’t given them the opportunity so recently to steal stuff, she would have found things missing in the morning.

‘Just wait until you see what they’ve done to my room!’ Mae yelled at her, running up the stairs.

Cara followed, her legs feeling like lead and her head pounding.

‘Great idea not, Mum,’ Mae said as Cara walked around the room as if on some sort of automatic pilot picking up Mae’s clothes, which had been strewn all over the bedroom floor in haste by Pam and Eddie Hine – if that was what they were called – as they ransacked it.

Cara felt hot with rage one second and then cold with horror the next, just thinking about the Hines and how they’d touched all Mae’s personal belongings.

‘Your room’s the same, Mum,’ Mae said, as though reading her mind. ‘All the drawers pulled open or tipped out completely on the bed, like they do in TV dramas.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Cara said. ‘I’d give anything for this not to have happened.’

She smoothed and folded Mae’s clothes as carefully as she would had they been freshly laundered, with the scent of lavender fabric conditioner mixed with fresh sea air clinging to them. Although she knew, as she methodically piled Mae’s school blouses and skirts and cardigans, that she

would have to wash everything – everything! – because it was as if she could smell the Hines and the badness that was in them to have done such a thing.

‘They looked perfectly respectable. Middle-aged,’ Cara said.

Mae stared angrily at her.

‘Huh!’ Mae said. ‘How stupid was that, to go out and leave strangers in the house?’

‘Very stupid,’ Cara admitted.

But this was a small place. There was hardly ever any crime and what there was only revolved around the pub when a bit of overdrinking got out of hand and a window got smashed, or someone’s wing mirrors got trashed. Burglary just didn’t happen in a place like Larracombe. Until now.

‘It seems I no longer have a laptop,’ Mae said. ‘So perhaps you could tell me how I’m going to do my homework? We have to do it online, you know.’

‘I know,’ Cara said.

She thought fast. Perhaps Rosie would loan her the money? Or buy one in advance of Mae’s birthday as her birthday present? Rosie was a good and generous present-giver to her goddaughter.

‘That was the last thing Dad ever got me,’ Mae said. ‘I was the last in my class to get a laptop. And he only got it for me then because he wanted to use the computer at night when I wanted to use it for homework. And now you’ve let someone steal it.’

So, Dad good, me bad, Cara thought. She knew she would have to tell Mae about Mark’s gambling soon, but now didn’t quite seem to be the time. While the robbery was making Cara feel uncomfortable, it was by no means as bad as Mark dying within hours of her asking him to leave the family home. Would she have the courage to tell Mae *that*?

‘I’ll get you a new laptop just as soon as I can,’ Cara said. ‘But perhaps Josh could loan you his in the meantime?’

‘That waster,’ Mae sniffed.

It was then that Cara noticed pins down one side of the skirt of Mae’s dress, and that the netting petticoat was more than hanging off. Mae’s knees had stopped bleeding – more bad grazes than deep cuts.

‘What happened tonight, Mae? Your frock? Your knees?’ Cara asked, suddenly cool and calm, her thoughts sharper and more focused. Whatever the Hines might have done was nothing compared to what she thought Josh might have done to Mae to get her into such a state. ‘Between you and Josh?’

‘You can’t ask stuff like that,’ Mae said. ‘Not even because you’re my mother.’

Yes, I bloody can if he’s hurt you, Cara thought. She reached for Mae’s hand.

‘Let’s sit down for a moment, Mae. On your bed. We’ve both had a bit of a shock.’

Much to Cara’s surprise, Mae allowed herself to be led.

‘He drank too much,’ Mae said, still with her hand in Cara’s. ‘I’m certain he’d been drinking before then, although ...’

‘Meg Smythson told me he’d bought wine. And that you were with him.’

‘Do you want to know what happened or not?’ Mae said. ‘Not that I think she had any right to tell you anything.’

‘No, she didn’t. Sorry. That wasn’t meant to sound as though Josh shouldn’t have been buying wine if he wanted to, or that I’m cross that he did. I let you drink wine sometimes. But I need to know, Mae ... did Josh attack you?’

Did he try to rape you? was what she meant but couldn’t bring herself to say the words.

‘No. Not exactly. I only had one glass or maybe a bit more, but Josh had drunk the rest of the bottle and I knew he shouldn’t drive so I tried to get his car keys off him. I wanted him to walk back with me and tell his sister the car had broken down or something, but he didn’t want to. And my frock got ripped when he tried to stop me getting out of the car and ... it’s the last frock Dad ever bought me and it’s special and ...’

