



Jennifer Bohnet

SUMMER  
AT  
*Coastguard*  
COTTAGES

A gorgeously uplifting  
holiday read

Jennifer Bohnet

**Summer at Coastguard Cottages**

«HarperCollins»

## **Bohnet J.**

Summer at Coastguard Cottages / J. Bohnet — «HarperCollins»,

‘A wonderful summer read’ Stardust Book Reviews  
Escape to the seaside this summer with Jennifer Bohnet’s fabulously feel-good beach read! A summer of secrets! Karen is escaping to her little cottage on the Devonshire coast this summer – it’s the perfect way to forget about her ex-husband. So she’s surprised to find love again when she least expected it! Bruce is learning to live again after the death of his beloved wife. She loved their cottage by the sea but Bruce is torn by the bitter sweet memories – should he sell up and stay in the city? Carrie is at a crossroads in her life after inheriting a fortune from the father she never met. Now she must make a life-changing decision that will affect her new friends, too... Could eight weeks at Coastguard Cottages change all of their lives – forever? Perfect for fans of Debbie Johnson, Ellen Berry and Caroline Roberts. Praise for Summer at Coastguard Cottages: ‘A beautifully written summer read’ Rebecca Stacey (NetGalley reviewer) ‘Gorgeously pleasant and heartwarming in a beautiful location!’ Rebecca Carter (NetGalley reviewer) ‘A joy to read!’ Gabrielle O’Sullivan (NetGalley reviewer) ‘Addictive’ Natasha Potter (NetGalley reviewer) ‘A wonderful summer read’ Stardust Book Reviews

© Bohnet J.

© HarperCollins

**A summer of secrets!**

**Karen** is escaping to her little cottage on the Devonshire coast this summer – it's the perfect way to forget about her ex-husband. So she's surprised to find love again when she least expected it!

**Bruce** is learning to live again after the death of his beloved wife. She loved their cottage by the sea but Bruce is torn by the bitter sweet memories – should he sell up and stay in the city?

**Carrie** is at a crossroads in her life after inheriting a fortune from the father she never met. Now she must make a life-changing decision that will affect her new friends, too...

*Could eight weeks at Coastguard Cottages change all of their lives – forever?*

**Escape to the seaside this summer with Jennifer Bohnet's fabulously feel-good beach read! Perfect for fans of Debbie Johnson, Ellen Berry and Caroline Roberts.**

**Summer at Coastguard Cottages**

Jennifer Bohnet



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

[Copyright](#)



An imprint of HarperCollins *Publishers* Ltd.

1 London Bridge Street

London SE1 9GF

First published in Great Britain by HQ in 2017

Copyright © Jennifer Bohnet 2017

Jennifer Bohnet asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins.

E-book Edition © August 2017 ISBN: 978-0-00-826271-6

Version: 2018-01-23

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Blurb](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Author Bio](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Dedication](#)

[July](#)

[Week One](#)

[Week Two](#)

Week Three

Week Four

*August*

Week One

Week Two

Week Three

Week Four

[Excerpt](#)

[Endpages](#)

## **JENNIFER BOHNET**

is originally from the West Country but now lives in the wilds of rural Brittany, France. She's still not sure how she ended up there! The saying 'life is what happens while you're deciding what to do...' is certainly true in her case. She's always written alongside having various jobs: playgroup leader, bookseller, landlady, restaurateur, farmer's wife, secretary – the list is endless but does provide a rich vein of inspiration for her stories.

For three years she wrote a newspaper column in the South Hams Group of Newspapers (Devon) where she took a wry look at family life. Since living in France it is her fiction that has taken off with hundreds of short stories and several serials published internationally.

Allergic to housework and gardening she rarely does either, but she does like cooking and entertaining and wandering around vide greniers (the French equivalent of flea markets) looking for a bargain or two. Her children currently live in fear of her turning into an ageing hippy and moving to Totnes, Devon.

To find out more about Jennifer visit her website at [jenniferbohnet.com](http://jenniferbohnet.com) or chat to her on Twitter at [@jenniewriter](https://twitter.com/jenniewriter).

Thanks to all the team at HQ Digital/HarperCollins but in particular big thanks go to my editor Charlotte Mursell – Charlotte you rock!

I also have to give a big shout out to all my on-line friends, bloggers, fellow authors and readers. I've only met a tiny, tiny percentage of you in Real Life but your friendship and encouragement inspire and keep me motivated. Thank you.

For my husband Richard with love.

[July](#)

*I am not a product of my circumstances. I am a product of my decisions.*

(Stephen Covey)

[Week One](#)

Ten days earlier, when Carrie Penfold had gone home for Sunday lunch, Elizabeth, her mother, had handed her a thick, official-looking envelope.

'This arrived on Friday for you.'

'Postmarked Bristol,' Malcolm, her father, said in his slow Somerset way of speaking. 'Looks important. We had to sign for it.'

Elizabeth handed her the paperknife from the bureau. 'You'd best open it. No point in playing guessing games.'

Carefully slitting the envelope open, Carrie pulled out the letter. The clearly expensive and embossed, cream-coloured paper, had the name of a firm of lawyers printed across the top.

Carrie quickly scanned the typewritten words before looking at her parents.

‘It’s from a firm of solicitors who want me to contact them as soon as possible in connection with the estate of one Robert Trumble, deceased. I don’t know anyone called that,’ she said, puzzled.

Her parents had looked at each other in consternation before Elizabeth had said quietly, ‘Trumble is a name on your birth certificate.’

It was Malcolm who, ignoring her protests, had insisted on ringing the lawyers Monday morning to make her an appointment.

‘You can’t ignore letters like this.’

Carrie, who had planned on doing just that, didn’t answer.

She’d known practically from the moment she was placed in the antique wicker rocking cradle, lovingly recovered in her honour, that she was special. Adopted. It had never been a secret. Calling her their special chosen daughter, Elizabeth and Malcolm had lavished love and praise on her all her life. Even through her difficult teenage years.

When, on her eighteenth birthday, Elizabeth had presented her with her original birth certificate and told her she was free to try and contact her biological parents if she wanted to, Carrie had looked at her horrified.

‘Why would I do that?’ she’d asked. ‘Do you want me to find and contact them?’

Elizabeth had shaken her head. ‘No. But you do have the right these days. Dad and I wouldn’t ever stand in your way. Even if we’d rather you left the past undisturbed. Selfishly, we’d feel hurt if we weren’t enough for you.’

