



A funny and uplifting  
holiday rom-com!

Coming Home  
to  
Wishington  
Bay



Maxine Morrey

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**Coming Home to Wishington Bay**

«HarperCollins»

## **Morrey M.**

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‘A stunning, perfect novel – it literally took my breath away.’ The Writing Garnet, 5 stars  
Home is where the heart is... Holly doesn't have time for a holiday this year. But when her job threatens to send her over the brink, her boss insists she take a sabbatical. So she packs her bags and escapes to her beloved grandmother Gigi's house on Wishington Bay, which has sat empty since Gigi passed away. But Holly's dreams of a coastal escape take an unexpected turn. Holly didn't expect to spend time with any man this summer – let alone an Aussie Adonis...but when she meets her next door neighbour Gabe and his little dog Bryan, it's clear her quiet summer of strolling along the sand and wandering through the seaside village's tiny streets on her own will come with a hefty dose of distraction. With a summer to fill and Gigi's wonderful and surprising house to sort through, Holly knew it would be a summer packed with old memories. She just didn't expect to make so many new ones... Coming Home to Wishington Bay is the new gorgeous uplifting rom-com from Maxine Morrey, perfect for fans of Sarah Morgan and Tilly Tennant! Readers LOVE Coming Home to Wishington Bay! ‘I loved this gorgeous, warm, funny romance and cannot recommend it enough.’ Amazon reviewer, 5 stars ‘I want to move to Wishington Bay!’ Amazon reviewer, 5 stars ‘A warm hug of a book.’ Rachel's Random Reads, 5 stars ‘A charming story filled with fun, romance and love!’ Rae Reads, 5 stars ‘A fabulous read... Had me laughing out loud throughout.’ Amazon reviewer, 5 stars ‘Just gorgeous!’ Amazon reviewer, 5 stars ‘A delightful warm read that wrapped itself around my heart... Simply perfect.’ Amazon reviewer, 5 stars ‘Full to the brim with uplifting energy, feel-good beach vibes, and characters you fall in love with; guaranteed to put a smile on your face.’ Gem Bee Reader, 5 stars ‘Wishington Bay is the perfect place to wrap yourself in Maxine Morrey's witty sense of humour and snuggly warmth.’ Victoria Cooke

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## About the Author

**MAXINE MORREY** has wanted to be a writer for as long as she can remember and wrote her first (very short) book for school when she was ten.

As time went by, she continued to write, but ‘normal’ work often got in the way. She has written articles on a variety of subjects, as well as a local history book on Brighton. However, novels are her first love.

In August 2015, she won HarperCollins/Carina UK’s ‘Write Christmas’ competition with her first romantic comedy, ‘Winter’s Fairytale’.

Maxine lives on the south coast of England, and when not wrangling with words loves to read, sew and listen to podcasts. Being a fan of tea and cake, she can (should!) also be found doing something vaguely physical at the gym.

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## Readers love Maxine Morrey!

'I've fallen **head over heels** for Maxine's writing style'

'I'm a **big fan of Maxine's writing** and I love how she is able to write **lighthearted romantic comedies** that have **serious issues** at their centre'

'I **love** Maxine Morrey's books'

'Hand on heart, **I could read a Maxine Morrey novel every day** of the week without getting bored'

'I'm a **big fan of Morrey's books**'

'Maxine has this way of **captivating her readers** with **charismatic and memorable** characters'

## **Also by Maxine Morrey**

*Winter's Fairytale*

*The Christmas Project*

*The Best Little Christmas Shop*

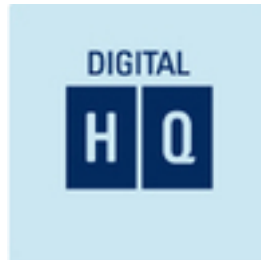
*Around the World With My Ex*

*Second Chance at the Ranch*

*No Place Like Home*

# Coming Home to Wishington Bay

## MAXINE MORREY



HQ

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**For James**

## Chapter 1

It was strange waking to the sound of soft waves rather than angry car horns and emergency vehicle sirens. Especially as, for the last ten years, I had been attempting to create this very scenario with the help of a little machine from which I could pick a range of background noises, depending upon where I wished to be deposited in my mind's eye. Most of the time I played it safe and kept away from the exotic-sounding Tropical Jungle or Wild Flowing River, opting instead for the simple and ever-reliant Waves. But today there was no need for a machine. Today I had the Real Thing, which was much, much better. And it didn't even need batteries. Although, if I'm honest, ever since I found out that the man I'd been dating thought girlfriends qualified as a 'two for the price of one' deal, batteries were something I tended to keep a stock of. You know. Just in case.

I lay in the soft, comfy double bed a little longer, listening to the swoosh of the water and watching the barely there breeze kiss the light voile curtains I'd hung last night. Shutters closed out the light and gave me privacy but the drapes softened the look, making it more feminine and pretty. Not that I was too worried about privacy. The house – a 1930s Art Deco inspiration that had been split into two dwellings decades ago – was set right on the beach and was accessed down a private, winding lane that only went to this place. I was sure to hear my neighbour's car and it was unlikely that anyone else would be just passing by. And, whilst I wasn't generally the type to be wandering around naked in my home, I didn't feel I should have to rule out the option entirely.

After a quick but invigorating shower, I pulled open the top drawer on the old dresser I'd hurriedly unpacked into last night and lifted out a matching set of ridiculously expensive underwear. I smiled as I put them on, at the complete indulgence of it all. Although beautiful, they were also incredibly overpriced. And frankly, this set wasn't even that practical – but oh so pretty! Still. Everything else in my life was sensible. Ordered. This was my one outlet. Even if I was the only one who ever got to see them.

I grabbed hold of that particular thought and tossed it to the back of my mind where it belonged before slipping my arms into the silk kimono robe I'd bought on a holiday to Japan several years ago. Leaving it flowy and unbelted, I wandered into the bathroom. Picking up my toothbrush from the cut-glass holder on the side, I oozed some paste onto it, gave it a quick flash under the tap and started brushing. With my other hand, I reached over and pulled up the blind. And suddenly I was no longer the only one getting to see my posh undies – the bloke on the ladder at my window was currently also getting a complete eyeful!

My scream of fright was immediately followed by the clatter of my toothbrush as it bounced into the sink. His cry of surprise and swift disappearance was immediately followed by a louder clatter of the ladder hitting the ground. I quickly belted the gown and rushed down the stairs, grabbing my mobile on the way. I hadn't got a good look at my potential burglar before he went tumbling earthbound but my mind had registered that there had been a sizeable bulk on the ladder – albeit briefly. Definitely more than I could realistically wrangle into a citizen's arrest anyway. With a bit of luck he wouldn't be hurt, just mildly unconscious, and would stay that way until the police arrived.

Hurrying through the door and out onto the patio, I came to an abrupt halt when I saw that the man was not unconscious as I'd hoped, but sitting up, inspecting a cut on his shin. He wore a loose T-shirt which looked like it had seen better days, well-washed cargo shorts and bare feet. The entire look was now accessorised with a liberal application of fresh, white paint. But the most exceptionally inconvenient thing was that, without doubt, he was the most good-looking man I'd ever met. His gaze shifted from his shin to me.

'Are you all right?' I asked.

He stared at me for a moment with a look that could freeze ice before glancing away again, ignoring my question.

Bristling, I crossed my arms. 'You should know I've called the police!'

'Great. That saves me doing it,' he said calmly, a slight Australian accent coating his words.

'Excuse me? Why would you call the police? Oh wait! I get it,' I said, sticking my hands on my hips. 'You're one of these burglars who hurts themselves breaking into someone's property and then sues the innocent owner! Well, good luck with that one. I'm friends with two of the top barristers in the country so if you think—'

'Good for you,' he cut across me. 'I'm not a burglar.'

'Of course you're not,' I replied, my words heavy with sarcasm.

'How many burglars do you know who paint the properties they're breaking in to?' He got to his feet and bent to pick up a brush from the ground, holding it up to me in order to emphasise his point.

'How do I know that's not a prop?'

He gave me a look that made me think that it probably, most definitely, wasn't a prop.

'I suggest you get dressed unless you want the police to cart you away in your underwear.'

I glanced down at my attire, and realised the belt was slipping, giving him yet another glimpse. Yanking at it, I tied it tighter, wincing as it pinched me. Wiggling things a little looser, I tried again.

'I am not being carted off anywhere, thank you very much. I have every right to be here. You, on the other hand, have none. Even if you're weren't trying to break in to my house, you still had a ladder up against the wall, peering in my window! That's also illegal, in case you didn't know!'

'I had a ladder up against the wall because I was painting the window frames! The blinds and shutters were closed, same as they've been for months. I had no idea you were even here! Believe me, spying was not on the agenda. I've absolutely no wish to peer at you. I can think of better ways to spend my time – no offence.'

Oddly enough, I was a little offended, although I wasn't entirely sure why. 'Well! That's a relief!' I huffed out.

'And, by the way, you don't have a right to be here. I think you and your solicitor pals need to do some swotting up on your squatters' rights. So, if you really have called the police on me, and don't want to get arrested yourself, I'd get moving.'

'I beg your pardon – my what? Do I look like a squatter?' I asked, palms to the sky. 'This is my house.'

'Well, now I know you're lying. This place belongs to Betty Gardner's granddaughter, Holly.'

'That's me.'

'She's blonde. Gigi showed me a picture. Nice try, sweetheart.'

'It's called peroxide, *sweetheart*. I went back to my natural colour eighteen months ago!'

Why on earth was I stood on my patio, in my underwear, explaining myself to this man?

He took a couple of steps toward me, slowly, his brow wrinkling.

'Holly?'

I stood up straighter, crossing my arms back over my chest. 'I seem to be at a disadvantage.'

'I'm ...' A fleeting frown crossed his brow. 'I was Gigi's neighbour, Gabe McKinley.'

He must have assumed I'd popped up from the cabbage patch if he thought I was going to buy that one. 'Ha! I don't think so,' I said, laughing. 'I mean, nice try, but I know for a fact that my grandmother's neighbour was a respectable local doctor, not some surf-dude handyman. I don't know what you want but I think it's best if you leave now before I really do call the police.'

'You mean you haven't already?'

'I was busy checking that you hadn't killed yourself on my patio.'

'Actually, the half I ended up on is mine.'

I rolled my eyes. 'Oh, of course. And just why were you painting *my* window frames? Surely as a doctor you have plenty more important things to be getting on with.' I made sure to emphasise the word 'doctor'.

‘I have the weekend off, and I’m painting them because I made a promise to Gigi that I’d look after the house for her for as long as it was necessary. She told me she’d left it to you but didn’t know if, or when, you’d use it. It’s been empty for months and the frames needed repainting. I did half last weekend and thought I’d get the rest done today.’ He paused and looked at me directly with eyes the colour of a Mediterranean summer sky. ‘I’m sorry if I frightened you. If I’d realised you were here, I’d have let you know. It’s just that it’s been so long, I really didn’t expect anyone. I just assumed you had no interest in—’

‘I do have an interest in it!’ I snapped, cutting him off.

But he was right, and it was that knowledge that was making me extra snappy. It had been too long. My grandmother had passed away early last summer, a little over a year ago now. We’d just spent a week together in London and had the most wonderful time. Two days later, I’d had a call from my brother to say that she’d passed away in her sleep. It was another three days before I stopped crying. For the first time in ten years, bar a couple of holidays, I’d taken a few days off work and sobbed practically the entire time.

My grandmother was the one person in the world I had felt totally understood me. And now she was gone. The reason I hadn’t come back to Wishington Bay before was not because it held little interest for me, but entirely the opposite – because it meant so very much. The walls themselves were infused with all the happy memories and laughter and love that being with Gigi, as I called my grandmother – she was far too glamorous to have ever settled for something as ordinary as “Gran” – created. It was beyond painful to know that she was gone and that no more of those memories would ever be made and if I was honest, I knew I still hadn’t come to terms with losing her. And this stranger – whoever he claimed to be – had the cheek to stand there and say that I had no interest! He knew absolutely nothing about me. Except what my underwear looked like, of course.