And then Mae dissolved into tears. Cara was full of questions, questions she couldn't ask like, where were you when this happened, were there no other people around, did you have sex?

'Time for a hug?' Cara said, opening her arms wide to her daughter.

'Not at the moment,' Mae said, her tears drying up rapidly as she reached for a corner of her quilt and swiped it across her eyes. 'I've been to hell and back, Mum, wondering what had happened to you when you weren't here and stuff was missing. Did you ever think of that?'

It was as though, in that moment, Mae was the adult, and she, Cara, the child.

'No, no I didn't,' Cara said. Whatever had she been thinking of going out and leaving people she didn't know in the house? Yes, she'd been desperate to start making some money for them both but, well ... 'We'd better phone the police.'

'I've already done it. I said I'd get you to ring when you got back.'

'In a minute,' Cara said. 'I'll tidy up a bit here first.'

She only had two vague descriptions of the Hines. Their accents could have been false, and there was no vehicle that she'd seen that could be traced.

'No, don't do that. The police will want to take fingerprints, won't they? Honestly, Mum, sometimes I wonder what planet you're on.'

'Of course. It's the shock. I won't touch another thing. Let's go downstairs. I'll make that call to the police to let them know I'm back and then make a cup of tea. And a bacon sandwich, now I've got the things to make one.'

The last thing Mae would want now was for her to bang on about washing her knees and putting antiseptic on, wasn't it?

'Surprising as it may seem,' Mae said, 'I seem to have lost my appetite.'

'Make that two of us,' Cara said. 'And your frock, Mae. I can mend it.'

'Whatever,' Mae said.

They stood up and together, mother and daughter went down the stairs.

In the kitchen, Cara rang the police to tell them she was home and then busied herself putting bacon and eggs in the fridge, and the bread in the breadbin. Mae sat and watched every movement her mother made around the kitchen as though she was afraid she might disappear again if she took her eyes off her, even for a second. Cara checked the time on the kitchen clock, wondering how long it would be before the police turned up. There was no resident policeman in the village and the nearest manned station about thirty miles away although, she supposed, there might be police nearer than that in a patrol car somewhere.

'Can I have that hug now?' Mae asked.

'Of course.' Cara opened her arms wide and Mae snuggled into them. Cara hugged her tight.

'I thought I was beginning to handle losing Dad,' Mae sniffed against Cara's shoulder.

'But now you find you can't?'

'It seems to be getting worse as I get older, not better. He keeps coming back to me in dreams and it's only in dreams I can remember his voice. And he's only been gone two years. Oh, Mum ...'

'Me, too,' Cara said.

And the tears came for them both. They stood hugging and crying with loud and wracking sobs for ages, until Cara's arms ached with holding Mae to her. But for Cara, none of those tears were cleansing.

And then Cara became aware of someone watching her – that uneasy sort of feeling you get that makes you turn around.

'Evening, ladies.' A policeman with a policewoman standing beside him gave Cara and Mae a rather embarrassed, if kindly smile. 'We did knock, but ...'

'We were making too much racket,' Cara said. 'Sorry ...'

'Don't be,' the WPC said. 'A break in, is that right?'

‘No,’ Cara said. ‘I very stupidly went out and left two people who came wanting B&B for a couple of nights alone while I went to get a few bits from Meg Smythson at the corner shop. Mae came home earlier than expected and found her room trashed – and mine, although I’ve not looked in there yet—...’ Her throat began to close over with emotion again, and she couldn’t get any more words out.

‘Shall I make tea?’ the WPC said.

Cara nodded. The evening was beginning to feel more surreal than ever, watching a strange woman – albeit a policewoman – searching for things in Cara’s cupboards and drawers, filling the kettle at Cara’s kitchen tap, while she felt herself unravel a bit emotionally, like a dropped stitch in knitting, she knew she could recover with patience and the right tool but couldn’t at that moment.

‘Have you touched anything?’ the policeman asked when they were all seated around Cara’s kitchen table.

‘I haven’t,’ Cara said. ‘Well, only the clothes strewn all over the place in Mae’s room. Mae met me at the door and we went straight upstairs. I looked in the sitting room but didn’t go in. There’s silver missing. I could see that straight away.’