‘You’re my Mum and Dad,’ Carrie had said, hugging her tightly. ‘As if I’d ever do anything to hurt you two.’

The birth certificate had been replaced, unlooked at by Carrie, alongside her adoption papers in the ‘Important Documents’ file in the ancient wooden bureau in the farm office. Where it had stayed forgotten and ignored for the next ten years. Until now.

Elizabeth had offered to go to the meeting with her, for moral support, and now, on the first day of July, the two of them were walking along an elegant street in the Clifton district of Bristol, peering at the numerous brass plates fixed to stone gateposts at the front of what had once been grand Victorian houses, now reduced to offices and flats and the occasional alternative health practice.

The law firm they were looking for appeared to occupy the whole of one imposing detached villa. Carrie pressed the entry intercom and gave her name. Inside, thick carpet absorbed the sound of their footsteps as they walked across the foyer to the reception area.

Ushered into a woodpanelled waiting room, Elizabeth whispered, ‘It’s a bit posh, isn’t it?’

Carrie nodded. ‘I expect their fees are extortionate. Hope they don’t charge me for this visit.’

Five minutes later, when the receptionist returned and escorted them up the sweeping staircase to an office overlooking a park, Carrie, expecting a man of her parents’ generation, was surprised to be greeted by a younger man..

‘I’m Ari Saper and I apologise sincerely for keeping you waiting,’ he said, indicating they should take a seat in front of the large, modern, glass-topped desk.

‘The senior partner who wrote to you has asked me to meet you today as he’s been called away,’ Ari said, opening a folder on his desk and taking out some papers and an envelope. ‘At this point, I need to ask you for some formal identification,’ he said, looking at Carrie.

Carrie reached into her tote and brought out the file Elizabeth had insisted they bring, ‘just in case’.

‘Birth certificates and formal adoption papers are all in there,’ Elizabeth said quietly.

A quick shuffle through the papers, and Ari handed the file back. ‘All in order, thank you.’ He smiled and gave a little cough before continuing.

‘Miss Penfold, I have to tell you that you are the sole beneficiary named in Robert Trumble’s will.’

‘But who is he? I’ve never met him,’ Carrie protested.

‘I understand he was your biological father. He’s left you a considerable fortune. He also left you this letter.’ Ari picked up the envelope from the desk.

It was Elizabeth who reached out and took it as Carrie sat there, stunned. ‘Thank you.’

‘I appreciate this has come as something of a shock,’ Ari started to say, but Carrie interrupted him.

‘Tell me about him. What did he do? Where did he live? When did he die? Has there been a funeral?’

‘He was a university lecturer here in Bristol. He died a year ago from a heart attack. The funeral was very private. I’m afraid it’s taken us a little while to find you.’

‘When you say a considerable fortune, how much? Like a lottery win of millions – or a more realistic figure?’ Carrie said.

‘Lottery size of several million. And of course his property – a flat in the centre of Bristol and a house down in Devon. We hold the deeds to both here.’

‘Can I refuse the inheritance?’

Ari looked at her, startled. ‘There would be certain formalities we’d need to follow, but yes, you can refuse to accept the legacy if you wish. But why would you refuse and give all that money to the government? It’s a chance to change your life.’

Carrie glared at him. ‘I love my life. I have no wish to change it.’

An hour later, another file of papers in her tote alongside two keys, Carrie and Elizabeth stood up to leave the solicitor’s office.

‘I’ll be in touch soon with some more papers for you to sign,’ Ari said. ‘Should all be formalised in about eight weeks. Please don’t hesitate to call me if you need help – or something clarified.’ He held out his hand. Numbly, Carrie shook it.

Both he and Elizabeth had applied pressure to get her to accept the legacy rather than rejecting it out of hand. But it was Elizabeth’s whispered ‘You can do a lot of good with that kind of money’ that in the end had persuaded her, and she’d taken a deep breath and signed the papers Ari handed her.

‘Let’s find somewhere for a drink and lunch,’ she said now as they left the offices behind them and turned into Clifton Village. ‘We passed a bistro-gastro-pub on the way here that should do the trick.’

Five minutes later they were sitting at a small, wrought-iron table in the garden of the pub Carrie remembered seeing, with glasses of wine and deciding what to have for lunch.

After taking a long sip of her drink, Carrie sighed and turned to face Elizabeth. ‘I don’t want this legacy to change who I am. It’s such a huge amount.’

‘Somebody famous, I forget who, once said money doesn’t change you – it simply brings out the person you were all the time. Or something like that. Anyway, you’ll be fine because you’re lovely all the way through.’

‘Oh, Mum. I hope you’re right. But I’m frightened that, if nothing else, it’s going to change my life beyond all recognition.’

\*

Severe delays because of roadworks on the M4, followed by a broken-down car blocking one of the narrow Devonshire lanes once she’d left the main road, had conspired to make Karen Weston late. The fact that her lateness was also due in part to her delaying leaving home until she’d talked to Derek was infuriating. What a waste of time that had proved to be.

She’d wanted to arrive mid afternoon but it was nearer six o’clock when she turned on to the single unfenced track that climbed the edge of the cliff towards the old coastguard cottages. Two minutes later she drove into one of the parking spaces reserved for ‘The Captain’s House’.

Glancing across the parking area as she got out and locked the car, she registered the presence of the large 4x4 that belonged to Bruce in 'The Bosun's Locker' and the ancient estate car of Joy and Toby, the unofficial caretakers of the cottages and year-round occupants of No. 5. Other than that, the parking lot was empty. She knew Hazel and Simon in No. 2, the last of the owners who regularly spent the whole summer here, were due to arrive tomorrow.

Karen sighed happily as she looked around. This was such a unique place, with the large 'Captain's House' and smaller 'Bosun's Locker' like mismatched bookends, holding up the six cottages in between. Despite the few modern improvements made down the years, principally the creation of the swimming pool and tennis court, the century-old weathered stone building of the complex, sitting on its clifftop overlooking the Channel, gave off a comforting air of permanence and solidarity.

The fact that only two of the eight properties were regularly rented out, and then only to friends and family, not commercially, was one of the main benefits of the old cottages for Karen. Everybody who came for the long summer holiday had some connection to the place, making for a tight-knit community with people knowing each other.

Karen shuddered as the image of the complex of holiday cottages in Cornwall Derek had persuaded her to spend Easter in one year came into her mind. Three hundred chalets accommodating a thousand people at the height of the season. She'd hated the place on sight. Derek had wanted to buy one.