‘Look. I don’t know who you are, but I think it’s best you leave.’

‘I’ve told you who I am.’

I glanced over at him and rolled my eyes.

‘Oh. Yes. The doctor. Right.’

Honestly, he couldn’t have looked less like a doctor if he’d tried. His dark blond hair was streaked where the sun had kissed it, not to mention in need of a good cut. Glancing around at his side of the house, I could see a surfboard propped up and there had definitely not been a car in the driveway last night when I’d got here. I mean, what doctor didn’t have a car?

I blew out a sigh and looked up at him. He looked back at me with those intense eyes again. I met his gaze. For a moment my mind drifted as I considered that had this been a different situation I might well have agreed with anything he said. He could have told me the moon was made of cheese and I’d have happily handed him a cracker. I gave myself a mental shake. Looks weren’t everything. I was the last person who needed to be told that. The fact that he was so downright gorgeous was my first reason for not trusting him as far as I could throw him. And bearing in mind he had about a foot in height on me and looked to weigh about twice as much as I did, that wasn’t likely to be very far at all.

‘Right. Perhaps if you’d come down to visit Gigi occasionally, we might have been introduced.’

His voice had a tone to it that I didn’t appreciate.

‘I did visit her! I spent plenty of time with her, thank you. It just often worked better if it was in London, rather than down here.’

‘Worked better for whom?’

I glared at him, astounded by the absolute cheek of this man.

‘You think it was better for an elderly lady to get onto trains and travel up to the city than for you to get in your swanky car and drive a couple of hours?’

‘How dare you! Gigi loved coming up to town. And I didn’t want to put her out by coming here. And if you really had known her at all, you’d also know that describing her as an elderly lady would definitely not have been the path to her good books.’

He paused a beat. 'OK, fair enough. I did actually say something along those lines once and she didn't talk to me for two days, so I'll give you that one.'

I made a sort of huffing noise that told him how grateful I was to have been bestowed such an honour.

'But as for the rest? You can keep telling yourself that, but those journeys took it out of her. You never saw her when she got back.' He shook his head and bent to pick up the empty can that had once held paint for the window frames. 'I'll finish the painting when you've gone.'

'Don't bother! I don't want you anywhere near my house.'

He turned and walked back towards me. I stood my ground, returning his glare.

'Look. I made a promise to someone I cared about and I'm not about to break it.' With that, he turned and strode off. A minute later, I heard the door on that side of the house slam. Great! A perfect start to my summer in Wishington Bay.

## Chapter 2

I went back inside and stomped up the stairs. Flinging off my robe, I marched into the bathroom, pulled the blinds back down with a force they didn't deserve, and finished cleaning my teeth. Rinsing the brush, I noticed my knuckles were white and dropped the brush back into the glass. I flexed my hand and stretched my neck from side to side, trying to ease the stress that now filled my body. I couldn't help my mind replaying the exchange with my neighbour. And it kept getting hooked on the fact that this man – Gabe – had called my grandmother Gigi.

Now dressed, I went back downstairs and dropped a pod into the coffee machine I'd brought down with me last night. As I waited for it to brew, I drummed my fingers on the counter. I checked my phone for messages, glanced over the financial headlines, scanned the FTSE 100, plus all the other main markets I dealt in, opened my personal email app and deleted some junk, before logging into my work one. Of course, I'd set up an out-of-office on it, saying that I was on sabbatical for the next few months and who to contact instead, but it was always best to check, just in case. People relied on me. But apparently my colleagues were handling things well and there were no messages awaiting a reply as yet. I took the mug from the machine, walked through to the living room and sank down into the overstuffed pale pink velvet sofa.

How many times had I sat here with my grandmother, my beloved Gigi, talking things over? Crying, laughing and feeling something I'd never felt anywhere else – home and loved. Gigi wasn't her real name. That's why it had taken me by surprise when Gabe McKinley had used that particular moniker. Her real name was Betty and to the village, and the rest of the world, that's who she was. Gigi was the nickname she reserved for very special people, those absolutely closest to her.

I knew my grandmother had become very attached to her neighbour. She'd been lonelier than she'd ever admit once Grandpa died, but her spirits had lifted shortly after letting next door to Dr McKinley. She'd even had the leasing agreement rewritten to allow him to stay there as long as he wanted, even once the property was sold. Or, as it turned out, inherited. Gigi was always singing his praises to me – this wonderful doctor – and I knew she wanted me to meet him. My own choices in men hadn't exactly been stellar. She'd always said I could do better, and that she knew someone who would be perfect for me, hinting at her apparently attractive neighbour.

But it never happened – the one and only time I hadn't had a chance to think up an excuse during an impromptu visit I'd made, she'd called round to his place only to find he was on shift at the local hospital. I could remember feeling both a little relieved and a little disappointed at the time. I trusted Gigi implicitly, and she certainly couldn't have made a worse decision when it came to men than I'd already accomplished with my past relationships. Although, if the man I'd met this morning really was the one she'd been trying to set me up with, then it looked like – for the first time in her life – Gigi might have been way off base. How dare he accuse me of not caring about my grandmother, or this place! He knew nothing about me and had no idea that she, and this place, had in fact meant everything.

Reaching over, I pulled my bag towards me across the coffee table. I slid my hand inside, unzipped a slim inside pocket and pulled out a single piece of rose-coloured notepaper. After unfolding it, I ran my fingertips over Gigi's flowing handwriting, all loops and swirls. Her writing, as with everything about her, was ebullient and glamorous, written in blue ink with the mother of pearl fountain pen Grandpa had bought her a few days after he'd met her – so that she would always have a pen to write to him with, he said. The engraving read *Today, Tomorrow, Forever* followed by a swirly heart. The inscription was still as clear today as when he'd given it to her in Paris all those years ago. I looked at the writing now, wishing more than anything that she was here. But at least I still had her words.

*My dearest, darling Holly,*

*As you will now know, I have left the house at Wishington Bay to you. I know your first thought will be that it should have been to both of you, but I have explained everything to Ned in his own letter. Both of you have been left things of the same value, but in different ways that, hopefully, suit you best.*

*I know that Ned and Carrie will soon be blessed with the children they so wish for and I do not want them to ever have to worry about providing for their education, or find themselves having to work such long hours that they never see them. Therefore, this has been taken care of. Of course, there is a little extra as well – strictly to be used just for fun!*

I smiled as I read that, feeling Gigi all around me, laughing and insisting on us doing something else ‘just for fun!’ Feeling my eyes dampen, I rubbed them with the heel of my hand and continued reading:

*For you, darling girl, I had to think a little harder. Unlike Ned, I’ve never quite known what it is you want from your life, and I think that’s because you haven’t yet discovered it either. But, don’t worry, you will. And, what better place to think about all those sorts of things than here, at Wishington Bay. The house is yours to do as you wish with, so don’t feel any compulsion to keep it if that’s not what you want.*

*I have so many wonderful memories of you all in this house. You were always so happy here, and I hope that you will be again – even if you just stay for a weekend.*

*I am so proud of you, Holly, my darling. I hope I told you that enough. You’re so bright, and beautiful and your heart, even though you keep it guarded, is of the kindest type. I only wish your mother could have seen what a wonderful woman you grew up to be. But rest assured, we are all together now, looking down over you and wishing you everything your heart could want.*

*With all my love, now and forever, Gigi.*

I put the letter on the table in front of me, tucked my knees up to my chest and sobbed like a child.

As my eyes dried, I leant over and picked up the letter once again. Her name was signed with a big flourish, as always. She was the queen of the single name long before Kylie, Beyoncé and anyone else who tried to claim it.

‘My grandmother had you all beat,’ I said aloud to no one. Carefully I refolded the letter and slipped it back into the pocket of my handbag.

‘Right,’ I said, taking a deep breath. ‘Let’s start ticking things off this to-do list. And then I’m going to make a big, bugger-off chocolate cake and eat it all. Possibly in one sitting.’

From outside I heard the throaty roar of a motorbike. A proper bike. The noise that emanated from it definitely didn’t sound like one of the Vespas that sometimes buzzed about the village with teenagers aboard, acting like they were cool, hip Italian types going off to meet up by the Trevi Fountain. In reality, they were more likely to be nipping down to the local Spar because they’d run out of toilet roll.

Hurrying over to the window and concealing myself behind the heavy drapes, I peeped out and saw a large bulk encased in leather swing one long leg over the burbling bike, adjusting his foot as it settled on the pedal. He moved his right hand on the handlebars and the engine revved briefly. Flicking a hand up to close the visor on his crash helmet, he blipped the throttle again and the bike pulled away, his other leg folding up to perch on the opposite pedal. I watched him disappear up the road, out of sight, and hoped that he’d stay that way for a long time to come.

Just knowing he was no longer next door helped me relax a tiny bit. Admittedly relaxation wasn’t exactly my forte. That was partly how I’d ended up back here in the first place. As a top Discretionary Fund Manager in London, I’d worked hard and done well. I had a swish flat in Canary Wharf that had a view of the river and was perfect for the short commute to work at Canada Water. It was sleek and modern, and stylish. My brother had called it “soulless” but then Ned never was in the running for any prizes for tact. Admittedly it didn’t have the warmth that Gigi’s house had, or that his and Carrie’s did. But then my life was very different to theirs too. And the fact that I started work

early, and often didn't leave until ten or later, meant that keeping it easy to maintain was important. Really the thing that was most important to me was that my bed was comfortable, and my coffee maker worked. Everything else was just window dressing.

Nothing about Gigi's house was just window dressing and there was certainly no way anyone could call it 'soulless'. I stood and walked to the patio doors, pulling them back to let in the warmth of the morning and the sound of the sea washing the beach. It was still early in the season but looking further along to where the beach became public, I could see a few holidaymakers setting up towels and parasols on the soft, pale sand. After listening to the calming sound of the sea for a few more moments, I turned back to the house and set my coffee cup in the dishwasher.

The kitchen had been revamped a few years ago and now had shiny white units and fancy worktops that sparkled when the light caught them. Gigi was like a magpie when it came to sparkle but I loved that she'd chosen it. It was so her. And while the units might have changed, this was still the kitchen where Ned and I had learned to cook, the same table where he and I had sat thousands of times, being fed and comforted and made to feel loved by Gigi and Grandpa.

Letting my hand drift across the doorway, I moved back into the living room. I pulled back the curtains I'd hid behind earlier. They were heavy velvet in a deep shade of plum and really had seen better days. They were on my list of things to assess but right now I was just enjoying the tactile feel of them against my skin and the theatrical reminder of Gigi's taste. Turning, I whipped off the last couple of sheets that had been covering the furniture, piled them on a chair and moved towards the stairs.

I'd removed the sheets from the guest room I always stayed in last night and had claimed that as my room for my sabbatical stay. It was a beautiful room overlooking the back of the house and the beach beyond, its large windows flooding it with light. The décor, like all the other rooms, had a slight theatrical bent – but that was Gigi and right now, the familiarity of that was comforting.

The other two spare rooms were mostly unused and one appeared to have developed into a bit of a dumping ground for things my grandmother had never quite decided on a place for. I pulled the sheets off everything, swallowed back a moment of feeling overwhelmed at just how much stuff she had acquired and the fact that I needed to sort through it all in the relatively short space of time I had, and then I moved on. My hand rested on the handle of the fourth and final bedroom. Gigi's bedroom. But I didn't go in. Tomorrow would be soon enough.

From the back pocket of my shorts, my phone made a ping and I pulled it out immediately, opening the email app only to find another spammy newsletter from a company I hadn't bought anything from for the last three years. I really ought to get around to doing some unsubscribing. Something else to add to the list. Opening my To-Do app, I did just that, gave the markets another quick scan and checked my work email again before putting the phone back in my pocket.

I'd planned on spending the day going through boxes and making a start on getting the house into order for sale. That was, after all, the plan. The thought of keeping it was wonderful but I knew in reality it wasn't a viable one. The idea of a beach retreat in a place that held such happy memories – really the only place that did – was perfect. But it was just a daydream. I knew that, with me working the amount I did, it wouldn't get used – at least not in the way it should. Even if I did manage to get away from London, I would only end up bringing work with me. I barely looked out of the window of my flat, even though the view of the Thames and the city could steal your breath away, especially at night. Why would it be any different here? Better to sell it to someone who would appreciate it. And I would ensure that was the case. This was going to be a family home. Not an opportunistic investment for some businessman who already had a second, third and fourth home.