Silver that had been in my family for generations, she wanted to add, but didn’t because it would add nothing to the investigation. But it was the void that was hurting most – the family heirloom silver, which had had a grounding effect, anchoring her to her past in some way, had been snatched away.

‘And you, Mae?’ the policeman asked. ‘Have you touched much?’

‘Doors. I opened and closed every door. So my fingerprints will be on there, right?’

‘They will,’ the policewoman said. ‘But we can eliminate all of yours in seconds once forensics get here. I’ve set that in motion. They shouldn’t be long. It’s a quiet night, apart from this.’

‘How long will it take?’ Cara asked.

‘Forensics?’ The policeman checked his mobile. ‘ETA about ten minutes and then an hour or so.’

‘Oh,’ Cara said, unable to stifle a yawn.

‘It’s best done now,’ the policewoman said. ‘And it if helps, I know what this feels like because my mother’s bungalow was burgled when she was in A&E having a broken wrist seen to. There was a feeling of ...’

‘Don’t!’ Mae interrupted. ‘You were going to say evil, I know it. Miasma or something. We did a tutorial on it in psychology. Evil leaves a tangible presence, far more than good does. And these people were pure evil to do this.’

Mae shivered, hunched her shoulders up around her ears, and a lightning rod of guilt shot through Cara for putting her daughter through this. She struggled to find words of comfort or remorse or regret – apology even – but nothing would come. But Mae filled the gap.

‘I just knew something bad had happened because the air wasn’t right. I was afraid something had happened to Mum.’

‘Oh, darling,’ Cara managed to croak out. ‘But perhaps we should be answering questions about the Hines?’ She looked from one officer to the other.

‘In a moment,’ the policewoman said. ‘Anything else, Mae?’

How kind this very young policewoman was being, how understanding; to allow Mae to talk about how the shock of the burglary had affected her.

‘No, that’s about it,’ Mae said.

Cara told the police officers everything she could remember of Pam and Eddie Hine – what they’d been wearing, hair colour, accents, the small bag they’d brought in with them – from the few moments she’d spent in their company. She knew now she’d gifted them the opportunity to steal when she’d gone to the shop, but she had no doubt they’d have more than likely done a moonlight flit, and left without paying, taking stuff with them anyway.

‘They can’t have got much in the small bag they had,’ she finished.

‘Duh, Mum!’ Mae said, slapping a hand to her forehead, cartoon comedy-style. ‘They’d have had something else in that bag, like a roll of black sacks or something. They probably had a car parked around the corner as well.’

‘Really?’ Cara said, wondering how her daughter had become so streetwise all of a sudden.

‘Really,’ the policeman said, ‘we need you to check where you kept jewellery, money, anything like family heirloom medals, that sort of thing. Small, portable things. To check what’s missing. If you have photos of any valuables, that would be more than helpful. Ah, here’s forensics now. Shall I let them in?’

‘Do,’ Cara said. ‘I’ll make a list of what I think is missing.’

And then the house became noisy with the organised bustle of people moving about and voices and the beep of phones as the police contacted colleagues at the station. Mae was practically glued to Cara’s side as she went from room to room jotting things down, still afraid she’d find her mother missing again if she lost sight of her.

‘All done,’ the policewoman said, coming into the sitting room where there was still the evidence of forensics testing on all the furniture, and where Cara was sitting on the couch, with Mae beside her, snuggling in. They’d been at loggerheads more than a bit of late and Cara was finding it monumentally sad that a difficult moment with Josh and then the burglary had been the catalyst to the change in their relationship.

‘Thank you,’ Cara said. ‘For being so kind and everything. I expect this is an everyday occurrence for you, but it’s a whole new experience – and a salutary lesson not to leave strangers in my home – for me. For us.’ She turned and smiled, somewhat guiltily, at Mae. ‘Isn’t it, darling?’

‘Mmm,’ Mae said and yawned.

‘We’ll leave you to get to bed, then,’ the policeman laughed. ‘We’ll be in touch. We’ll see ourselves out.’

Cara heard them talking in the hall. And then another voice joining them.

‘Josh,’ Mae said, with the hint of a question. ‘That can’t be Josh’s voice.’

Cara got up to investigate. She heard the policewoman say ‘Goodnight, Josh,’ and then the door banged quite noisily in the frame, the wind getting up and blowing in from the east.

‘What’s he doing here?’ Mae called after her mother.