He'd been furious with her when she'd said she didn't like the place. Couldn't see why anyone would want to have a holiday there.

'But look at the amenities. Swimming pool, crazy golf for the kids, restaurant, pub, cinema, sports room. It's got everything you could want on a holiday.'

'But I don't want any of those things – apart from the pool and we've got one in Devon.' She'd shrugged. 'There's no character. All the chalets look alike. It's just too busy for me. Not relaxing at all. Give me The Captain's House every time.'

Making her way down the short path to the front door, memories of that visit to the detested Cornish complex lingered in Karen's mind. Why now? Probably because of something Derek had said that afternoon, she decided.

'You're obsessed with that damn place,' he'd muttered when she'd reminded him it was today she was driving down to Devon for the summer. The fact that it also signalled the first day of their trial separation, he seemed to have forgotten.

'Could buy a decent villa down on the Costa del Sol and have guaranteed sunshine if you'd only sell it. And have money in the bank.'

'Not going to happen, Derek,' Karen said. 'Especially now. Right, I'm off. Let me know if you do decide to come down while Francesca and Wills are around. I haven't told them about us needing time apart to rethink things.'

An emphatic shake of his head. 'Not sure there's any point in even coming down.'

Karen had sighed and left. A few years ago he would have kissed her properly, told her to drive carefully and to ring when she arrived. Those days were in the past, though, and the chances of them returning were slim.

Unlocking the large wooden front door, Karen released a deep breath. She was back in the place she loved most in the world. The place where her problems faded temporarily into the background. Derek and his bullying would never win. No way would she ever sell this house.

Once the shutters on the large bay window of the sitting room were open, she sank down onto the cushioned window seat. Always her favourite place to sit. She loved the way the front lawns dropped away leaving nothing but the sea in full view, giving the sensation of standing on the bridge of a ship. People visiting the house for the first time always pointed that out, which amused her. Did they think she perhaps hadn't realised? That the past forty-odd summers had been spent here in some sort of daze?

Sitting there looking at the sea, choppy as the evening tide turned, Karen offered up a silent thank you to her parents, who'd had the foresight to buy the house as a holiday home all those years ago – and then to leave it to her, not her brother. He'd been openly relieved to inherit their parents' detached house close to the university town where he was a lecturer.

Not that he didn't like The Captain's House. He and his wife came for a holiday every summer, claiming it set them up for the year. But he didn't love it with the passion Karen did. She couldn't imagine a life without it. Maybe Derek was right and she was obsessed. But it was so good to be back here with eight weeks of summer stretching ahead of her.

Eight weeks of days with no real routines, swims in the infinity pool whose water she could see sparkling in the late sun, games of tennis, communal get-togethers and barbecues. The only thing missing would be the continual presence of the children.

Wills would be home sometime this month and Francesca had promised to come for a fortnight in August. The first summer in eighteen years without either of them being around for the whole of it.

Wills had no idea how much she'd missed him the last few months while he travelled on his gap year. The occasional postcard was no compensation. Summer here wouldn't be complete until he arrived back safely from his travels.

She knew things changed as life progressed, of course she did. Children growing up and gaining their independence was only natural. Francesca, being the eldest, had been the first to take flight four years ago for a career in the arts. At the time Karen had consoled herself with the thought that Wills, at fourteen, would be home for a few more years. She wasn't ready for the nest to empty completely. Nor was she ready for how fast those four years had flown.

She'd realised recently that certain milestones, while openly acknowledged as being part of the general melee of family life, actually made a deeper impact than at first seemed to be the case, their full extent hidden, iceberg-like, way below the surface.

Francesca and Wills would, of course, always be connected to her because she was their mother, but at eighteen, nearly nineteen, Wills was now busy following Francesca into the wider world. Making his own decisions, choosing the life he wanted. A life she would inevitably be on the outskirts of, as she now was with Francesca, rather than being involved in the day-to-day minutiae.

It had been Wills' decision to go travelling for six months, to get his own place, to study medicine, rather than the decisions Francesca had made four years ago, that had hurled unwelcome and unforeseen changes and challenges into her life.

If she were honest, though, she'd known for some time that an eruption in her own life was inevitable. The ground beneath her feet had been trembling for a few years now. The big final quake, destroying everything in its path, was getting nearer. Could she honestly say the changes she was facing, had initiated, were unwelcome? No. That was what this trial separation was all about – her trying to gain control of an uncertain future. She just needed to let her natural optimism rise and fight the frightened feelings about what the future might hold.

Watching a small sailing boat beating its way back into harbour, Karen decided she wasn't going to worry about anything over the summer. She'd follow her own mother's default philosophy for once: 'Remember, Karen, life has a habit of sorting things out one way or another if you leave them alone.'

Karen had always secretly thought the philosophy was a bit of a coward's way out, much like the old cliché 'least said, soonest mended', but this summer she intended to test the validity of both. With any luck, by the end of summer, decisions would have made themselves.

\*

Bruce Adams, slicing onions and mushrooms for his chicken casserole supper in 'The Bosun's Locker', heard a car arriving and guessed it was Karen. Good. Karen's arrival signalled that summer proper was about to begin. Although, of course, it would be a new version of summer. His first without Gabby. He muttered to himself as his eyes began to stream. Damn onions.

There had been a lot of firsts in the last six months. Months in which he'd learnt how quickly life could change as well as the true meaning of loneliness. No siblings, either his or Gabby's, to give support, no cousins to offer a comforting word, no children to share the despair of heartbreaking loss. Just him. Alone.

Of course he had friends who'd offered their sympathy, attended the funeral, and then, muttering 'Time's a great healer', slowly drifted away, back into their own lives where they didn't have to suffer the embarrassment of not knowing what to say to him. All he really wanted was to be able to talk to someone, anyone, about Gabby. If he couldn't talk about her, he was afraid the essence of her would disappear from his memory.

Karen had sent him a lovely letter after the funeral offering to help in any way she could and looking forward to seeing him in the summer. Would she understand his need to talk about Gabby?

After the funeral he'd taken the silver-framed photo of Gabby and him that lived on the mantelpiece of the sitting room of the flat and placed it on the breakfast bar. Taken last summer, here on the terrace in front of the cottage, the two of them had their arms around each other and were laughing at some shared joke. As a couple they'd laughed a lot. Always had, from day one. He'd never quite understood how the vivacious American girl he'd fallen in love with the day she appeared in his life asking for a job could possibly love him in return. But she had.