If Carrie and Ned weren't so settled and in love with their own house, I'd have insisted they have it but that wasn't an option. The thought of turning it into an Airbnb had crossed my mind – albeit only fleetingly. Ned and I had been enveloped with love here, and the house was a part of that. I couldn't bear the thought of it becoming a place where people just dropped their luggage. Four walls

and nothing more. It had meant so much to Gigi, and still meant so much to me. It was a house that deserved to be loved. So, I would just have to find a new family to bring to it.

While the house was beautiful, it was definitely in need of some updating. Gigi had been a showgirl in her youth, performing at top theatres in London and Paris when she met my grandfather all those years ago, and the décor definitely reflected a tendency to draw on that part of her life for inspiration. There were a lot of rich, deep colours on the walls and in the furnishings. I had no intention of trying to get rid of all of Gigi's stuff so I'd decided to ask my brother Ned what he wanted, choose a few pieces for myself and then sell the house with much of the rest included. But as it was, even though the Thirties' Art Deco style of the house supported a bit of Gigi's style, with my business head on, I knew it wasn't as attractive to a modern buyer as it could be, so I needed to think up some tricks for adding in a bit more of a contemporary look.

Of course, I'd also have to work on a strategy that would help sell the sitting tenant next door – something I wasn't terribly thankful to Gigi for, knowing that without that particular fly in the ointment, I'd be looking at a far quicker turnaround. But, as it was, it seemed a good time to take some leave from work anyway. Well, that and the fact that my boss had told me I was wound tighter than a Swiss watch and if I didn't take a break he was going to fire me and blacklist me for six months just so that I had to. All of which was really Gerald's way of being a sweetheart. He'd watched me working long hours for years, and then of course, after the break-up with Paul, something pretty much everyone in the company had seen, I'd only increased my workload. If I was thinking about work, I wasn't thinking about anything else. But everyone, apparently even me, has a limit and Gerald knew I was burning out.

The ultimatum had come after I'd gone off the deep end about a report he wanted. One that, despite practically living at the office, I still hadn't had time to get around to. As I'd begun assuring him that I'd have it done by the end of the week, without having the faintest idea how, my chest had got so tight I could barely breathe, the room had begun to swim and I'd ended up sliding down the side of Gerald's desk in what I don't imagine to be the most elegant of ways, getting more and more panicky as I found I had less and less breath.

At this point, Gerald had had a little panic of his own and in my fuggy, lack-of-oxygen state, I'd heard him on the phone, trying to find out who the First Aider was. With the tiny bit of energy I'd had left, I'd flung my tingling arm out and yanked the phone away from him, and the desk, cutting off the call as I shook my head. This was already an embarrassing enough situation without more people coming in to gawp at me and comment as to whether that particular shade of waxy white my face had taken on was really my colour.

Gerald had tried to wrangle the phone back from me but I'd kept him at bay and instead flapped my hand about on his desk until it had reached his paper lunch bag from the posh sandwich shop just down the road. Scattering the contents across Gerald's desk, I'd quickly shoved the paper bag up to my face. After a few breaths in and out, the room spun a bit slower and I'd focused on trying to calm my racing mind. The pain in my chest was still there but it would go in time, like it usually did. Although, this was by far my most spectacular, and most public, experience of it. I hadn't admitted it to anyone – and barely to myself – but I was terrified.

Gerald had been my boss, and friend, for over ten years. Once I'd calmed down and returned to a much more normal colour, he'd sat me down and given me the ultimatum, telling me that with the way I was going, my next position was either going to be a sabbatical at the seaside, or a stay in hospital. Put like that, the decision was kind of made for me. I arranged for my post to be forwarded to Gigi's place, packed a suitcase and drove down. The further I got from London, the more I had tentatively started looking forward to it. I still wasn't sure how I was going to cope without going into the office every day but I had my phone and laptop so it wasn't like I was going to be cut off from civilisation entirely.

That night, I'd gone to sleep surrounded by peace and quiet and woken to the sound of real waves gently washing over a real beach. I'd lain there feeling a little of the long-held stress leave my body with each return of the tide, confident that this little break was all I needed to see off the attacks I'd had.

And then Gabe McKinley had appeared at my window, seen me in my scrap of silk undies, and spoiled it all.

\* \* \*

I'd succeeded in accomplishing very little today. The morning's encounter with my neighbour had put me out of sorts and disrupted my equilibrium. I hadn't felt able to concentrate on anything after that, which wasn't like me at all. I'd fiddled about, moving bits from one place to another before moving them back again, looked half-heartedly over paint charts, and wandered out into the garden to deadhead a few flowers before finally giving up. Pulling out a big box of photos I'd found in a sideboard, I sat on the overstuffed sofa, tucked my feet up underneath me and proceeded to lose the next two hours looking through them.

Many of them I hadn't seen for years or had never seen. I smiled at a photo of Gigi and Grandpa laughing together and cried at one of my dad and me building a sandcastle on the beach outside this very house. For once, he actually looked happy. Eventually deciding I'd had enough emotional pummelling for today, I gave my phone another quick check for market news and possible emails then headed out and took a long walk on the beach, making some notes on my phone about jobs I needed to get done in the house as I did so.

It was nearly three hours later I returned to the house, feeling both mentally and physically calmer. Even just approaching the house from the beach, knowing that was where I was headed, had sent a ripple of calm through me that I couldn't remember feeling for many years. And not one I could remember ever feeling anywhere else. Thankfully there seemed no signs of life from next door and I settled down on one of the steamer chairs on the patio with a stack of interior design magazines to study for ideas for the house. The huge UV protective sail that stretched across both sides of the house provided perfect shade – which was just as well because the next thing I knew it felt cooler and there was a large shadow over me. I opened my eyes to find Gabe McKinley back, and loitering by my patio door.

'What are you doing?' I snapped, waking properly and pushing myself into an upright position.

He jumped and spun around. 'Oh God! I thought you were asleep!' he said, his words slightly muffled because his face was all squished up by the crash helmet he still wore.

'Lucky I woke up before you got a chance to case my house properly then, isn't it?' I said, standing up.

'Oh for ...' The rest of the sentence got lost as he pulled the crash helmet from his head, revealing a very recently acquired neat short back and sides. 'You're officially nuts. You know that, don't you?' He turned away and began walking back towards his own side of the house.

'And that's your professional medical opinion, I suppose?' I returned, with more than a hint of sarcasm.

I really don't know why I was having such trouble believing this man was a doctor. I know you're not supposed to judge a book by its cover and all that, but he just didn't *look* like one. Not one I'd ever seen anyway. Which was probably just as well because he had a habit of raising my blood pressure dramatically – and not only because all we'd done so far was bicker. But right now, I was doing my best to put that particular nugget of information to the back of my mind and pretend it wasn't there.

He continued walking away from me, his gait slightly stilted due to the stiff, protective motorcycle suit and boots. At my comment, he threw his hands in the air in resignation, not bothering to turn around. A moment later he disappeared inside and the patio door slid back into place with a little more help than it probably needed.

I shook my head and checked my phone for the time. My brother and his wife had invited me for dinner this evening, but I still had a bit of time to kill before I needed to get ready. Retaking my seat on the lounge, I picked up one of the magazines and flicked through the thick, glossy pages looking for inspiration. As I stopped on one particular article, I heard the neighbouring door slide open again. Keeping my head down, I concentrated intensely on the words. A moment later, Gabe McKinley was stood in front of me, and it was really hard not to concentrate on him instead.

I aimed for nonchalant as I lifted my head and met his gaze. He'd unzipped the yellow and black leather bike suit and the top half now hung down from his waist, the arms dangling loosely. Underneath he wore a fitted white T-shirt that showed every line and curve of a powerfully built chest and heavily muscled arms. He'd discarded the boots now and his feet were bare as he stood looking at me. I tilted my head in question at him because I wasn't entirely confident about what might come out of my mouth if I attempted speech right now. Best to be safe.

'Just so you know, I wasn't casing your house. All I was going to do was shut your patio door. I know it's pretty quiet here and this bit of the beach is private, but you never know. Gigi used to nod off out here from time to time, always leaving the door wide open, even though I'd suggested she might want to push it closed a little. It made me nervous for her. I know she wasn't worried because she was so trusting. I grew up in a city and although I've lived here a few years now, it's hard to shake that instinct, so I still always shut it for her if she was asleep when I came by. She always knew to check so that she didn't bump into the glass or anything. It sort of became a habit.

'Although you'll probably disagree because it's me who has said it – but I get the feeling you understand because you've definitely got suspicious instincts and probably had no intention of dropping off and leaving your door open. Having said that, I do see now that my behaviour might have seemed a bit odd to you as it wasn't expected, and I'm sorry if I startled you – again – but my intentions were entirely honest.' Having finished his speech, he nodded at me and turned to go.

'My flat was broken into. It's made me a little paranoid,' I blurted, surprising myself. What on earth was I doing telling this stranger my business? Opening up to people, even my family, wasn't exactly like me so why had I just told Gabe McKinley about the break-in?

He turned back, facing me once again with those incredible eyes. 'I'm really sorry about that. It's definitely not a nice thing to go through. I've been burgled myself.'

'Here?' I asked, my nerves tensing and my voice zipping up an octave.

He smiled, holding his hands up briefly in reassurance. 'No. At home in Oz.'

'Oh,' I said. 'Then I'm sorry for you too.'

'That's OK. It was a while ago now.'

I nodded.

'I'm guessing yours was more recent?' he asked, leaning on the metal balustrade that encircled both balconies. The leather of the protective suit creaked as he bent a leg and rested one foot on top of the other.

I knew that I should just shrug and give a noncommittal answer, thereby putting an end to the conversation. I didn't want to start sharing with this man. He was unbelievably gorgeous, built like Atlas and with a sexy accent to boot. That was way too much good stuff wrapped up in what looked to be one incredible body. All of which meant he could only be Bad News – at least for me.

Of course, this was all moot anyway. There's no way he'd be interested in me, despite what Gigi had tried to dream up in the past. I mean, I had accused him of being a burglar – twice. And been instrumental in him falling off a ladder, although that bit really was unintentional. It was just that he'd made me jump, not to mention the fact that he'd caught me in my underwear. Oh God! *He'd caught me in my underwear!*

'What's wrong?' The deep voice penetrated my thoughts.

'Huh?' I looked up, quickly stuffing the images in my head away.

'You all right? Your face went kind of scrunchy.'

‘Scrunchy? Is that another medical term?’ I asked, the hint of a rebellious smile sneaking onto my face.

‘Absolutely. You can look it up if you want.’

‘I’m sure you can see why I doubt your credentials.’

He laughed for the first time since I’d met him. It was a nice sound and he kind of did it with his whole face. His eyes crinkled, the tempting mouth widened and his nose did a little scrunchy thing of its own.

‘Yeah. I guess I could see why you might. But I swear it’s true.’

I nodded.

He shifted his body and faced me a little more squarely. ‘Look. I’m sorry we got off to a bad start. I guess it was a bit of a shock to see someone in Gigi’s house after all this time. I ... I really miss her. I kind of keep expecting her to step out and tell me she’s “accidentally” cooked too much dinner again, so would I help her out by having some?’

I smiled but without looking at him because I didn’t want this stranger to see the tears in my eyes as he spoke so familiarly of my wonderful grandmother. I might still have trouble believing this totally built Adonis in front of me was a doctor – although the new haircut had definitely helped in that he now looked less like a beach bum, but I no longer doubted Gabe was the neighbour Gigi was always speaking so warmly of. All of his descriptions sounded just like something she would have done.

‘I’m sorry, too. I hope you didn’t hurt yourself too much when you fell this morning. You gave me a bit of a start!’

‘Nah. It’s fine. And I was totally out of line in saying that you didn’t see Gigi enough. I don’t know what came over me. I’m sorry. I know she really did love going up to London and staying with you. She’d talk about those trips for days and days!’