‘I don’t know,’ Cara said.

And then Josh was in the doorway. Cara hadn’t met him before, although she knew who he was and had seen him about. Up close he looked well-built, muscled, with thick straw-coloured hair, and a fringe that looked as though he’d cut it himself with a Swiss Army knife. He looked every inch a man who worked physically for a living. He had his hands stuffed into the pockets of his jeans, and Cara noticed he was wearing trainers but no socks, and that his T-shirt stretched across a broad chest. He practically filled the doorway with his presence – rather the worse for drink – and Cara shuddered to think Mae had had to challenge him like this. Mae would have stood no chance against Josh had he pushed his case for whatever it was he’d had on his mind.

‘What do you want, Josh?’ Cara asked. She folded her arms across her chest, doing her best to block Josh’s view of Mae, although she realised she was being totally ineffective.

‘I saw the police car outside. What’ve you been saying, Mae?’ he asked.

‘Nothing about you,’ Mae said. ‘Why would I waste my breath?’

‘Some guests I thought were bona fide B&B guests were anything but,’ Cara explained.

‘Ah, right,’ Josh said, sounding relieved that Mae hadn’t called them to report him, although why he hadn’t thought the police would have arrested him if she had, Cara couldn’t think. The drink, probably, clouding his thinking.

‘That sucks,’ Josh said. ‘Sorry. Anyway, I walked back should anyone be asking. You were right, Mae. I wasn’t in a fit state to drive, but I’ve sobered up now. I don’t know what Mae’s told you, Mrs Howard, but I was properly out of order. I apologise for that, frightening her and that.’

‘I appreciate that,’ Cara said. ‘But what with the burglary and the police being here, Mae and I haven’t had chance to talk about ... well, whatever it was that happened between you tonight. Apart from the fact you’d had too much to drink and she felt she had to get away.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Josh said, nodding. He looked more than a little embarrassed now, as though he was regretting coming. He ran his tongue around his lips as though he was nervous and they’d suddenly gone dry. ‘I’m sorry about what happened to your frock and that, Mae.’

‘You’re not the only one!’ Mae snapped.

Cara flinched at the vehemence in her daughter’s words, but could understand her reason for it. This whole conversation was beginning to feel bizarre – as though they were all part of some stage play, a farce or something – and she considered inviting Josh to come on in, have a cup of coffee to sober up further before he went home, but it was getting late now and she was bone-tired.

‘Actually,’ Mae went on, ‘I don’t think the police should have let you just walk in here.’

‘WPC Maynard? My cousin? Amy?’ He said it as though he thought Mae ought to have known. ‘Her dad – my dad’s brother – is superintendent down Plymouth way. I told Amy we were going out, and I’d seen their car and thought I’d just pop in and see how things are. So, what’s happened here? Just a straightforward burglary or ...

‘Like burglaries are just normal, right?’ Mae snapped.

‘Darling ...’ Cara began. She was about to admonish Mae for being rude, snappy, but decided against it. Of *course* her daughter was angry about not just the burglary, but what Josh had done as well. She would allow her to express that anger, rather than have it fester inside.

‘Have you been hurt, Mae? Mrs Howard?’ Josh asked as though neither she nor Mae had spoken. He walked into the room without being asked. ‘Has much been stolen?’

‘A fair bit,’ Cara said.

‘Sorry,’ Josh said. ‘Looks a bit of a mess in here.’

‘It does,’ Cara said, and left it at that. There were gaps on the dresser where the silver had been and drawers had been left open, cushions scattered, and the seat pads of the couches pulled out as the Hines had riffled swiftly through her home. *They* were a mess – her and Mae. All she wanted in that moment was for Josh to leave so that she and Mae could take a shower and get to bed. She might suggest they share a room tonight because if Mae felt as shaky as she did, she probably wouldn’t want to sleep alone. ‘But it will get better.’

‘Like I said, I saw the police car and well, I wasn’t exactly a gent earlier to Mae, Mrs Howard, and I thought Mae might have made a complaint or something.’

‘I guessed that might be the case,’ Cara said.

‘Well, now you know I didn’t,’ Mae said. ‘Not as entirely altruistic as checking to see we were okay, but—’

‘Mae,’ Cara interrupted, ‘can we just leave this? I’m tired, you’re tired, and I think Josh has had as much of a shock as any of us.’

