

# Living the Dream in Seabury



**BETH RAIN**

LIVING THE DREAM IN  
SEABURY

SEABURY - BOOK 12



BETH RAIN

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Living The Dream in Seabury (Seabury: Book 12)

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# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Also by Beth Rain](#)

[About the Author](#)

# CHAPTER 1



Lizzie leaned against the ancient wooden doorjamb and gazed towards the centre of Seabury. She couldn't see much. The Sardine, Pebble Street, and even the King's Nose were barely visible behind a heavy curtain of rain. It had been pelting down all morning. Huge drops danced on the surface of several deep puddles that were trying to turn the little seafront road into a water feature.

There wasn't a soul in sight - not that Lizzie could blame everyone for staying snuggled up inside on a day like this! Just a week ago, the sun had been shining and the little town had been buzzing with late-summer visitors, all intent on exploring the lanes on her hire bikes. Today couldn't be more different though. They hadn't had a single customer through the doors of Moore Bikes all morning.

It might be quiet, but Lizzie couldn't help but feel a bit... fidgety! She let out a long sigh and turned to peer in the other direction - up the hill that led past the turning to her cottage and then on towards the allotments and the main road.

There wasn't anything to see that way either - other than more rain.

'Boss?'

Lizzie jumped and turned to find Jason peering at her with an amused expression on his face. She couldn't blame him... she'd spent a good portion of the morning propping up the shop doors and staring into the middle distance. It wasn't like she didn't have plenty of work to be getting on with. They'd

had customers coming out of their ears for days - and there was more than enough to keep the pair of them busy until bonfire night!

‘You okay?’ prompted Jason.

‘Yeah, sorry!’ laughed Lizzie. ‘I’m being a total slacker today, aren’t I?!’

‘I thought you said Liam wasn’t due back until this evening?’ said Jason, cutting straight through her apologetic waffle.

‘Yup,’ said Lizzie, feeling daft as her cheeks rapidly started to heat up. ‘That’s right.’

*Damn the boy for his razor-sharp memory and attention to detail!*

Still, that’s what made Jason the perfect member of staff, so she couldn’t exactly complain when he turned his superpowers on her, could she? Besides - he’d just hit the nail on the head. Jason had caught her in the act of mooning around after a boy... and at her age too!

There wasn’t much point in trying to deny it. After a whole week away, Liam was finally due back in Seabury by the end of the day - and Lizzie had been like a love-sick puppy all morning.

*More like all week!*

Even though Liam wasn’t due to reappear in town until well past closing time, Lizzie couldn’t help herself from keeping half an eye out for his arrival... just in case he rocked up early. She longed to see his battered old van trundling towards the shop.

‘Anyway,’ she said, clearing her throat and feeling like a bit of an idiot, ‘where are we up to?’

‘Hire bikes are all clean, checked over and ready to go again,’ said Jason, scratching his nose. ‘So I’m going to head home for lunch if that’s okay? I was just wondering if you’d like me to take Heather Landry’s bike back while I’m at it. She’s only just up the road from our place.’



‘You’re not going to walk home in this weather, are you?’ said Lizzie with a frown. ‘I’m happy to grab us both something to eat from The Sardine to save you from getting soaked?’

‘Dad still isn’t feeling that great,’ said Jason, pulling a face. ‘I just wanted to check in on him... but only if that’s okay with you?’

‘Of course it is!’ said Lizzie quickly. ‘It’s so quiet today, you’re welcome to take the afternoon off if he needs you at home?’

‘It’s just a really sucky cold,’ said Jason, shaking his head. ‘He doesn’t really need me there - I just thought I should make sure he eats some lunch. He was all over the place this morning - completely out of it to be honest. I’m guessing he’s got a temperature or something.’

‘Poor thing!’ said Lizzie. ‘Take as much time as you need.’

‘Thanks Boss,’ said Jason. ‘I won’t be too long. I’ll just heat up some soup if he’s not had anything... I don’t want him feeling worse!’

‘I wish I had the car so I could give you a lift and save you a soaking!’ said Lizzie as she watched Jason pulling on his jacket.

The lad was so ridiculously capable - able to do pretty much anything he turned his hand to – that it was almost too easy to forget that he was still just a kid. From what she’d picked up on the town grapevine, it was just Jason and his dad at home.

Lizzie bit her lip. Her mother-hen antennae were tingling... but she hadn’t known Jason long, and she wasn’t entirely sure how he might react if she started to fuss. Still, she’d not reached her age without learning to follow her instincts!