‘Really?’ I smiled.

‘Absolutely. And I’m pretty sure, like you said, she’d have given me a good clip round the ear if she’d heard me describe her as an “elderly lady”.’

I laughed, nodding in agreement.

‘I really did invite her up there because I wanted to spoil her. It’s beautiful here but I knew she’d always cook for us, which, as you apparently already know, she loved doing. But I wanted to give her the opportunity to be spoiled and waited on. It always felt like it was the least I could do in return for everything she’d done for me.’ I suddenly realised that he was making me do that whole ‘sharing’ thing again. What was it with this man? Quickly, I changed the subject.

‘So, you work at St Andrew’s?’ I said, steering the conversation away from more emotional topics.

A little look crossed his face. ‘I do. How did you know?’

‘Gigi told me that her “doctor” neighbour worked there.’ I made little quote marks with my fingers but smiled as I did so. He grinned back.

‘Oh! So, you finally believe me?’

‘You have to admit you don’t look like most doctors.’

He gave a little shake of his head. ‘I don’t? I guess I didn’t get that particular memo.’

I gave a shrug before waving my hand up and down at him, encompassing the leathers and ... well, general gorgeousness, but I wasn’t going to spell it out. Although, to his credit, and honestly my relief, he only picked up on the motorbike reference.

‘I did used to have a car, but the bike’s better for getting through the traffic in the city. I can get there and home much quicker now. It suits me better.’

Oh my, it did suit him. That was for sure.

‘I’d like to see you strap that on the bike,’ I said, pointing towards where his surfboard was propped up in a corner.

He laughed again and I smiled at the sound. ‘Yeah, that’s the only issue. Mostly I just surf here when the sea’s right but sometimes a group of us go somewhere, in which case I just grab a lift with a mate.’

‘What about shopping?’ I was nothing if not practical.

He smiled, apparently amused by the interrogation. ‘I’m not exactly a whizz in the kitchen so ready meals fit pretty well in my backpack.’

‘Surely that’s not all you eat.’ Going by how he looked, I was thinking more along the lines of ‘my body is a temple’ sort of food. From where I was sat, it was abundantly clear that Gabe’s body would be pretty damn easy to worship. I suddenly realised he was saying something.

‘Sorry?’

‘I just said, pretty much. Well, fruit and stuff too, but in the main ...’ He obviously caught the look on my face and misinterpreted it. ‘I know it’s not ideal and I do want to try and get better. I’m just not that great at cooking. I need to try and find some time to practise a bit more. Last time I tried, it didn’t work out too well.’ His face had taken on a bit of a sheepish look that, if possible, made him look even more attractive.

‘Oh dear. Well, why don’t you start with something really simple? Like boiling an egg?’

‘That’s what didn’t work out too well.’

‘Boiling an egg?’

He pulled a face and I couldn’t help the smile that teased the corners of my mouth.

‘I know! I can qualify as a doctor, but I can’t boil an egg.’

‘What happened exactly?’

‘It got left on for a little bit too long, I think. A colleague rang me and we got stuck into discussing a case. By the time I remembered the egg, you could have used it to play cricket with.’

‘Oh dear!’ I said again, laughing.

‘Pathetic, eh?’

‘No! Not at all. It happens to the best of us. And it wasn’t like you got distracted by something inane.’ Like watching videos of cute puppies on YouTube. Yep. I definitely wasn’t ready to share that deeply yet. I smiled up at him. He returned it and then shoved himself away from the banister.

‘I’d better get a move on.’

‘Hot date?’ *Please, please tell me I didn’t say that out loud.*

‘Something like that.’ He grinned.

Oh God. It was out loud.

Avoiding his eyes and glancing down at my phone, I jumped up. ‘Is that the time?’ I said, quickly grabbing my stuff off the lounge. ‘Sorry. I’m running a bit late.’

‘Hot date?’ He returned the question and I felt myself blush from my bare feet upwards.

I paused and turned back briefly, rolling my eyes. ‘Oh, I really hope not,’ I said, before dashing back into the house and running upstairs to the shower.

## Chapter 3

In the past, my brother and his wife had made a variety of attempts to set me up on dates. Clearly, they considered my ability to choose men with about the same level of disillusionment as I did myself. Unfortunately, their choices for me also often left something to be desired, so perhaps it was a family trait. Although, thinking about it, Gigi had managed to choose a pretty wonderful man for herself, and Mum couldn't have picked anyone who would have worshipped her more. Then there was Ned, my brother, who had a gorgeous, funny and very loving wife whom I adored. OK then, so it was just me with the crappy taste. Good to know.

They hadn't specifically said they were setting me up with anyone this time. They never did. A friend just always 'happened' to be free so they'd 'invited him along'. I'm pretty sure they knew I didn't believe a word of it but they continued to try. Which was sweet of them but I really had no interest in meeting anyone. By now I was completely fed up with my inability to find a decent man so it just seemed like the best plan was not to bother even attempting it.

I'd come to this decision when my last relationship had ended spectacularly badly around eighteen months ago after I'd found out my boyfriend was 'technically' still seeing someone else. This revelation came about when his 'technical' other girlfriend walked in to the restaurant where the company Christmas do was being held. It wasn't pretty. I'd walked out, head held high, and hadn't crumpled until I was safe within the walls of my own flat.

But the whole thing had hurt like hell because he'd been so wonderfully handsome and charming, and I'd really, really liked him. I'd trusted him and let him into my heart. It was something I'd been so careful about before but Paul had said all the right words, done all the right things, and I'd believed him. The error of that particular judgement had been painful in its proving and I had absolutely no intention of making a similar mistake ever again.

'Four place settings,' I said, unable to keep the sigh out of my voice as I picked up a fork from the table and began twirling it in my fingers.

'Yeah. We've got a friend coming. I hope that's all right,' Ned said, concentrating on the deliciousness in the pan in front of him on the stove.

'A friend,' I said, putting the fork back and wandering over to where my brother was adding a touch more seasoning to the food.

'Try that,' he said, handing me the spoon. I did. It was, as always, beyond yummy. I made noises to this effect and Ned smiled. Glancing at me, he caught something in my expression. 'Oh! No! No, I promise this time, it's most definitely not a set-up. I'm pretty sure you're not his type anyway. His last girlfriend was an absolute stunner.' My brother was, as always, the epitome of tact. I whacked the spoon on his forearm.

'Oww! What was that for?'

'I imagine it was because you just insinuated that your sister isn't beautiful.' Carrie came into the kitchen, smiling, and gave me a big hug, her posture a little awkward as the large bump that was my niece or nephew came between us. 'Which she totally is,' she finished.

Ned shrugged his shoulders and went back to stirring the food.

'But he's right on the other part. This isn't a set-up. We had this planned before we knew you were coming down. It really is just four people having dinner. We kind of decided that maybe we weren't so great at matchmaking after the last incident.'

'Whatever gave you that idea?' I asked, an innocent look on my face.

Carrie grinned. 'Oh God, I know it was bad. But he seemed so normal and nice!'

'He was. Sort of,' I conceded. 'He just was very, very ... enthusiastic about his farm,' I said, trying to find the right words. 'More specifically the recipe for the manure that went into the muck spreader.'

Carrie and Ned's last attempt to set me up had been with a local farmer they'd met through the restaurant when he became one of their new organic suppliers. He was, as Carrie said, very nice but he had also, apparently, spent a long time perfecting the perfect recipe for poop and then spent what felt like an even longer time telling me about it – over dinner.

Unfortunately, I did such a good job of being polite that he seemed to believe I was genuinely interested and insisted on driving me over to the farm to show me first hand. I really, *really* didn't want to go but, apart from the manure obsession, he was a sweet man, and I didn't want to hurt his feelings or sour the working relationship between him and my brother's restaurant. Ned and Carrie had looked at me helplessly as I'd searched for an excuse in my momentarily blank brain. None of us had come up with one.

It had taken me over a fortnight to get the smell out of my nostrils and had at the same time proved to everyone for future information that I most definitely wasn't cut out to be a farmer's wife. It was at least a week before I could even look at chocolate cake again but, as I wasn't a quitter, I'd forced myself to beat that particular problem.

The experience, however, had at last apparently confirmed to my brother and sister-in-law that they weren't natural matchmakers. So at least something good had come of it. Even though they still owed me for a once-beautiful and hideously expensive pair of shoes that didn't survive the ordeal.

Carrie and I sat for a few minutes chatting, as we flicked through a fashion magazine and Carrie sighed at all the tiny waists.

'Look at them!' she cried.

'Hon, they're not home to a small human at the moment. You are.'

Carrie gave another sigh. 'There is that. Good point.' She stroked her bump and smiled. I couldn't help smiling along with her. For all her griping about the models, Carrie was exactly where she wanted to be. She and Ned had been trying for a baby for a while before it had actually happened, and they were incredibly excited about this new addition to the family. As was I. I couldn't wait to be an auntie, and already had a tonne of boxes and bags of stuff that I just hadn't been able to resist when I'd mooched around in town or on holidays. It was all stored back at the flat for now. I'd drive back up and get it when the baby arrived later this summer.

Talking of new additions ... I looked down at the small dog who had just wandered into the kitchen. His walk was a little wonky but his face was adorably cute in a mishmash of breeds way. From the looks of him, he was mostly sausage dog but clearly someone wanted to mix it up a bit and his legs were slightly overlong for the breed as was his tail.

'You got a dog?' I asked.

'No, it's our friend's. He's collecting him tonight. We doggy-sit for him sometimes so that Bryan isn't on his own too long.'

'Bryan.'

'Yes, with a Y.'

'Of course. Is he drunk?'

'What?'

'He's kind of wobbly.'

'Oh! No, he had a little operation today, so he's still a bit dozy from the anaesthetic. It'll wear off soon and he'll be back to normal.'

'He's all right though?' I said, bending down and stroking the dog who was now sat slightly haphazardly in front of me.

'Yes, he's fine. Just a bit tired. He'll be right as rain tomorrow.'

Carrie had been head veterinary nurse at the local practice for years now. It had an excellent reputation and people travelled miles to bring their animals to the village practice, thanks to the expertise and care it offered. I knelt on the floor and tickled the dog's chin and he wobbled up closer, put his front paws on my knee and looked up at me, expectantly. I took the bait and lifted him

gently onto my lap where he curled up and promptly fell asleep. Ned looked over from where he was preparing dessert and laughed.

‘You’re such a sucker.’

My brother’s compliments were almost as big a draw for my visits as his incredible cooking.

‘To be fair, he’s pretty good at emotional manipulation.’ A deep, accented voice drifted in from the back door to the kitchen.

‘Gabe!’ Carrie waddled over and got swept up in a big hug.

‘How are you both?’ he asked, gently touching the bump. I watched from the corner of my eye, seeing immediately how at ease he would put his patients. Yes, OK. So maybe he was a doctor after all.

‘We’re fine. Really good actually.’ Carrie beamed. Being pregnant suited her. She looked all glowy and serene. I was pretty sure that wasn’t a look I could pull off. I’d probably just end up sweaty and agitated.

‘I’m fine too!’ Ned called in a mock huff from the other side of the kitchen. Gabe did that way-too-good laugh again and walked across to where my brother was now opening two bottles of beer. Gabe wrapped an arm around his shoulders and gave a big squeeze.

‘Aww, no need to get jealous, mate. I still love you too!’

Ned pulled a face and thrust a beer at his mate. They clinked bottles and downed a good proportion each.

Gabe put his bottle on the worktop and walked over to where I was sat. Crouching down, he smiled at me. ‘Hello again.’

‘Oh, you’ve met then?’ Carrie asked. ‘We weren’t sure if you’d have bumped into one another yet or not.’

‘Yeah. There was definitely some bumping going on.’ Gabe laughed. Then stopped as three pairs of eyes looked at him, mine wider than the rest, and he suddenly realised how his statement had sounded. ‘Not like that! I fell off a ladder when Holly pulled the blind of the window I was painting. We ... kind of made each other jump. And then she spent the rest of the day accusing me of being a burglar.’ He grinned at me and I pulled a face.