He'd started his renovation business eighteen months earlier and had recently begun to put out feelers for a freelance interior designer to join the team. He hadn't advertised, simply hoped to find someone recommended via 'word of mouth'. Gabby had arrived unannounced one Friday afternoon. He'd done his best to ask her the right questions, and looked at her portfolio (which was excellent), all the while knowing he was going to offer her the job anyway. Bruce sighed, remembering those long-ago days when he and Gabby had laughed and loved their way through life. What was that famous song line about days – 'We thought they'd never end'. But they had.

These days it had become a ritual for him to talk to the photo, tell Gabby his plans for the day as he ate his breakfast. Not that he had many plans these days, but talking to Gabby every morning had become an essential part of his routine. He couldn't imagine not doing it now.

Unable to leave the photo behind for the summer, he'd wrapped it carefully in bubble-wrap and placed it between the shirts in his suitcase. Within five minutes of arriving at the cottage he'd retrieved it and placed it on the shelf in the small alcove in the kitchen that held favourite bits and pieces they'd collected over the years.

He poured the bottle of white wine sauce over the chicken pieces, mushrooms and onions and placed the pot in the oven and set the timer. Briefly he thought about asking Karen to join him for supper.

'What d'you think, Gabby?' he said, glancing across at the photo. 'Tonight or tomorrow? Tomorrow is better, I think. Don't want to look desperate for company, do I? I expect she's looking forward to a quiet night to settle in.'

Besides, he'd decided this evening he'd fetch the bag from the communal outhouse and sort out the flags, a job he and Gabby had always done together as they enjoyed a glass of wine, and something he'd been putting off doing. But people were arriving and would expect the flag to be flying. He couldn't disappoint them.

The summer ritual of flying the flag that Gabby had started years ago would begin tomorrow and kick-start summer. You have to fly flags – you can't leave the flagpole empty, she had always said.

\*

Karen glanced at her watch and wondered about wandering along to say 'Hi' to Bruce. He'd have finished supper by now and might be glad of some company for an hour. The last time she'd seen him at the funeral, he'd looked heartbreakingly adrift, as if he didn't quite remember who he was without Gabby at his side. He hadn't come down at Easter, telling Karen in a phone call that he couldn't face the cottage yet without Gabby.

This summer was going to be hard for him. At least she had the consolation that Francesca and Wills would at some point both put in an appearance.

Picking up the bottle of red wine she'd opened to accompany her own supper, she went out onto the front terrace and made her way along to The Bosun's Locker, waving to Joy and Toby as she passed No. 5.

Bruce looked up as she opened the wooden gate that separated the small patio, with its flagpole belonging to The Bosun's Locker, from the main terrace.

'Karen. Lovely to see you. How are you?'

'Thought you might like to share a glass with me?' she said, holding the bottle aloft. 'Drink to summer. Unless you're busy?' she said, looking at the pile of material she recognised as his flag collection.

'Almost sorted,' Bruce said. 'You know where the glasses are. I'll just finish tidying up this lot.'

In the kitchen, as Karen reached for two glasses, she saw the picture of Gabby and Bruce. The memory of the perfect summer evening it had been taken on just a year ago flitted into her mind. Whoever could have guessed tragedy was so close?

She glanced out at Bruce carefully folding the last flag, remembering with affection the day he and Gabby had arrived in their lives, twenty-seven years ago. In those days the cottages and grounds had still been rustic, the amenities basic, and her parents had voiced trepidation about the young couple who were the new owners, the changes they would want to initiate.

At first sight, Bruce and Gabby had been a most unlikely couple. Her, extrovert and people-gathering. Him, friendly but reserved in the beginning. The realisation that they too genuinely loved the old-fashioned cottages, which had survived over one hundred years of buffeting by the storms that thrashed the coast every winter, had come as a welcome relief.

Joining Bruce out on the terrace, Karen poured the wine and handed him a glass. The flag bag was full again, the green, black and white Devon flag remaining alone on the table.

'First one up tomorrow as usual,' Bruce said. 'Normal summer routine. Cheers.'

'Cheers. Here's to...,' Karen hesitated. It would be insensitive to drink to a good summer when it was going to be such a difficult one for Bruce. 'The next few weeks. And a sunny summer with not too much rain,' she added.

Bruce gave her a diffident smile before taking a sip of his wine. 'Long-term forecast is good, I think. Derek not with you?'

Karen shook her head. 'No. Too busy at the moment. He'll be down when the children come.' Maybe. But there was little point in saying anything to Bruce just yet about the state of her marriage.

Bruce glanced along the terrace. 'No news about No. 4 yet. Still going through probate, I suspect. Sad to see it empty.'

Karen nodded. 'Hope someone in the family decides to keep it rather than sell it.'

'Joy was telling me that No. 3 has been rented for most of the summer,' Bruce said.

'Has Charlie told her who it is? Someone we know already?' Karen said, surprised.

Bruce shook his head. 'Just a friend of Charlie who needs a place to stay for a while. No definite arrival date yet. Maybe next week.'

Karen sipped her wine thoughtfully. A long summer rental of any of the cottages was unusual. Charlie himself always came down for a week or two with a group of friends, and always around the time of the owners' annual meeting when joint decisions regarding maintenance, etcetera, were taken.

Wills had once described Charlie's friends as 'totally fit', so summer could be interesting – or not.

\*

The next day, awake at 5.30 a.m., Bruce decided it was pointless to stay in bed in the hope of falling asleep again. Four hours sleep a night seemed to be the maximum he could hope for these days as he tossed and turned his way through the hours of darkness.

In town there were familiar noises accompanying the new day. Buses changing gear to climb the hill, car doors slamming, the rattling of the jeweller's security shutter as he unlocked the shop across the road from the apartment. But here – nothing.

It always took him a couple of days at the cottage to adjust to the silence surrounding him. Seagulls were the only early risers here and the sound of the waves breaking against the rocks below was the only other noise he could hear. Even when all the cottages were occupied in August there was little movement or noise before half past eight. Something to do with everyone being on holiday, Bruce supposed. No need to rise early. He had to admit he liked the all-enveloping morning silence. He'd get up and have his first coffee of the day watching the breaking dawn from the terrace.