Cara knew Josh was popular with the girls and, if rumour had it, some older women too, and it can’t have been easy for him having a fifteen-year-old squaring up to him, refusing to do his bidding, although why Cara was feeling sympathetic towards him she had no idea – tiredness probably.

‘Yeah,’ Josh said. He hung his head. ‘Sorry. You know, for being a jerk earlier and also about the robbery. Hope they catch whoever did it. Have they cleaned you out?’

There wasn’t a lot to be ‘cleaned out’ seeing as Mark had pretty much done that.

‘Pretty much,’ Cara said with a yawn – the last thing she wanted was to pursue this conversation, but poor Josh was looking genuinely contrite now, and concerned. ‘Mae’s laptop. Her jewellery. And a fair bit of my stuff’s gone as well.’

‘Look, Mrs Howard,’ Josh said. ‘I can see you want me to go. I can see you’re both pretty shook up and tired by events. It’s true I saw the police car and panicked a bit, wondering what it was Mae might have said about me earlier, but I was on my way here anyway. When I sobered up, I

remembered stuff. So I've got something I have to tell you. Before Mae hears it in the village. Bailey Lucas is spreading rumours. Look, can I speak to you on your own, Mrs. Howard?'

'No!' Mae shrieked. 'Everyone treats me like a baby and I'm not. Anything you have to say to Mum you can say to me. Right, Mum?'

'What do you want to tell me?' Cara asked.

'Not in front of Mae,' Josh persisted.

'Oh, stuff it!' Mae said. 'That Bailey Lucas is just making trouble because I finished with him. I only went out with him a couple of times anyway so it's not like we were an item! Whatever he's saying it's probably nothing much, nothing even worth staying here to listen to anyway. I'm going to have a shower and wash my hair because the thought that strangers have been through my stuff is making me feel dirty. Get it? Let me know when I'm old enough to be in your company, Josh Maynard!'

Cara watched her daughter go, waited until she heard the shower running. Josh put his hands in the pockets of his jeans and took them out again at least half a dozen times.

'So?' Cara asked when the shower had been running for a good two minutes – Mae would be in there at least fifteen minutes.

'Bailey Lucas is saying that Mae's dad had a huge gambling habit and owed money and that half the goods from this house are in pawn shops all over Devon or sold to whoever would buy them. Pub landlords mostly.'

Cara put her hands to her mouth. What could she say? She'd kept Mark's gambling from Mae until now. But even she hadn't known about the selling of her household goods in pubs until Rosie had told her. But pawn shops? Cara didn't even know where there was one – or what you had to do to use one. But she didn't doubt what Josh was saying was true – Mark's addiction had been so great she'd often wondered if he'd sell his own body to fund it. Why, she wondered, was all this coming out now, two years after Mark's death? Respect, perhaps, for when she was newly widowed had stopped people saying anything before, but now time had passed, tongues were loosening up again?

'Do you have proof Bailey Lucas is saying these things?'

'Well, um ...'

'You haven't, have you?'

'Must be him. We met him in Meg Smythson's earlier and he was, like, confrontational. His sister, Xia, works behind the bar ...'

'That's not proof, Josh,' Cara said. 'And I think it would be a good idea not to spread that particular rumour yourself. But it is true my husband gambled.'

'But Mae doesn't know?'

'No. Not yet.'

'I won't say a word,' Josh said. 'But she needs to know. Soon.'

'Of course. But I have to find the right moment. Come with me.' Josh followed as she led the way into the kitchen. 'You probably noticed the patches on the walls that hadn't faded like the rest of it ... where paintings had been. It's the same in here. Mark took the paintings, little by little, to sell them to fund his gambling. He left me – us, Mae and me – choosing gambling over his family. And it seems the Hines have taken what Mark left behind: my mother's silver, which was valuable.'

Cara knew she might be taking a risk telling Josh, but he seemed more man than boy. And he was the son of a vicar. He had to be used to his father being told things that would go no further.

'Lowlifes,' Josh said.

'More than,' Cara agreed. 'But I can't risk telling Mae any of that, Josh ...'

But then Mae came back into the kitchen in the towelling robe that had been her dad's – her comfort robe she'd called it, wrapping it around her the night Cara had told her that her dad had been killed, and using it at every opportunity since; it drowned her, making her look so vulnerable, so small somehow, although she was already five feet six inches tall, almost as tall as Cara. Mae fiddled with the towel wound around her wet hair, loosening it then winding it tight again.