‘Oh God, Holly. You’re not still freaking about that break-in, are you?’ Ned asked.

I looked up at my brother and opened my mouth to respond, glancing at Carrie as I did so. She just rolled her eyes and shook her head. I took her advice, not wanting to sour the evening by bickering with him. I knew it was hard for him to understand the feeling of violation and insecurity the burglary had left me with. Something that Gabe had seemed to understand straight away. Ned had always been the most laid-back of the two of us. He’d made his life down here, rather than up in London as I had, and sometimes I wondered if that hadn’t been a major factor in the way we dealt with things.

I turned my attention back to Gabe. ‘Hot date fall through?’ I teased.

‘Unfortunately. Luckily, I had this as backup.’ He grinned.

‘If that’s true, and we are merely “backup” I will be hiding whole chillies in your pudding,’ Carrie informed him, the sweetest of smiles on her face. ‘Just so you know.’

Gabe laughed and leant over to stroke the little dog with the back of his hand. As he did, I got a waft of an aftershave that smelled delicious.

‘Is the little bloke all right, then?’ he asked, his brow creasing slightly as he studied the sleeping dog.

Carrie took a seat at the table and watched us. ‘Yes. Everything went well. Probably best if he doesn’t go charging through any meadows for a bit though.’

‘What was it? In his ear, I mean?’

‘Oh, just a grass seed. Not huge but enough to cause him discomfort. He’s fine now. He was a bit wobbly from the sedation before he found a new bed on Holly’s lap, so he just needs to sleep it off.’

‘Thanks for taking care of it all, Carrie. I really appreciate it.’

‘You’re welcome.’

‘Dinner will be ready in a minute,’ Ned called.

‘Can I bring his bed in here?’ Gabe looked at Carrie.

‘Of course, it’s just in the living room.’

He quickly rose and hurried out, returning a moment later with a soft bed in one hand and an oversized stuffed toy prawn sporting a slightly surprised expression in the other. He put the bed down against the wall, in sight of the table, and then crouched down in front of me.

‘Do you mind if I ...’

‘No, of course not.’ As awkward as I suddenly felt at Gabe’s hands brushing my thighs during the action of scooping up the little pup, I was as disinclined as he was to wake the patient. I quickly dismissed what else I felt at the touch and concentrated instead on watching as Gabe moved and laid Bryan gently in the bed. The dog dozily opened his eyes and looked at his master. A tired little tongue poked out of the side of his mouth and gave a lick to Gabe’s hand before the dog drifted off again. Gabe rubbed his pet’s head gently before tucking the prawn in next to his paws.

‘Here’s Petey, mate,’ he said quietly.

Bryan stretched and put one paw over the toy, dragging it closer. I smiled at the scene.

‘He loves that prawn.’

‘So I see.’

‘My parents sent it over from home when I first showed them a picture of Bryan.’

‘Gabe rescued Bryan last winter,’ Carrie said, waddling over. ‘He found him wandering the streets in the city, shivering with cold, and brought him back to the practice for us to check him over. He wasn’t in good shape but Gabe said if we could save him, he’d give him a home.’

I glanced over to where Gabe was now intent on not looking at us.

‘Need any help over there, Ned?’ he asked and headed off, his long legs crossing the room in a few strides. Within moments, the expression that had clouded his face cleared as he laughed with my brother.

Carrie lowered her voice. ‘We didn’t have a lot of hope for Bryan when he was brought in. He’d obviously been out on the streets for some time, fending for himself. We don’t know his history but he had a nasty wound on his neck that wasn’t healing, possibly from a collar or rope that had cut in. He’s the sweetest-natured dog too, poor little thing. It was difficult to know what to do for the best. His fur was gone in places with a skin infection and he had an abscess in his mouth. He was only young and in such a state, it was heartbreaking.’

I looked at the dog sleeping peacefully with his cuddle companion, surrounded by love and comfort, and my eyes filled with tears.

Carrie saw and gave me a squeeze.

‘Stupid,’ I said, quietly.

‘Not at all,’ she reassured me. ‘Believe me, we were all in tears.’ She surreptitiously nodded at the big, macho guy now lounging against her worktop.

‘Really?’ I whispered.

‘Really. He walked in with this mangy little dog wrapped in a jumper and stuffed down the front of his bike suit and begged us to save him. We told him that even if we could, it might be expensive, depending on what we found, but he just waved it away. I mean, I know he’s a doctor so he’s not short of a few bob, but still. He’d just picked this dog off the street and he was prepared to do anything to save him.’

‘I’m glad he found him.’

‘Me too. I don’t think the poor little thing would have lasted many more days to be honest.’

I looked at the puppy and got another wash of tears.

‘Will you stop doing that?’ I hissed at her.

She grinned.

‘OK, everybody ready?’ Ned asked.

We both looked up ready to acknowledge him when Ned spoke again. ‘Why are you crying?’ Not content with finishing top of his class in ‘Tact’, my brother had also majored in ‘Subtlety’. ‘I am not crying!’ I said. ‘It’s the onions.’

‘The onions went in two hours ago. You weren’t even here.’

‘She was upset about Bryan’s history,’ Carrie stated.

I looked at her.

‘What?’ she whispered. ‘You were!’

‘I don’t need them to know that!’ I whispered back.

‘Why not?’

‘You know we can still hear you, right?’ Ned asked, a puzzled look on his face.

I risked a quick look at Gabe, but he had his head down.

‘Didn’t you say something about dinner?’ I asked, changing the subject.

\* \* \*

Dinner was, as always when my brother cooked, delicious. Chicken that melted in your mouth, Dauphinoise potatoes that were so creamy and light – I’d definitely be asking him for his secret – accompanied by vegetables plucked from their own garden a couple of hours previously. It smelled heavenly and tasted even better.

‘Fantastic, mate. As always. Thanks,’ Gabe said, sitting back in his seat.

‘You’re very welcome. Anything to keep our own private obstetrician happy.’

‘Oh, Ned, stop fussing.’ Carrie laughed, taking her husband’s hand. ‘Everything’s fine. We just saw the nurse this morning!’

‘I know. I’m just saying. It helps to know people. That’s all.’

‘I feel so used.’ Gabe affected a mock-distressed look, but laughter danced in his eyes.

‘What? You didn’t think we actually liked you, did you?’

Gabe crossed his arms, both hands resting on his heart. ‘I could only hope.’

Ned grinned around his glass and shook his head before taking a sip of his beer. I sat listening, and watching, the interaction – the easy friendship between them all – and felt a tug inside me. Was this something they did regularly? From the look and feel of the laid-back atmosphere, I guessed it was. As they carried on with their teasing, my mind wandered to what I would have been doing right now had I been at home in London. The kitchen clock above the door showed nearly 9 p.m. and I felt the tug again. I knew exactly what I’d be doing. I’d have been sat at my desk, a half-finished ready meal beside me, had I remembered to eat at all, with my head buried in paperwork as the office sat quiet around me.

‘Is that your speciality? Obstetrics?’ I asked as I took the plates Gabe handed me, having insisted on clearing the table and letting Carrie rest. She’d objected, of course, but not for too long. To be honest, I didn’t know a whole lot about being pregnant or babies but I did know from Ned that she was finding things more tiring than she’d hoped.

My brother had fallen head over heels for Carrie the moment he’d seen her and had been known to fuss over her – which although sometimes a little nauseating, depending on my mood, was mostly adorable. And they’d been trying for a baby for nearly two years before this little one appeared, so I totally understood his anxiety.

‘No. I’m actually a little further along that particular road. I’m a paediatrician.’

‘Oh wow. That’s got to be ...’

He tilted his head at me as he waited for me to tell him what his career must be. Ned glanced over.

‘She’s amazing with figures but words are not her strong suit. If she cocks up here, take it with a pinch of salt.’

‘Do you mind?’ I said, feeling the blush touch my cheeks. Partly because I suspected Ned was right. While the actual meat of a presentation at work was something I could do with my eyes

closed, the presentation itself, that whole speaking in front of people bit, was most definitely not my happy place. The pain in my chest would burn, my limbs would tingle and I'd have to concentrate on remembering to take enough breaths in between the words so as to not start turning blue. I may even have been known to bribe another colleague with a very expensive dinner to take my place on more than one occasion.

'I'm not that bad,' I said, turning back to Gabe.

He shrugged. 'It's a brother's job to wind his siblings up. Ned's a wizard at cooking but it's nice for him to work on some other skills too.'

Ned wobbled his head in ironic amusement, causing us both to grin.

'Believe me. He doesn't really need too much practice at that particular skill. I think he spent the four years before I came along building on that.'

'Just as well! Right nightmare she turned out to be,' Ned huffed as he opened the oven to release the most mouth-watering, sweet smell of home-made treacle tart. I moved to take a closer look at the golden, bubbling deliciousness.

'Luckily, I'm very forgiving.'

'Actually, she's not. But she does love food.' Ned gave me a raised brow as he handed me the plate he'd now transferred the tart to. 'Although you wouldn't know it by her diet.'

I gave him a look. 'I have a very busy schedule!'

'You have a very unhealthy schedule that results in you barely eating, and when you do it's rubbish and you're suffering panic attacks.' His expression had lost the joviality now. 'The only time you ever ate properly was when Gigi came up to visit you or you came here.'

'Oh, pfft,' I said, trying to laugh it all off and not be mortified that my brother was bringing all of this up right now in front of someone who was, to me at least, pretty much a total stranger.

That someone was now looking at me with what I could immediately see what his 'concerned doctor's face'.

'Panic attacks?'

'They're not panic attacks,' I said, airily, as I put the dish down on the table, and handed the cake slice to Carrie, pleading with my eyes for her to help me out of this conversation. 'Ned's exaggerating again. You clearly know what he's like. It's nothing.'

'Well, we were worried when you mentioned this last one. It must have been bad for you to take this sabbatical,' Carrie added.

*Please, ground, open up now.*

'Tell me about them.' It didn't sound like a request but there was still no way that was happening.

'Tart?' I said, putting a slice in front of Gabe, desperate to change the subject.

A smirk tempted the sides of his mouth. 'I date but I think that particular label's a little harsh.'

Ned snorted as he put down the jug of crême Anglaise. 'And you say I'm tactless.'

I shook my head. 'You two are as bad as one another,' I said, drowning my slice of pudding in sauce and forking up a large piece.

Carrie pushed the small jug of cream towards me. I added some to my coffee – a little more than I usually did feeling, with more relief than I'd expected, that I didn't have to get up at five o'clock tomorrow morning. Years ago, I'd loved my coffee milky, but as I'd worked harder and longer and climbed the financial services corporate ladder, I'd gradually taken my coffee darker and stronger, relying more and more on the kick it gave to help me last through the day. I was only on my first full day in Wishington Bay and I realised I was already two coffees down. Considering how many I'd get through in a day, that wasn't a great reduction but it also said quite a lot.

I passed the cream to Gabe. 'So, how long have you been at St Andrew's Hospital?'

He closed his eyes for a moment, savouring the smell of the freshly roasted coffee before taking a taste. 'A little over three years now.'

'Did you come from somewhere else in the country, or straight over from Australia?'

‘Straight from Sydney.’

‘Gosh. That’s quite a leap, isn’t it? I mean from living in a busy city in Australia to a quiet little English seaside village?’

He grinned and I tried not to notice. At least not in all the places my body was trying to get me to notice.

‘It was kind of a culture shock, that’s for sure. I stayed with a mate for a few weeks when I got here and had been looking at places in the city when I heard from one of the guys I’d been surfing with that there was a place for rent right on the beach. I wasn’t sure if that might be a bit quiet for me, but the thought of waking up and hearing the sea each morning did kind of have an appeal. Anyway, I decided I could take a look and then at least I’d know.’

‘And now, here you are!’ Carrie smiled.

‘Here I am. Gigi was one hell of a real estate agent.’

‘Are you pleased you took a look, even though it wasn’t where you’d considered living?’

‘Definitely. And with Gigi next door ... well, to be honest, I’d been wondering if I’d done the right thing coming over here. I’d left my family and friends behind, and although I knew a couple of people over here and was gradually getting to know people through work, honestly? I was pretty damn homesick. Meeting Gigi that day ... it was kind of ... well, it just took all that away. Suddenly I felt right at home.’