Sitting there, waiting for the sky to lighten completely, Bruce planned his day. Finish his coffee before raising the flag. A drive along the coast for supplies – including a visit to his favourite bookshop. After that he'd treat himself to lunch somewhere. At some point he'd need to talk to Karen and enlist her help in carrying out the promise he'd made years ago to Gabby. He hadn't wanted to mention it on her first evening. Too soon.

He glanced along the terrace towards The Captain's House. Karen had been rather quiet last night. Not her usual self at all. Apart from the brief 'He's too busy' comment she hadn't mentioned Derek. Gabby would have picked up on that and gently probed – something he hesitated to do. He'd hate Karen to think he was intruding. Overstepping boundaries between friends. On the other hand, he'd like her to feel free to talk to him if she wanted. He'd wait a couple of days and see if she talked to him, asked his advice, before asking her if she was all right.

Carefully, he clipped the Devon flag to its rope and pulled it to the top of the mast where it fluttered in the breeze. Always the first flag of the summer, the Devon flag would be raised every day until the annual communal barbecue on 4<sup>th</sup> July, which Gabby, proud of her American roots, had instigated, and for which the stars and stripes had specifically been bought.

It was very rare for anyone to join him for the morning flag-hoisting, but the lowering of the flag every evening was different. Nine o'clock was sundowner time, when everyone migrated to The Bosun's Locker if they were around, either with a drink in hand or a bottle to share.

Gabby had always had a plate or two of nibbles to pass around every evening. Nothing fancy: cheese and crackers; crisps; maybe some crab sandwiches if she'd been to town. Things it was well within his capabilities to provide. He just had to get organised.

Lady Luck was smiling on him, Bruce decided, as he manoeuvred into the last available place in the car park.

Taking Gabby's wicker basket from the front seat he made for the embankment. A walk alongside the river was one of the pleasures of summer down here. They'd always made it a part of their shopping routine before facing the supermarket crowds when they made the effort and drove over to Dartmouth. That and lunch afterwards in the Royal Castle Hotel. For some reason, in recent years, Gabby had always preferred to shop in Kingsbridge, although she did like lunch in the Royal Castle.

This morning the tide was in and there was the usual activity out on the river. A teenage boy handed him a flyer as he passed the fishing-trips kiosk. Bruce smiled and said 'Thanks' before briefly glancing at the paper.

A day at sea fishing? Something he'd never done – never been tempted to do. His days here had always been spent with Gabby. Filled with 'couple' things. There had always been places to go, books to read, restaurants to try, films to see, friends to meet up with. Memories to be made together. Six months since she'd gone but the numbness was still there. No point making memories now there was no one to share them with.

Already, in this first week of being alone down here, he was struggling to fill his days. He'd never been one for hobbies as such. Not even when he was younger. He doubted sea fishing was for him, though. A short trip on the Dartmouth ferry was enough to have him reaching for the sea quells.

He sighed, inwardly acknowledging he was going to have to think seriously about what he was going to do with 'the rest of his life', however long that might be. Sea fishing might be out but there had to be something else.

He stopped as he saw a small girl skipping along the embankment towards him, not concentrating on where she was going and dangerously near the edge. Her parents were yards behind pushing a buggy, laughing and chatting happily together, seemingly unaware of the risk their daughter was taking.

Instinctively he moved nearer the edge himself, ready to put a restraining hand out should she need it. Which she did. She stumbled and would have fallen over the edge if he hadn't grabbed her.

'Whoops,' he said. 'Not time for a swim yet.' Holding her hand he looked towards the parents.

'Hey, you! Let go of her,' the man shouted as he ran towards him.

Shocked, Bruce let go of the little girl's hand and straightened up.

'You, young man, can stop shouting at me. Your daughter very nearly went over the edge. I caught her just in time. Children are very precious. You should look after her better.'

'He's right,' said a woman sitting on a nearby seat. 'I saw what he did. If he hadn't grabbed her, she would have gone over. He deserves your thanks.'

Bruce smiled at her gratefully as she got up and walked away.

'Sorry. I guess I overreacted. But these days...'

The man shrugged. 'Keep a closer eye on her if things like that worry you,' Bruce said. He smiled down at the little girl. 'And you, young lady, you stay away from the edge of the quay.'

Bruce turned and walked briskly away. How could anyone not realise how quickly children could get themselves into trouble and take more care of them? But it wasn't just anger he was feeling. He was shaking from the rush of an emotion he hadn't felt for years. The crippling sadness they'd both felt with the three miscarriages Gabby had suffered before they'd given up on their dream of a family.

Thankfully, by the time he reached his favourite coffee shop, he'd stopped shaking. The large 'For Sale' sign on the nearby three-storey townhouse caught his attention. Normally that would be just the kind of property he and Gabby would have been interested in renovating. Mentally he made a note of the estate agent's name. He'd call in later and get the details. It would be good to have a project on the go again. He'd throw himself into work and try to fill the new gap in his life.

He stopped in the act of pushing open the café door, to the annoyance of the woman following him in. How could he even think of renovating a building without Gabby? Without her to oversee the interior details, he'd be lost.

'Sorry' he muttered, ushering the woman past.

Where had these sudden thoughts come from? Only last week he'd decided that, in September, he'd wind up the business. Find something else to do. The word 'retire' had flitted through his brain. He'd even been vaguely thinking about moving down here. Living in The Bosun's Locker permanently. It was big enough for just him.

Sitting waiting for his coffee, he sighed inwardly. The business had always undertaken work up country, both he and Gabby wanting to keep Devon as the place they escaped to from the pressure of work.

But now, why not? Move here and maybe do just one local renovation a year to keep his hand in and stop him getting bored. He'd need to suss out the local builders, find an interior decorator. Were local architects any good? Bruce could feel the lethargy that had settled over him in recent months lifting as possibilities flitted through his brain.

He'd go to the estate agent's and pick up the details of the townhouse, see if there was anything else that caught his eye, and then do some serious thinking about his future. He'd work his way back into some sort of life. Gabby would expect nothing less of him.

\*

‘Right, that’s the spare ribs marinating and the spicy chicken legs rolled in their coating. What shall I do next? Cut up the veg for the kebabs?’ Hazel asked.

‘Please. I’ll get on with the macaroni salad once I’ve got the pumpkin pie in the oven,’ Karen said.

The two of them were in Karen’s kitchen preparing everything for the 4<sup>th</sup> July barbecue that evening. The first communal get-together of the season.

‘At least the weather is good. Remember the year of the thunderstorms and floods?’

‘Never forgotten it,’ Hazel said. ‘God, was it scary.’