‘Jason... if you ever need anything...’ she said, not quite knowing where she was going with this. ‘I mean - I know we haven’t known each other long - but if you or your dad ever need anything, you can always call me, okay?’

Jason held her eye for a long minute and then smiled.

‘Cheers,’ he said.

‘I’m serious,’ said Lizzie.

‘I know,’ said Jason quietly, giving her a nod. ‘Thanks.’

‘Anytime. Just shout,’ she said. ‘As for Heather’s bike - leave it here for now. She said she’s not in a rush for it, and it’ll get drenched in this. Bad enough that you will too!’

‘Who’s getting drenched?’

Lizzie turned only to find Jenna standing behind the pair of them, a half-folded umbrella held at arm’s length so that it didn’t drip down her leg.

‘Jason - he’s got to walk home for lunch!’ said Lizzie.

‘I can give you a lift if you’d like?’ said Jenna, glancing at Jason.

‘It’s fine,’ said Jason, somehow managing to look hopeful and awkward at the same time. ‘I mean - I’m just across town... it’s not a big deal!’

‘Lift?’ said Lizzie distractedly. ‘You drove down?’

‘I hope you don’t mind!’ said Jenna with a nod, looking a bit awkward as she jangled Lizzie’s car keys in her free hand. ‘Megan found them down the side of the sofa when she was tidying up earlier!’

‘It’s fine,’ said Lizzie faintly. The idea of her eldest daughter tidying up without being asked had temporarily put her into a state of shock. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Oh!’ said Jenna. ‘Only down here to see you and bring you this.’ She rummaged around inside her shoulder bag for a second before producing a large Tupperware box. ‘I made you some lunch. I didn’t think you’d want to head out to the cafe in this weather. Plus - I know what you’re like - you’d probably get so caught up in whatever you’re working on, you’d just forget to eat anything.’

‘Sounds a bit like my dad!’ laughed Jason.

‘Aw, Jenna!’ said Lizzie, smiling gratefully as she took the box. ‘That’s really kind of you!’

‘I would have walked down...’ said Jenna, feeling around in the bag again before handing over a bottle of elderflower fizz.

‘And got soaked to the skin just to save me from the rain?’ laughed Lizzie. ‘Don’t be daft! Anyway - it’s brilliant timing if it saves Jason from getting wet through!’

‘Only if you’re sure you don’t mind?’ said Jason, looking strangely shy.

‘Course!’ said Jenna. ‘Better be quick though - there was a traffic warden mooching down the hill just now, and he looked like he was in a foul mood... not that I can blame him. There was rain dripping off his nose!’

‘Go go go!’ laughed Lizzie. ‘Otherwise, this’ll be the most expensive packed lunch of all time!’

‘Won’t be too long!’ said Jason as he gave her a quick wave before following Jenna out into the rain.

Lizzie watched the little car splash away towards the centre of town, and then sighed as her eyes scanned the road yet again for any sign of a beaten-up white van.

‘Idiot!’ she laughed.

She just needed to keep herself busy - the afternoon was bound to fly past if she did that... and then Liam would be back before she knew it! Lizzie couldn’t believe how much she’d missed him considering they weren’t even officially an item yet... but then, who needed official? She was old enough to know exactly how she felt about him.

*Totally crazy.*

At least they’d managed a couple of quick chats since he’d dashed off to help Amy move into her new home at the last minute.

‘Bloomin’ daughters,’ she muttered with a grin.

Lizzie didn't really mean it, though. Liam clearly doted on his girl – a hard-working junior doctor roughly the same age as Megan. As for Megan and Jenna, they were still very much at large, but the cottage had been unnervingly quiet since their little family show-down at the Pebble Street Hotel.

If she was honest, Lizzie hadn't really expected her intervention to work so well - but giving everyone a good talking-to seemed to have worked some kind of magic. For starters, Tiffany had insisted on paying for Mark's stay *and* the meal they'd all shared - and Lizzie's sigh of relief had been more than heartfelt.

More importantly though, since then she'd been able to get in for a shower before the girls *every single morning*. Even if that was the only change, it would have been nothing short of a small miracle... but the girls seemed to be determined to make up for being total brats – and Lizzie definitely wasn't complaining!

If she wasn't afraid of jinxing things, Lizzie might even go so far as to say that she was starting to enjoy having them around. Now that she was getting to grips with things at Moore Bikes, she was looking forward to spending some quality time with both of them.