‘She always did have a great talent for making people feel welcome.’ Carrie smiled, covering Ned’s hand with her own.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak for a moment or two, instead pouring myself another coffee that, surprisingly, I didn’t really want, just to have something to do with my hands.

‘So, you said you were in paediatrics?’

Gabe smiled. ‘I did.’

‘And we’re all still waiting to hear what you thought about that,’ Ned kindly reminded everyone. ‘You stopped mid sentence.’

I shook my head. ‘I’m still convinced they brought the wrong baby home from the hospital when they got him.’

Ned grinned at me. I might have been more convinced of this if we didn’t look quite so alike. Same ebony hair, same deep blue eyes that showed gold flecks when the sun shone and same wide smile that on Ned looked like a film star, but on me, I’d always considered a little too ... well, for want of a better word – gobby. Either way, I was pretty sure he really was my brother and despite his habitual lack of tact, I wouldn’t swap him for anything. Not that I’d tell him that, of course. Though, somehow, I think he was already clued in. He’d got a lot smarter since meeting Carrie.

‘OK,’ I said looking at Gabe, feeling slightly braver now, which may have had something to do with that second glass of wine.

‘I was going to say that paediatrics must be very rewarding – but I can also imagine how ... challenging it might be at times.’

‘You’re right,’ Gabe agreed, thankfully taking the spotlight off me. ‘I love what I do. I’ve wanted to be a doctor since I was little. I think, initially, I was attracted by the toys. My grandad was a doctor in a small town and he’d always have his kit on him. Obviously most of it was out of bounds for me, but it fascinated me that there was this bag full of magic things to help people feel better.’ His gaze flicked up to my face. ‘Stupid, huh?’

‘Totally,’ Ned answered.

I gave him a glare and Gabe chuckled.

‘Not at all. I think it’s a lovely story,’ I said, looking pointedly at my brother. ‘Go on.’

‘Well, he did let me play with his stethoscope. I’d just go around trying to listen to everyone’s heartbeat and every time I heard one, it kind of blew my mind. I think the seed for training as a doctor

was planted the first time I ever used that. And then, of course, I found out about the Royal Flying Doctor Service and that sounded like the perfect combination of adventure and helping people.'

'That's such a lovely story.'

'Thanks.' He smiled.

Ned made a retching sound and got a kick from Carrie for his troubles.

'What?' he asked, rubbing his shin.

'You!' she said, calmly. 'You're being rude.'

'I'm not. Gabe knows I'm just kidding.'

By the look of the grin on Gabe's face, it appeared my brother was right.

'I'm just not sure how I feel about him practising his smooth chat-up spiel on my sister.'

I did my best to stop the mouthful of coffee I'd just taken from coming out of my nose and forced it to take its usual path down my throat. Carrie gave me a concerned look and patted me on the back as I swallowed and gave a cough. Ned got a kick on the other shin.

'You all right?' Gabe asked.

I nodded. 'Yes, just went down the wrong way.'

Ned opened his mouth.

'You say one more thing and I'm not going to do any of your finances for the next five years!'

Ned closed his mouth.

'Well, I think I'd better start heading back. All this sea air is making me a bit tired.'

'And perhaps your workaholic lifestyle's catching up with you a little?'

'This from the woman who worked day and night, literally, to get a restaurant up and running,' I said, grabbing the wrap I'd brought with me and draping it around my shoulders.

'That is true. But if I remember, you'd also taken time off to come and help us out and the difference is that we've now found a balance and make sure we have days off and time away. You, my dear one, have not.'

I fuffed with my wrap a bit as I tried to extricate myself from the conversation that had just turned round and bitten me on the bum.

'I don't think a workaholic just takes the whole summer off, which is what I'm now doing,' I said, pleased with my return.

'No.' Ned came to stand beside his wife. 'A workaholic is forced to take the whole summer off because she collapses in her boss's office and is on the verge of being carted off to A & E.'

'Ugh! You two are so dramatic. Good job I love you. Thank you for the food and I'll see you soon.'

The strength of Ned's hug told me that, despite all the teasing, he was worried about me, and I felt a shot of guilt sear through me. He had enough to think about with running his own business and his first child on the way.

'I'm fine. Honestly,' I said, trying to put as much reassurance into my voice as possible.

Ned gave me a nod but I could tell he wasn't anywhere near convinced.

'Night, Carrie,' I said, giving her a hug. 'Night, Bump. Sleep well and don't keep your mum up with your fidgeting.'

'Do you mind if I walk with you?' Gabe asked.

'No, of course not, but please don't feel you have to leave early because of me.'

'No, I need to get Bryan home and get some rest too. I've got a double shift tomorrow.'

I screwed up my nose.

'Yeah, I know,' he replied. 'I just need to grab Bryan and his stuff.'

Two minutes later, we were all ready to go. Gabe had shrugged on a light jacket and zipped it up, before tucking Bryan in the front. Ned handed him the squashy dog bed and gave me Petey the Prawn.

Ned and Carrie lived along the crescent of the bay from Gigi's house but you could walk all the way there and back along the beach, rather than through the village if you wanted, which was what Gabe and I chose to do tonight. The moon was half full and bright, easily giving off enough light to see where we were going as it shone down and reflected in the expanse of dark water to our right. Even when the tide was in, Wishington Bay's beach was wide and sandy. After a few steps, I bent and quickly removed my sandals, hooking the straps over the fingers of my free hand.

'Good, huh?' Gabe laughed.

I hadn't realised the sigh of contentment I'd made at the sensation of the soft, cool sand between my toes as I walked had actually made it from my mind and out of my mouth.

'Yes ... sorry. That wasn't meant to be out loud.'

'Why not?' Even in the half-light from the moon, I could see Gabe's quizzical look.

'I ...' Honestly, I didn't know why not. I'd just got so used to keeping stuff to myself, especially since Gigi had gone, that even this slight, momentary display of feeling suddenly made me feel a little exposed.

'Just relax, Holly. And if what I heard tonight is anything to go by, it sounds like that's something you could do with.'

I flapped a hand, complete with toy prawn, dismissing the comment. 'You shouldn't listen to half of what Ned tells you. Seriously.'

'So, you haven't been doing long hours for years?'

'Well ... I suppose sometimes my hours have been quite long. But, you of all people know that long hours can often be part of the job. You said yourself you've got a double shift tomorrow.'

He gave me a look that somehow said both 'touché' and 'that's not the same thing and you and I both know it'. But to his credit, he let it pass.

'But you have had panic attacks?'

I gave Petey another flap. 'I'm not sure you'd call them panic attacks and really there's only been a few. I was just particularly stressed a couple of times and got a bit overwrought. I'm fine, now. Honest. Ned's just been getting phantom hormones since Carrie got pregnant and working himself up about it.'

'Or he could be aware that since Gigi is no longer here to keep an eye on you, you're not taking care of yourself in the way you should.'

I let out a sigh, and this time I knew for sure it was out loud.

'Look,' he said, 'I'm sorry if I'm overstepping my boundaries. Maybe right now you're wishing that I'd either brained myself this morning or that we had stayed mad at each other because either way you wouldn't be getting what you, I imagine, to consider to be a grilling.'

'No. I don't wish either of those things. Especially not the first. I've got enough to do in that house without trying to get blood out of the deck too.'

Moonlight caught his smile, his teeth showing bright in the celestial glow. 'It's just that I've been doing this job a long time now, and I've got pretty good at reading people. I've also known Ned and Carrie pretty much since the first night I moved here, as Gigi was eager for me to meet some new people and make friends. Between all of that, I can usually tell when people are worried about something, no matter how well they try to hide it. And your brother's worried about you. More than I think you realise.'

I ran a hand over my hair and pushed it back over my shoulder from where the softest of sea breezes had blown it forward.

'I don't really know what anyone wants me to say! I've taken the time off and I'm here, aren't I? I've got a whole summer's worth of relaxation time ahead of me, so everyone can just stop worrying now.'

'So, you're not planning to just sort the house super quick so that that you can get it sold and get yourself back up to London as soon as possible?'

Even in the low moonlight, I was pretty sure Gabe could see my guilty blush.

‘Yeah. That’s what I thought. Is your boss actually going to let you back that quick?’

‘I don’t know. I’ll have at least taken some time off by then, and shown willing, so I don’t see why not.’

Gabe smirked. ‘I think “shown willing” is pushing the description a little far from what Ned said tonight.’

I shook my head. ‘My brother, as I’m sure you’re already aware if you’ve known him for as long as you have, says a lot of things. Quite a large percentage of which can easily be ignored. For example,’ I carried on, just in case Gabe had plans to circle back to those panic attacks, ‘about how you were practising your ... what was it ... “smooth chat-up spiel” on me earlier.’

This time it was Gabe’s turn to colour a little – and it was kind of adorable.

‘I really wasn’t, you know.’

Somewhere deep inside, I felt a surprising stab of disappointment. ‘No.’ I laughed it off. ‘I know that. I was just using it as an example of one of the many dopey things that emanates from my brother’s mouth from time to time.’

‘Right.’

We walked on in silence for a little way, the only sound around us being the soft whoosh of the waves as they caressed the sand before pulling back out.

‘Not that I wouldn’t practise on you.’

I looked up.

‘I mean, not that anyone would want to just practise on you, because that sort of implies they’re looking for something ... someone a bit ...’

‘Gabe?’

‘Yes?’

‘It’s probably best if you quit while you’re ahead.’

‘Yep. I think you’re probably right.’ His laugh was soft in the quiet of the night, but after a few minutes he spoke again. ‘Ned just likes teasing me about stuff like that precisely because it’s not really something I do.’

‘Chat women up?’

‘Chat anyone up,’ he said, apparently clarifying things for me, just in case.

‘You mean women just fall at your feet naturally?’ I was teasing, but even when I thought he was a burglar and then threatening to report me for squatting in my own house, I could still totally see how that could happen.

‘Ha! Yeah, I wish.’

*Be careful what you wish for there, Gabe ...*

‘It’s just finding the time.’

‘Too much surfing?’

‘Too much working. And then, when I’m not, you’re right, I want to get in the surf because I don’t know when the next opportunity will be.’

I stopped walking and two steps later, Gabe realised and also stopped. In the front of his jacket, Bryan shuffled a little and carried on snoozing.

‘Wait, so after an evening of everyone giving me grief about how I was a workaholic, you’re standing there telling me you’re one too? Isn’t that just a little hypocritical?’

‘I do work a lot, but that’s not necessarily being a workaholic.’

‘Are you though?’

He shifted his weight as he looked down at me. Now I’d taken my sandals off, he was back to having a good twelve inches’ height advantage over me.

‘Probably.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Gigi tell you that?’

‘No. I’m getting that information straight from the horse’s mouth. Gigi was always too busy telling me how gorgeous and wonderful you were.’

Gabe shook his head. ‘Funnily enough she told me the same about you.’

‘Oh God, did she really?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Well, that’s not embarrassing at all.’

‘Don’t worry about it.’

There was something in the way he said it ... I knew that he was saying it to make me feel better, less embarrassed about the fact my grandmother had clearly been trying to set us up since the poor man had moved in, but still ... Was it stupid that I wished he’d followed it up with something about her at least telling the truth? I gave myself a mental shake.

*Yes, Holly, it was stupid.* Clearly good food, fresh air and moonlight were playing havoc with my normally fairly sensible reasoning system. A good night’s sleep – something I had definitely been short of for far longer than I cared to remember – would help me sort this out. The novelty of a relaxed evening and an easy stroll with a good-looking man and a cute dog was just something my system wasn’t used to processing. God knew it had been far too long since any one of those things had been part of my life, let alone all of them together in one night.

Besides, what was I even doing thinking of anything that had a hint of romance about it? I’d broken my own rules about that once before and been severely burned for my troubles. There was certainly no wish to ever repeat that particular experience. My grandmother, however, had been a romantic through and through, and my views on relationships were the one thing we disagreed on.