‘How big a macaroni salad do we want?’ Karen held up the bag of pasta. ‘All of it?’

Hazel nodded and Karen poured the lot into the saucepan of boiling water on the Aga.

‘Simon and Bruce setting the barbecue up for later? Who’s in charge of the actual cooking this year?’

‘Who d’you think?’ Hazel laughed. ‘Simon’s bought himself a new set of posh tools and a King of the Barbeque apron. No way is he planning to stand aside.’

Karen piled all the meat for cooking – chicken drumsticks, steaks, beef burgers and sausages – onto dishes ready to be carried out to Simon and Toby. A table had been set up to one side of the barbecue for people to help themselves to the rest of the food. Green salad, macaroni salad, rolls, crisps, sweet-potato wedges, pumpkin pie.

Looking at the array of food, Karen said, ‘D’you think we might have gone over the top this year? There’s only Tia to represent the hordes of hungry teenagers we usually feed.’

Before Hazel could answer, Karen’s mobile rang. Glancing at the caller name her heart lifted. ‘Wills. Where are you?’

‘At the airport on the way home. Looking forward to seeing you and Devon.’

‘Wonderful. When exactly do you want me to collect you from Totnes?’

‘No worries. Dad’s offered to bring me down towards the end of next week.’

Karen pushed the guilty ‘But I don’t want him to’ thought away, saying instead, ‘Great. See you both then.’

What had happened to Derek’s ‘Not sure there’s any point in coming down’ excuse? Was he up to something? Fingers crossed it would just be an overnight visit and he’d then disappear back to town, leaving her to enjoy Wills’ company.

Karen smiled happily at Hazel. ‘Wills is on his way home. He’ll be here next week.’ She picked up the first couple of meat dishes. ‘Right, let’s get the chefs cooking.’

The first communal barbecue of the summer was always a noisy one. This year was no exception.

As the first steaks and burgers came off the grill, Bruce checked everyone had a drink before raising his glass of wine. ‘Nice to see everyone here again and hopefully we’re in for a good summer.’ He paused before adding quietly, ‘Here’s to absent friends.’ Silently, glasses were raised in acknowledgement.

Looking at Bruce, Karen realised how tense he was and knew how difficult this first communal get-together was for him. Gabby had always been such a powerhouse at these events. Organising everything and everyone. This first summer without her was sure to be full of reminders of the gentle woman who had been his life for so long.

‘You okay?’ Karen said, moving to stand by him.

Bruce nodded. ‘Yes. As Gabby would say, the show must go on.’ He glanced at her. ‘I need to talk to you. About something I promised Gabby I’d do. Can I buy you lunch one day next week? Wednesday? Friday?’

‘Wednesday’s good for me. Wills and Derek are probably arriving on Friday,’ Karen said.

‘Glad to hear that,’ Bruce said. He glanced along the terrace. ‘I was in the estate agent’s this afternoon. They’ve got No. 4 on their books, so we can expect a few nosey parkers looking around this summer. Mind you, at the price they’re asking, it’ll be well-heeled nosey parkers.’ He shook his head.

‘Oh, that’s a shame. You’d have thought one of the relatives would have wanted to keep it,’ Karen said. ‘What were you doing in the estate agent’s anyway? Please don’t tell me you’re thinking of selling up?’

‘Not The Bosun’s Locker, no.’ Bruce shook his head. ‘But I’ve got to find something to do. Some purpose to my life,’ he added quietly. ‘I’ll tell you more on Wednesday.’

By mid evening, Simon and Toby, fuelled by several cans of beer, were doing a duet of ‘Yankee Doodle Dandy’, much to the disbelief of Tia, Hazel and Simon’s teenage daughter, who was watching them with a look of horror on her face.

‘Yankee doodle went to town, a-riding on a pony, stuck a feather in his cap, and called it macaroni.’

Hazel tried not to laugh as she poured Joy and Karen another glass of wine. ‘It only needs for us to start dancing and her embarrassment would be complete,’ she said. ‘If I had the energy it would be worth it.’

An hour later, as Bruce supervised the fireworks that always heralded the end of the evening, Hazel whispered to Karen, ‘You up for a chat and a skinny-dip tonight after this lot finishes?’

Karen nodded. ‘Good idea.’

\*

‘Joy – lives in No. 5. She and her husband, Toby, act as unofficial caretakers for everybody. She’ll have bought food and stocked the fridge, made the bed up, etcetera, and will look after you. Do your shopping, a spot of cleaning if you want,’ Charlie said, looking at his old friend Guy Widdicombe.

‘Thanks, mate,’ Guy said, taking the key Charlie was holding out.

‘Stay as long as you want. I’ll be down at the end of the month.’

‘I really appreciate this,’ Guy said.

Charlie shrugged his shoulders. ‘It’s what mates do. You can buy me a decent dinner when I get there. Now, d’you want a lift to the station?’

‘Booked a taxi. Should be here any minute. Thanks. I’ll go and wait downstairs. See you in a few weeks.’

Sitting lost in his own thoughts as the train thundered through the countryside, Guy tried to convince himself he was doing the right thing.

He knew going back was supposed to be a no-no. But he was only returning to where he’d once spent an idyllic holiday. It wasn’t as though it was his hometown and he was attempting to begin a new life there. He was just going to chill out for a few weeks while he got his life back on track. Forget the horrors he’d seen. Then he could move on.

He’d accepted Charlie’s offer of the use of his holiday cottage for the summer before he’d realised where it was, by which time it was too late to turn the offer down. He needed somewhere to live and he hated the thought of being holed up in London for the summer months.

But the memories had started to come back once he’d realised, and now, as the train negotiated the vulnerable track beside the sea near Dawlish, images of that holiday were picture-sharp in his head. At nineteen, he’d moaned about its location. Isolated and boring he’d called it then. Nothing to do. But then he’d met Chris and things had changed.

Instead of mooching about bored, his days had been filled with sailing, rock climbing, swimming in the small cove, illicit beer drinking and playing table tennis on a rickety old table under the big oak tree at the edge of the garden. In the end it had been a good holiday – one he looked back on now with affection and nostalgia for lost opportunities.

Today, thirty-odd years later, all he wanted was the isolated and boring part. No friends or holidaymakers intent on jollying everyone into joining in things. Charlie had said to expect the

cottages to be occupied by the various owners, but they all wanted peace and quiet too. He wouldn't have to socialise if he didn't want to. And he definitely didn't want to. He planned on lots of sleep, long walks and lots of reading. And drowning recent memories in copious amounts of whisky and wine.