‘Can’t tell me what?’ Mae said.

‘That you’re very beautiful when you’re angry,’ Josh said, grinning at them both. ‘The biggest cliché of them all but hey, it’s true at the moment. Forgive?’ he finished, making a prayer gesture with his hands to Mae, and Cara remembered how Meg Smythson had said Josh could charm the birds from the trees. Was that a flutter of Mae’s eyelashes?

‘I might consider it,’ Mae said.

‘Another chance?’ Josh asked.

‘Try me?’ Mae said, which served for Cara’s heart to plummet to somewhere down around her feet that she hadn’t given Mark another chance – all this wouldn’t be happening if she had. ‘As long as alcohol isn’t involved.’

‘Not a drop will pass my lips,’ Josh said. ‘That was one wake-up call tonight.’

‘Yeah, but just remember,’ Mae said, ‘that actions speak louder than words. Right?’

Josh’s eyes widened in surprise at Mae’s words, which made Cara want to laugh. But how proud she was in that moment of her feisty daughter, coming back from her shock and commanding the situation.

‘Indeed,’ Josh said, pulling himself up tall, and looking directly at Mae. ‘I was wondering if you fancy going sailing next weekend?’

Mae shrugged. I dunno, the shrug said, but Cara could tell by the light in Mae’s eyes and knowing how she loved sailing with Mark that she was considering it.

It seemed Josh had come to that conclusion too because he said, ‘If, you know, you haven’t got any gear any more you can borrow a lifejacket from my sister. And even her Helly Hansen. She won’t mind. That okay with you, Mrs Howard?’

‘As long as Mae’s comfortable with it,’ Cara said. Rosie’s voice came into her head asking her what the hell she was thinking agreeing to let her daughter go off with someone who was obviously a professional charmer, because hadn’t he turned the situation around, barging in scared out of his wits about what Mae might have told the police about him, and when he found she’d said nothing at all and that Cove End had been robbed by the Hines, he’d come over all concerned for her and Mae to suit his own ends? ‘Mae?’

‘Yeah. Fine,’ Mae said. ‘Maybe I need the diversion? Text me, eh? Saturday or Sunday. Whichever’s best for tides and weather.’

Cara let out an audible sigh of relief that Mae had water safety uppermost in her mind.

‘Yeah, will do,’ Josh said. ‘Better let you get your beauty sleep, then. Not that you need it, Mae.’

‘Oh give over, Maynard,’ Mae laughed. ‘I’m getting the drift. You’re sorry. You’re making amends, and I think you might be making my mother sick with all your smarmy charm, but it doesn’t fool me. Any more and I’ll change my mind about the weekend.’

Mae yawned theatrically and it was all Cara could do not to burst out laughing. Mae might not have a father around to look out for her any more, but she was learning how to stick up for herself and Cara had to be thankful for that.

‘You’re too kind,’ Josh said, laughing. ‘I’ll see myself out.’

And then he was gone.

‘You can change your mind if you want to, darling,’ Cara said. ‘You know, when you’ve had more time to think things through. If you think Josh might just be saying things he wants us to hear?’

Mae sighed heavily.

‘Is this a lecture?’ she asked.

‘No, but a lot’s happened here tonight, and I wouldn’t want you to make a rash decision because of it.’

‘I haven’t. Okay?’ Mae’s eyebrows were practically meeting in the middle in indignation. And then she smiled at Cara, a broad beaming smile that lit up her face. ‘Why would I not want to see him again? You saw him. He’s like, lush!’

Cara couldn't think of a thing to say about that. Yes, Josh Maynard was a looker. And the word lush could mean more than drop-dead desirable – not that Cara was going to mention that right now.

'Okay,' Cara said. 'You've got school in the morning. Up the wooden hill?'

'When I've dried my hair.' Mae roughly rubbed the towel over her hair. 'And, Mum ... can I, like, sleep in your room tonight?'

'Of course,' Cara said, relieved that she wouldn't now need to ask that same question of Mae and get, perhaps, a flat refusal for the asking. Tonight had brought mother and daughter a little closer together. An ill wind and all that ...

'Just tonight, you understand?'

'Of course,' Cara said again. Even the fact that the Hines had violated her space by searching through drawers and wardrobes, and even under the bed, couldn't take away her joy that she would have Mae lying close to her and could reach and give her reassurance in the night if she needed it.

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