When I’d started dating Paul, and she could see I’d begun to get serious about things, she’d been thrilled. Her thrill had lessened a little when she actually met him but when I’d questioned her about it, she’d just told me that it was something she couldn’t put her finger on. I had been so excited for Paul and Gigi to meet that I was heartbroken to find out she hadn’t liked him as much as I’d hoped. All the time he was there, she’d been perfect and gracious, but then her career on the stage had taught her well about how to put on a smile, even if you didn’t feel like it.

I sighed as I remembered the argument we’d had once I’d realised it had all been an act with Paul, and then I’d become even angrier when she hadn’t been able to explain why she didn’t like him. I couldn’t understand it. After all her words about how love was so special and that continuing my stance on absolutely refusing to even consider the sort of relationship she and Grandpa, and that my parents had had meant that I was doing myself and my heart the biggest disservice possible. But when I finally gave in and opened my heart, it still wasn’t right.

We’d both cried and I’d stormed off back to London. My strop lasted all of a day and by the following evening, I’d been back on Skype to Gigi, hoping that we could make up. She’d apologised too and said that she was sure Paul would grow on her, and it was probably just her natural concern for her granddaughter because she wasn’t sure there would ever be anyone good enough for me. All of which, of course, had made us both cry again.

But, as usual, Gigi had been far more astute than me when it came to love and six months before she died, I’d driven down to Wishington Bay with my heart in shreds. It seemed likely that the reason she hadn’t taken to Paul was because he was a lying, cheating piece of shit who’d decided that just one girlfriend was a little bit too restrictive for him. And I’d had absolutely no idea. I’d, stupidly, thought that despite all my reservations, I had actually found what my relatives had managed to – the love and support of a partner with whom I could see myself spending the rest of my life.

I was, however, entirely disavowed of this ridiculous belief around eighteen months ago, and as much as I wished that could have happened in the privacy of my apartment or his, the universe had apparently decided that wouldn’t be half so much fun as having it happen in the middle of a Christmas works party for the entire company. Thankfully, both for me and the new dress I’d just

spent a fortune on, it was immediately clear to the beautiful, tall and elegant woman who stalked in on towering black patent Louboutins, that her existence was as much a surprise to me as mine had apparently been to hers. Possibly the look of absolute shock and horror I could feel on my face had helped her with that conclusion.

This had, thankfully, resulted in both her screaming, and her aim with a gravy-laden plateful of Christmas dinner, being directed solely at him. As he stood there, covered in food, a roast potato sliding slowly down his expensive lapel, she gave him – and me – the final proverbial kick as she pulled off a large diamond ring from her left hand and slammed it down on the table.

\* \* \*

‘That was a big sigh,’ Gabe commented, turning his head a little towards me as my mind bounced back to the present at his voice.

Oh Lord, I had done that out loud.

‘Anything you want to talk about?’

*Most definitely not.*

‘Huh? Oh no, it was just a ... umm ... you know, a contented sigh. Don’t have to get up for work tomorrow, la la la, sort of thing.’ I forced a smile and tried not to focus on how idiotic I probably sounded right at that moment.

Gabe nodded. ‘OK.’ Clearly, he didn’t believe a word but, thankfully, we were now very close to the house so he didn’t have time to pursue it, even if he’d wanted to.

‘Well, night then. I hope Bryan is feeling a bit more perky tomorrow.’

‘Thanks. I’m sure he will be.’

The little dog was now sleepily peering out of the front of Gabe’s jacket, having woken when his master had stopped walking, the cease of the gentle rocking movement stirring him from slumber.

‘Night, night, Bryan,’ I said, giving him a gentle stroke on the top of his silky head. He moved a little, his eyes closing as I did it.

‘You might be here all night now.’ Gabe laughed.

I smiled back, thinking that there were far worse places to be, and not only because of one of the cutest dogs I’d ever met. Quickly, I shoved the additional reasons from my mind and held up Petey the Prawn.

‘Someone will be wanting this for bedtime, I’m guessing.’

‘You’re right. Thanks,’ Gabe said, taking it from me.

‘Right. Well, goodnight then.’

‘Night, Holly. Thanks for the walk back.’

I shrugged. ‘Wouldn’t want you being mugged by a rampant starfish.’

He laughed, the sound clear and deep in the still of the night, sending tingles where there definitely shouldn’t be any right now. ‘Yeah, I’ve heard about those. Thank goodness I don’t have to worry about them anymore now you’re here.’

‘Only for the summer, remember. Then you’re on your own again.’

He nodded, but his head was tipped down towards his dog, so I couldn’t see his expression.

‘Yep. Of course. Goodnight, Holly.’

‘Night, Gabe.’

I climbed the steps up from the beach to my side of the deck, the sound of the waves at my back already soothing me towards sleep. As I got to the top, I turned towards where my neighbour was just disappearing around the side of the house.

‘Gabe?’

He poked his head back around. ‘You all right?’

‘Yes. I was just going to say if you ever need me to watch Bryan when you’re working ... or you know, anything, I’d be happy to.’

I could see the smile in the moonlight, but little else of his expression. ‘Thanks, Holly. That’s really kind of you. I do feel kind of bad sometimes asking Carrie and Ned, even though I know Bryan’s a good little mate and no trouble. They have quite a lot going on already.’

‘They clearly love having him, so I don’t think you need to feel bad about it, but I just thought I’d ask. I’m hoping to do a bit more walking while I’m down here and other than that I’ll only be sorting out the house, and I’d be glad of the company.’

I shifted my weight, suddenly feeling awkward.

Gabe took a few steps back towards me. ‘What is it?’

‘Nothing. It’s ... silly.’

‘Why don’t I be the judge of that?’ His voice was soft and calming and once again my thoughts drifted back to how comforting that sound could, and likely had been, for many patients in the past.

‘It’s just that ... I kind of always wanted a dog. As a child, I mean. But we were never allowed one. My dad just told us it was something else we’d get attached to and then lose in time and that we were just setting ourselves up for heartbreak.’

Less shadowed now, I could see the frown on Gabe’s face. ‘I suppose that is true in a way but if you operated like that all the time, you’d never open yourself to anything or anyone.’

‘I think that was the point.’ Feeling an odd jab of loyalty, I gave a shrug. ‘He had his reasons.’

Gabe didn’t answer.

‘Anyway, I just wanted to say that dog-sitting would be a pleasure. Obviously. I can’t have a dog with the way my life is now either. I mean back in London. So you’d be doing me the favour really.’

‘I think that’s probably pushing it a little bit but it’s a really kind offer, Holly. Thank you. And I may well take you up on it if you’re sure you don’t mind. It’d be nice for Bry to have someone around all the time like that.’

‘Great. OK, then. Night.’

‘Sleep well.’ And with that he was gone.

## Chapter 4

Waking up at 5 a.m. was proving to be a hard habit to break, even though I had no Tube to catch or specific place to be. That didn't mean I didn't have things to do though so, as inviting as this bed was, its downy softness cradling me in comfort, I forced myself not to linger. Kicking back the covers, I pushed myself up, slipped my feet into some hotel slippers I'd snaffled out from a five-star place in Hong Kong in a moment of reckless abandon and headed to the shower.

I'd been here nearly a week now and had already had two lectures from my brother and Carrie about how important breakfast was. Pointing out that I knew this thanks to half of my meetings taking place over breakfast due to differing time zones got me nothing but two exasperated looks and an explanation more suited to a 5-year-old that they were referring to the actual meal. I'd tried to laugh it off but I couldn't shake the niggles that my automatic reaction when someone mentioned breakfast was to equate it with work and meetings rather than actual food, and that perhaps that wasn't such a good thing.

However, I was making an effort, even if I knew it was unlikely I'd be able to keep it up once I went home. Two eggs were now floating leisurely in their silicone pods in a pan of water, slowly poaching as I prepared the toast and pulled the tub of guacamole I'd made the night before from the fridge. As the eggs began to look ready, I grabbed the toast from the toaster, spread both pieces with some of the guacamole and then plopped one perfectly poached egg on each slice.

For once I didn't look at my phone whilst I ate – something else I'd got a telling-off from my big brother for a couple of days back when I'd dropped into the restaurant for lunch. After a few delicious mouthfuls, he'd appeared at the table and whisked my plate away!

'What the ...?'

'That wasn't carefully and lovingly cooked so that you could then barely taste it because you're too busy looking at your phone, checking on work that you're *supposed* to have left behind!'

'I have left it behind!' I said, making a swipe for my plate as Carrie approached the table, taking my plate from Ned and placing it back in front of me.

'Thank you!' I said.

'Don't look too smug,' Carrie warned, pulling out a chair and lowering herself onto it. 'I happen to agree with him. I just don't like seeing good food go to waste. And you need to eat.'

I rolled my eyes as I took another mouthful. 'Traitor.'

'Not at all,' she said. 'Ned's right. You're supposed to have left all this behind. That was the whole point of you coming down here. To take a break. Reading about the markets, and checking emails, statistics and God knows whatever else it is that you do isn't taking a break.'

'Of course it is! I'm not in the office. I'm not answering emails.'

'But you're constantly logging in to see if there are any there to answer.'

I let out a sigh. 'I think "constantly" is a bit strong.'

'Fine. Regularly.'

I couldn't argue with that. Even though I really, really wanted to.

'Give me your phone,' Ned said, suddenly.

'What? No!' I snatched it up and clutched it to me like I was protecting a small child.

The two sets of raised eyebrows I received in reaction confirmed my inkling that that probably wasn't the healthiest of reactions.

'I mean ... I need my phone. I use it ... for all sorts of things. I'm researching ideas for the house, and estate agents and stuff.'

They exchanged a look. 'Fair enough. And actually I wouldn't want you to be without a phone over there anyway, just in case.'

‘I’m not about to be uncontactable with the baby on the way either, so whatever you’re thinking isn’t going to work.’

‘Yes it is,’ Ned said with a tone of such self-assurance that I feared he might actually be right. ‘I’ll swap you. I just upgraded mine and the old one is just sitting here. It’s still a nice phone, but it’s not full of all your financial crap and email and messaging apps.’

‘That crap happens to be my job!’

‘Which you’re not supposed to be doing right now!’ His voice was low but his tone was steady and determined. It was a tone I recognised. It was the same one he’d used when he’d told my dad he was going to catering college, something that my father had never agreed with. Although at least he’d shown a flicker of interest in Ned’s choice, even if it was to disagree. All he’d ever said about me was that ‘Holly’s a bright girl. She’ll do well.’ And I had. Although that was no thanks to my father. Or perhaps it was. Perhaps if he hadn’t just turned in on himself after Mum died, had realised that Ned and I were lost too and that we still needed him, I might not have disappeared into my books and schoolwork quite so much.

The older and lonelier I got, especially once Ned went away to college, the more determined I was to do the very best I could. It was an escape plan. And it had worked. I’d got into Cambridge, graduated top of my class with a First and immediately been head-hunted by one of London’s most prestigious investment firms. They’d wanted me and that had been rather a novel feeling after so many years of feeling like my father barely noticed me. I didn’t hate him. But I’d been angry for a long time. He’d been ill. Destroyed by grief – but he’d never even tried to get help. It was as though Ned and I barely existed. If it hadn’t been for Gigi and Grandpa, I honestly don’t know what would have happened to us.

Ned had managed things better than I had. He hadn’t let the fear of not feeling like you were enough affect him. He’d believed in himself and he’d found Carrie and built a beautifully warm and welcoming life with her. A life full of laughter, and colour and fun, as well as hard work. I tried not to think too much about the contrast in our lives. I certainly had the hard work bit down but the rest ...

‘So, what do you say?’

‘You want me to swap phones with you?’

‘Well, you take my old one, and this one goes in a locked drawer in our house.’

‘What if someone needs me? They wouldn’t have the number!’

Ned swung a glance at Carrie then back to me. ‘That’s rather the point.’

‘But ...’

‘Who’s going to need you?’ Ned asked and I flinched. Automatically his hand went out and caught my wrist. ‘That came out wrong.’

I laughed it off. At least I tried to but I don’t think I convinced any of us. But acknowledging that was something else entirely.

‘Why don’t you try it?’ Carrie asked, taking my hand. ‘Let’s say for two weeks to start with?’