The taxi he'd organised was waiting for him when he got off the train at Totnes. Half an hour later he was standing in the car park behind the cottages, looking at the stars and stripes flag fluttering in the evening breeze over the end cottage. Someone was singing 'Yankee Doodle Dandy' loudly, off-key, and there was a lot of laughter and conversation.

So much for Charlie's promise of peace and quiet. Still, at least no one was around to notice his arrival and he pushed open the big heavy wooden door in the stone wall that surrounded the communal grounds and made his way along the path to Charlie's cottage.

Inside, No. 3 was bright, modern and minimalistic. No feminine touches for Charlie. And nothing like whichever cottage in the row he'd stayed in all those years ago, with its chintz and old-fashioned furniture.

A sturdy cream loop carpet had been laid throughout No. 3, except for the kitchen with its traditional slate floor. Table and chairs were placed by the French doors leading to the terrace, two black-leather settees faced each other in front of the fireplace, a glass coffee table between them. Bookshelves and abstract paintings covered the whitewashed walls.

Upstairs in the front bedroom Guy slung his holdall onto the trunk at the foot of the king-sized bed and took out the bottle of whisky. He'd unpack later. Right now he needed a drink and something to eat. The tantalising smell of barbecue food was fanning his hunger.

As promised there was a box of food on the kitchen work surface and eggs, milk, cheese, butter and wine in the fridge. He poured himself a generous measure of whisky before making himself a cheese sandwich. Not wanting to alert anyone to his presence, he didn't bother to switch on any lights, preferring to manage in the half-light.

Taking his sandwich and whisky upstairs, he ate and drained his glass before taking off his boots and stretching out on the bed. He lay listening to the sounds of laughter, wondering if it was going to be like this every evening. Half in, half out of sleep he speculated about who these people might be.

The bang of the first firework jolted him out of his semi-conscious state, setting his heart racing in fear and his hands clutching at the duvet in fistfuls as he wrapped himself in it protectively before realising what was happening. Bloody things.

As firework displays went it was a short one – barely ten minutes. The acrid smell in the air lasted longer.

Guy lay there listening for a while as people said their goodnights and the party broke up. Finally, all he could hear was the waves breaking against the rocks at the bottom of the cliffs. Good. Maybe he could get some proper sleep now. Another whisky would help and he swung himself off the bed.

A bright moon was illuminating the grounds and the sea in front of the cottages. Standing briefly in front of the window, looking out, Guy could see two people swimming in the pool. As he watched, one of them climbed out and stood on the pool ladder holding the rail for a couple of seconds. Perfectly silhouetted in the moonlight. He smiled – they'd been skinny-dipping. Was it a summer ritual? The woman, whoever she was, had a great figure.

A memory of a skinny-dip down in the cove on that long-ago holiday flashed into his mind. Three or four teenage girls, splashing and giggling. He and Chris hidden in the bushes, enjoying the scene, afraid to move for fear of discovery. Not brave enough to join the girls.

Guiltily he pulled the curtains closed before turning away. Before leaving the room to go downstairs in search of his whisky, he switched the light on to warn them someone was awake. Didn't want the neighbours for the next few weeks labelling him a Peeping Tom before he'd even met them.

\*

‘Oh, I can’t tell you how good this feels,’ Karen murmured as she and Hazel floated lazily on their backs in the pool. ‘Good idea of yours.’

‘Bliss,’ Hazel said. ‘We should make a pact to do this at least once a week when everyone is in bed.’

‘Not sure about when Charlie and his mates are down in August,’ Karen said. ‘They’d probably get the binoculars trained on us. Otherwise, great idea.’

‘Not compulsory to skinny-dip. We could just come and swim at midnight – it’s so different down here then. Proper alone time.’

Karen turned over and began to do a leisurely breast stroke across the width of the pool. ‘You wait,’ she said. ‘Empty-nest-syndrome time is approaching. You’ll have plenty of alone time then. Probably more than you want.’ She reached the side of the pool and took a deep breath. ‘God, I hadn’t realised I was so unfit. Definitely need to swim every day.’

‘Having an empty nest sounds so appealing at the moment,’ Hazel said.

‘Tia being a teenage pain?’

Hazel spluttered. ‘She’s like seventeen going on twenty-seven these days – when she’s not throwing a tantrum like a seven-year-old.’

‘I remember Francesca behaving like that. Surely the twins too?’

‘Yes, but I swear Tia is worse than the two of them put together. Honestly, I can’t wait for her to go to uni.’

‘Wills arriving might help. Having someone near her own age around.’

Hazel nodded. ‘Hope so. Race you for a length?’

Karen shook her head. ‘Not fit enough to race but I’ll do a length behind you.’

Doing a fast front crawl, Hazel reached the far end first and trod water waiting for Karen. As Karen reached her they both heard an owl tooting from one of the tall pine trees that bordered the grounds, but otherwise the night was silent apart from the sound of the sea below them.

Karen grabbed hold of the steps’ rail to climb out of the pool, pausing for a moment on the second one to look up at the moonlight-illuminated terrace of houses. Beautiful.

‘I love this place. I don’t know how Derek can even think of asking me to sell it,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘It’s been a part of my life for so long.’

‘How is Derek?’ Hazel asked.

Karen shrugged. ‘Nothing changes,’ she said before swearing under her breath and climbing out of the pool, reaching for one of the towels they’d left on a chair and wrapping it around her body.

‘What’s the matter?’ Hazel said, joining her by the chair.

‘Quick, you’d better have this,’ Karen said, handing her the other towel. ‘There’s a light on in No. 3. I hope to hell whoever it is hasn’t been watching us for the last twenty minutes.’

\*

‘Which way?’ Bruce said, stopping at the T-junction. ‘Restaurant in town or a walk on the beach and a pub lunch?’

‘Oh, a walk and then a pub lunch,’ Karen said without hesitation. ‘Another week and it’ll be impossible to get a table for the hordes of holidaymakers.’

‘Slapton Ley, here we come then,’ Bruce said, taking the left turn onto the narrow coast road.

Lots of traffic meant Bruce needed to concentrate on his driving rather than talking, and Karen was happy to stay quiet and look at the passing countryside.

Empty fields shorn of their crops were sporting a yellow stubble. In others, tractors were racing against time to gather the last of the hay before the threatened rain arrived. Holidaymakers, with their exuberant holiday shirts and shorts, wandered aimlessly along the coastal road, happy to be enjoying their freedom from workday routines.

It wasn't until they'd parked the car and were striding out along Slapton Sands that Karen said, 'Charlie's friend in No. 3 is keeping a low profile. Haven't had sight nor sound of him. Have you?' She didn't mention the light the night she and Hazel had been skinny-dipping.

Bruce shook his head. 'No. I did wonder if he'd venture out to join us one evening – he must have heard us. Maybe I'll knock on the door later, invite him for tonight's sundowner. Let him know the natives are friendly. Although if he just wants to be left alone...' Bruce shrugged.

'He'll have to show himself sometime,' Karen said. 'So, what is it you wanted to talk about?'

'Gabby's ashes,' Bruce said. 'Ages ago, long before either of us ever thought it would happen, we both promised to scatter the other's ashes in a favourite place.' He was silent for a moment. 'I still can't believe I'm having to think about doing it.'

'You want me to be with you when you do it?' Karen asked gently. 'Of course I will. Where did Gabby want to be scattered? By the coastguard cottages?'

Bruce shook his head. 'That's my choice, but she said she wanted them scattered in the sea by the American memorial along here. Said she'd feel close to both me and her American roots that way.'

Karen glanced at him. 'I'd almost forgotten Gabby was American. Her accent was more Home Counties than New York City.'

Bruce laughed. 'She worked really hard at it. She so wanted to fit in and not stand out. Yet she never really forgot her roots, despite never going back after her studies here finished.'

'Did you bring her ashes today?' Karen asked gently.

Bruce shook his head. 'No. I was thinking I'd do it on her birthday and then in the evening invite everyone to have a drink and celebrate her life.'

'That's what we'll do then,' Karen said, threading her arm through Bruce's. 'I'll do the food for you.'

Bruce squeezed her arm gratefully. 'Talking of food, shall we turn round and get to the pub? I'm starving.'

By the time they got back to the pub the lunchtime rush was starting. Karen managed to grab a couple of seats at a window table while Bruce went to the bar to order and get their drinks. Half a lager for him and a glass of wine for her.

The pub had been one of her parents' favourite lunchtime haunts and she remembered them dragging both her and her brother for lunchtime fish and chips whenever they were in Devon. They'd never complained about coming, even if as teenagers they'd found their parents' company boring. The fish and chips were always worth it.

It was ages, though, since she'd eaten here. When Derek was down he always insisted on going to the fish restaurant in Dartmouth, and on her own she could rarely be bothered to drive out this way.

Derek. A few more days and he'd be here. Still no news on how long he was planning to stay. This last week being away from him had made her realise just how hyper-sensitive and tense she was whenever he was around. A fleeting visit would suit her better. Then she could relax and enjoy Wills' company – and Francesca's when she arrived.

'You're looking very serious,' Bruce said, placing her glass of wine in front of her. 'Did someone upset you?'

'No,' Karen said. 'I was just thinking about...' She hesitated, searching for something to say. She couldn't tell Bruce yet what she'd really been thinking. 'Food for when Wills gets here. Planning a welcome home dinner is a serious business. Cheers.' Karen picked up her drink and took a sip. 'You promised to tell me more about your plans today?'

'I'm thinking of moving to The Bosun's Locker permanently,' Bruce said. 'Selling my flat and doing something Gabby and I swore we'd never do – renovate something down here. I've seen a townhouse I rather fancy as a project. We liked keeping the business and our private lives separate, but now...' He shrugged. 'I don't want to stay in town, or in the apartment with its memories, and I love it down here, so why not?' He looked at Karen anxiously, seeking her reassurance.

‘Gosh. There are memories associated with the cottage and Gabby as well, though,’ Karen said. ‘You’ll have to live with those.’

‘I know. But I feel somehow it will be easier not having lived full-time down here. At least I won’t be sitting around staring at the wall, wondering what I’m going to do. Like I have been for the past months.’

Before Karen could answer, the waitress arrived with their lunch, carefully placing the plates on the table before asking, ‘Is there anything else? More drinks?’

When they both shook their heads and muttered ‘No thanks’, she beamed at them, said ‘Enjoy your meal’, and disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

For several minutes the two of them concentrated on their fish and chips, enjoying them while they were hot.

‘You don’t have to stare at the walls in town. You could buy somewhere else in a different area and carry on with your business up there,’ Karen said eventually.

‘I know, but dealing with the same builders and interior designers, not to mention planning officers, will just serve to keep reminding me Gabby’s gone. Whereas down here I’d have to find a completely new team, deal with new officials, etcetera. I’m sure it would be easier.’

‘You could be right. But it’s a big change.’

‘It’ll take time to organise, of course. Selling the apartment, buying the townhouse. Probably be next year before it all came together.’

‘Putting business aside: what about friends and a social life? I know there’s lots going on out at the cottages in summer but winter is quiet.’

‘I’ve already got a few friends down here, so I’m sure I can build on that,’ Bruce said. ‘I’ll probably make more of an effort to socialise once I’m down here permanently.’

Karen picked up her wine glass and took a sip. ‘That last remark makes it sound as though you’ve made up your mind to do it.’

Bruce, realising what he’d said, smiled and picked up his lager. ‘You know what? I think I might have. God only knows whether it’s the right thing to do or not, but I’m going to give it my best shot. Cheers.’

‘Good luck. Here’s to the future.’

As Karen clinked glasses with Bruce, he said, ‘Thanks for listening. It always helps to have someone to bounce ideas off.’

‘You’re welcome any time,’ Karen said.

Bruce hesitated. ‘I’m more than willing to be a sounding board for you too, if you ever need it,’ he said quietly, looking at her. ‘I know you used to talk to Gabby – not that she ever told me what you talked about,’ he added quickly.

Karen drained her glass before replacing it on the table. ‘I know, thank you, but I’m good at the moment.’ And she smiled brightly at him. No point in talking to anyone until she’d worked out in her own head which way she wanted to go.

Bruce was right. She had talked to Gabby occasionally in the past, woman to woman, but it would be good to get a man’s unbiased point of view on things that were going on in her life. Sometime this summer she would talk about the logistics of her life with Bruce, knowing he would tell her the truth and give her sound advice, but today was not the day.

‘Whenever you’re ready, you know where to find me,’ Bruce said. ‘Now, how about dessert? I see they’ve got my favourite on the menu – apple pie and clotted cream.’

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.