‘Two weeks?’ I squeaked. ‘Am I allowed to look at anything?’

‘Nope. You can get a paper in the village if you’re that bothered about general news but no *Financial Times*!’

I gripped my phone a little tighter and felt my heart hammering. Was that normal? Should I really be having this bad a reaction to someone just asking me not to check my work? But what if there was a crisis? What if Gerald really needed my advice on something? What if one of my biggest clients suddenly—

‘Holly? Holly!’

The glass was cool against my damp palm as my thoughts stopped swimming, along with the room.

‘Take a sip.’ My brother’s concerned face came into focus. ‘I think this would be a good idea. Just for a couple of weeks. Give your mind and body a chance to relax a bit.’ There was nothing but

caring in his tone now. Care and worry. With his first baby on the way, I felt terrible that I was adding to his plate. If trying what they asked would alleviate some of those worries, then it was the least I could do. It was only two weeks after all.

‘OK.’ I slid the phone across the table. ‘Two weeks.’

The look of relief on both of their faces told me I’d done the right thing, however many knots my stomach had tied itself into.

‘But I definitely need pudding now. I’ve had a terrible shock.’

Ned rolled his eyes but I saw some of the strain there had lessened. ‘There’s some sticky toffee kicking about in the kitchen. That do?’

‘Perfect.’

\* \* \*

Hooking the wicker basket over my forearm, I pulled the door closed behind me and began walking up the lane that led from the house. The sun was beginning to burn through the early morning mist. I knew some of the shops were yet to open but Carrie had told me about a cute little café that I should try. As I was in need of supplies – and had gained some extra time this morning since I hadn’t looked at email, financial news or social media – I thought I’d take a stroll into town and try it out. I’d even brought a book with me. To be honest, that might have been pushing the whole relaxing thing as I couldn’t remember the last time I’d read something that wasn’t a financial report but seeing the worry on Ned and Carrie’s faces had spurred me into trying a little harder, for their sakes. After all, it was only for the summer.

As the lane flattened out, I looked around, taking in the beautiful houses that butted up against the main bulk of the village. Many of these were of the same era as Gigi’s with large gardens, all beautifully landscaped and cared for, some in formal linear beds full of box hedges, and sculpted topiaries and another – perhaps my favourite – a complete riot of colour with flowers and leaves, none of which I knew the names of, rammed into bustling cottage garden borders, clashing wildly and yet harmonising at the same time.

I stopped as the scent of roses wafted headily across my path. Turning, I saw the source. A huge, tumbling and climbing rose bush scrambling across a large archway, its soft white blooms emanating clouds of perfume to anyone who passed. Impulsively I took one flower gently in my hand, inhaled, and smiled to myself at the thought I’d be able to tell my brother that I’d literally stopped to smell the roses.

‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’

I jumped. ‘Oh! I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean ...’

An older, very elegant lady in a large, wide-brimmed straw hat strolled towards me across the garden, waving my protestations away, a broad smile on her face.

‘You must be Betty’s granddaughter.’ It was a statement rather than a question.

I nodded.

‘I thought so. She always loved that rose too. Never failed to stop and give it a sniff when it was in bloom.’

I felt a little shift inside of me as I thought of my beloved grandmother and the fact that I’d just unknowingly repeated an action she must have done hundreds of times, looking at the size of the rose bush.

‘I’m Eleanor,’ the woman said, holding out her hand.

‘Holly. It’s nice to meet you. You have a very beautiful garden.’

‘Thank you. We like it.’

‘It must be a lot of work.’

‘I suppose it depends how much you enjoy gardening. There’s often a lot to do, that’s true, but if you love something, it feels less like work, don’t you find?’

‘Yes ... I suppose so.’ I enjoyed what I did but there was no doubt in my mind that it most definitely felt like work.

‘Do you garden, Holly?’

‘Me? Oh no. I sort of deadheaded a few of Gigi’s flowers the other day but to be honest I haven’t a clue what I’m doing.’

‘We all learn by doing. Bertie and I had no idea what we were doing when we bought this place. It was all just lawn and that was about as much as we could cope with.’

‘But now you have all this,’ I said, my eyes roaming over the riotous colours surrounding the gleaming white of the freshly painted house.

‘We do. But there’s been a lot of trial and error. Gigi’s garden is lovely. She wasn’t especially into faffing like I am, so I helped her choose some nice low-maintenance plants. You shouldn’t have too much to do, but I’m always here if you ever want to ask anything. Bertie will laugh and tell you not to wake the dragon.’ She had a fabulous laugh that made you want to join her. ‘I’m not quite sure if I should be offended by the mention of the word dragon when he says that but when you’ve been married as long as we have ...’ She flapped her hand and laughed again.

‘That’s really kind of you to offer, thank you. I appreciate that. I’ll probably just tidy it a little bit. Gabe has been good enough to keep an eye on it I think – it’s not as overgrown as I thought it might be so that’s one less thing to worry about before getting the estate agents round.’

‘Gabe was a godsend for Betty. I think she enjoyed having him there to fuss over.’

‘I think you’re right.’

‘But estate agents? Does that mean you’re not staying?’

‘Unfortunately not. I live in London.’

‘It’s a perfect weekend retreat,’ she said, a twinkle in her eye.

I smiled, seeing immediately how well my grandmother and Eleanor would have got on, imagining them chatting as we were now, as Gigi took her almost daily stroll into town.

‘It would be. I mean, it is. It’s just ... I work a lot.’

Eleanor tilted her head a little. ‘Too much, from what I hear.’

‘Gigi always says that ... I mean said that.’ I swallowed hard at my inadvertent tense error.

Eleanor reached over the low wall and patted my hand. ‘It’s not just Betty who told me that about you. We go to Ned and Carrie’s restaurant all the time.’

‘Oh. I see.’

‘But it’s nice to see you taking some time here anyway.’

‘Yes. I’m actually on sabbatical from my job for a few months, so this seemed the perfect place to spend it.’

‘Well, maybe we’ll grow on you.’ She squeezed my hand, smiling.

‘Oh, I already know I love it here. I just have to be practical. Unfortunately.’

‘Practical can be a little over-rated.’ There was that glint again.

I shook my head, laughing. ‘You’re as bad as my grandmother was.’

‘That’s probably why we were such good friends.’

I smiled. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘Oh, my dear.’ She cupped my face for a moment with one hand, both linked in our grief of missing someone who had meant such a lot to each of us.

‘Off to explore the village then?’ A man’s voice drifted out before a tall, distinguished-looking gentleman appeared from behind one of the large borders. ‘I hope my Eleanor hasn’t been interrogating you about your garden.’ His wife rolled her eyes but the love of decades showed on both their faces.

‘Bertie. Pleased to meet you.’

‘Holly, and you.’

‘This is Betty’s granddaughter.’

‘I thought it might be. You have your grandmother’s eyes.’

‘Doesn’t she?’ Eleanor said, turning to him. It wasn’t the first time I’d been told this. Personally, I’d never seen it. I mean they’d been the same colour but Gigi’s had always been full of laughter and mischief. Mine, not so much.

‘Stocking up the larder?’ he asked, indicating the basket.

‘Yes. It’s ages since I had a good nose around the village so I thought I’d take advantage.’

‘Capital idea.’

I smiled at the slightly dated language, which seemed absolutely correct coming from this upright gent, with his military bearing and hair as white as his house.

‘Well, it was lovely to meet you both.’

‘And you, Holly. And don’t forget, we’re always around. If you need anything, just pop up.’

‘Thank you. I will.’

We said our goodbyes and I headed on up the lane and into the village, pondering over the encounter. I’d been in my flat in London for over seven years and I could count on one hand the number of words I’d exchanged with any of my neighbours. I’d never even been inclined to. I, and they, were always in such a rush. Nobody had time to talk. But here in Wishington Bay, things were different. Very different. And worryingly, I rather liked it.

Having found the café Carrie had insisted I try, I ordered a croissant and a decaf coffee. I’d begun to wonder if the symptoms I’d been getting, the shortness of breath, the tingling, panicky feeling as the room spun around me, might be something to do with the copious amounts of caffeine I funnelled into my system day after day. Perhaps it was trying to tell me something. Probably the same thing my doctor would have told me had I been truthful on my last company check-up about the amount of caffeine I drank and the amount of exercise I did – or rather didn’t do. But still. I was trying now. I’d walked into the village and I was on decaf. Baby steps.

The croissant was the softest, butteriest one I had had outside a bistro in France and I decided it was probably a good thing I wasn’t staying because having discovered this fact could be very bad for my waistline. The book remained in my basket but I occupied myself with watching the village awaken outside the window – shutters going up, awnings being wound down, ready to protect from the strengthening sun, and signs and tables being put out on to the pavements. There was bustle but unlike the chaotic type I was used to in London, this was gentle and almost calming. It was comforting.

Leaving the café, I headed further into the village, peering in the windows of the shops, stopping in one that sold locally produced goods, including some of the cutest children’s wear I’d ever seen. Three baby outfits in my basket later and I was back on my way, passing The Lighthouse. I was glad to see the pub still thriving, having seen so many around the country fall into debt and close. A board advertised teas and coffees, as well as some delicious-sounding specials, and of course the inevitable sports matches. From what Ned had told me, they’d cleverly screened off one area for this activity so that it managed to maintain its country pub atmosphere while still doing what it needed to help bring in the custom. Holidaymakers especially didn’t like to miss a big game so although the owners had been somewhat hesitant initially to make this change, they’d done it well and reaped the benefits.

‘Morning!’ A man smiled and nodded as he watered the window boxes that lined all the sills of the pub on this side.

‘Morning.’

‘Going to be another beautiful day,’ he said, his Barbadian accent melodic while his smile, wide and bright, brought out my own.

‘It certainly looks that way.’

‘I’m never wrong on these things!’ He laughed and I couldn’t help but join him.

‘The window boxes look amazing.’

‘Well, thank you! They’re rather my pride and joy. We’ve won the village Best in Bloom award a few times over the years and I like to think I’ve helped a little in that.’

I ran my eyes over the pub again, taking in the flowers bursting and spilling out of the boxes, their red and white contrasting with the pale blue of their containers.

‘I’m very sure you did, if this display is anything to go by.’

‘That’s most kind of you. Thank you.’

‘You’re very welcome.’

‘Are you on holiday here or just visiting us for the day?’

‘Actually I’m staying for a little while. In Betty Gardner’s house. I’m her granddaughter.’

‘Oh well then, welcome, welcome! There’s a drink here waiting for you whenever you’re ready. Betty was a wonderful woman.’

‘She was. And thank you.’

‘Anytime. It’s nice to know there’s someone breathing life into that place again. Gabe’s done what he can from the outside, of course, but a house needs love from the inside too. Kind of like people.’

‘You’re quite the philosopher.’ I smiled.

He did the boomy laugh again, making me smile more. ‘My wife says the same thing. Usually before she gives me another chore to get on with.’

‘Perhaps she thinks it’s best to keep you busy?’

‘Have you been talking to her?’ He grinned.

‘No, but maybe I will when I come for that drink.’

‘Excellent! Excellent! Then we’ll look forward to seeing you ...’

‘Holly.’

‘Holly. I’m Edward. My wife is Philomena, and we shall very much look forward to seeing you at The Lighthouse.’

I shook the hand he offered, smiling as he laid his other on top and then waved as I left.

Making my way through the small streets, I stopped at the butcher’s, bakery and greengrocer’s, filling my basket with fresh, fragrant produce and not a hint of a plastic bag in sight.

‘Mind those sausages,’ the butcher had cautioned once he realised I lived next door to Gabe – or more specifically Bryan. ‘He’s a fiend for sausages, that one. Certainly lives up to his breed name!’ I thanked him, assuring him that I would keep them somewhere the little dog wouldn’t be able to snaffle them before heading back out into the street and nipping through one of the tiny alleys that led through to the beachfront side of the village.

It was this side that Ned’s restaurant sat but I knew he’d be busy getting ready for lunchtime now and Carrie was at the surgery today so I walked down onto the beach, pulled my sandals off, hooked the straps over my fingers and pointed myself towards home.

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