Besides... she wasn't convinced that Megan was quite as *fine* as she was pretending to be, and she wanted to get to the bottom of what was going on while they were all together. Whether she liked it or not, Megan was going to get all the moral support she needed!

Still, there was nothing Lizzie could do about that right now. Thanks to Jenna, though, there was *definitely* something she could do about her growling stomach!

Turning her back on the rain, Lizzie headed over to her workbench and perched on the wobbly chair tucked in behind it. After a brief fight with the lid, she peered inside her lunchbox and her mouth instantly started to water.

'Wow Jenna!' she breathed.

Her daughter had sectioned off the inside of the box using smaller tubs and had crammed them with a lunch fit for a very hungry queen. There was a gorgeous, colourful salad, a smoked salmon and cream cheese bagel, a lemon quarter to squeeze into it, and a fork rolled up in a couple of napkins. The pièce de résistance was a chocolate brownie, carefully wrapped so that it wouldn't end up tasting of salmon.

Lizzie twisted the top off her drink and took a long, thirsty sip. It was her absolute favourite.

*Definite brownie points!*

As she bit into the bagel, Lizzie let out a little groan of delight and wondered if Liam was getting the same royal treatment from his daughter!

'For heaven's sake,' she laughed, shaking her head at herself. She'd only managed to think about something else for about thirty seconds - before getting straight back to her favourite subject - Liam.

## CHAPTER 2



‘Yum!’ sighed Lizzie, tossing her fork into the empty Tupperware box before snapping the lid back in place. There were packed lunches... and then there were *packed lunches*. This one was most definitely the latter. She wasn’t sure if Jenna was a genius, or if the bagel had simply tasted divine because she didn’t have to go out into the rain to fetch it. Either way, Lizzie made a mental note to thank her daughter for being so thoughtful.

‘Back to work, slacker!’ muttered Lizzie, hauling herself to her feet and staring around the shop. In a way, she was glad of this rain. She’d adored the sunny days that had brought so many customers through her doors already, but this weather meant she might actually get the chance to catch up a bit.

Turning to eyeball the wall behind the workbench, Lizzie decided she’d start by getting the rest of the hangers and brackets screwed into position so that she’d be able to stash most of her tools up out of the way when she wasn’t using them.

Lizzie had just dragged her stepladder into place and climbed to the top when she heard a car pull up right outside. Wondering if Jenna might have come back for some reason, Lizzie craned her neck to take a peek, only to spot Mrs Hatherleigh dashing towards the door bearing a slightly soggy cardboard box in front of her.

‘Give me a hand, Lizzie love?’ she said, striding inside and plonking the box down on the workbench before Lizzie had even had the chance to budge an inch.

‘Hi Margie,’ said Lizzie in surprise as she hurried back down to ground level.

‘I thought I’d get some more of these boxes down to you,’ she said, bustling back out into the rain.

‘You didn’t need to do that!’ said Lizzie, hot on her heels and suddenly feeling guilty that she hadn’t managed to collect the last of the bike parts from the Hatherleigh’s barn as she’d promised. What with Jenna and Megan being around, and then Mark and Tiffany descending on Seabury, she simply hadn’t had the chance to pick them up.

‘I absolutely *did* need to!’ laughed Margie. ‘Don’t worry – I’m not about to make good on my threats of taking everything to the tip... it’s just... Ted’s starting to drive me mad!’

‘How so?’ said Lizzie, grabbing a box from the boot and dashing back inside. She felt a bit like she’d missed a step in the conversation somewhere.

‘Well... let’s put it like this – I needed to bring you these boxes before the old fool empties them all out again,’ said Margie, rolling her eyes. ‘It’s just as well you took away that file of designs of his, otherwise I think he’d be back at it!’

‘Oh no,’ said Lizzie, her heart sinking. She’d been worried Ted might regret handing over his incredible collection of goodies to her.

‘Don’t look like that, love!’ said Margie, shaking her head and letting out a long sigh. ‘He’s over the moon that you’re going to be able to put all his junk to good use. He just misses tinkering around with it himself. Hearing about your plans and getting excited for you...well... it’s just stirred him up a bit, that’s all!’

‘Oh,’ said Lizzie, not quite knowing what to say. ‘Poor Ted.’

‘Don’t you *poor Ted* me!’ laughed Margie. ‘I definitely don’t miss having greasy old bits of bike lying around here there and everywhere. I’m looking forward to when he finally gets around to sorting out our lane so that we can have the

caravan at ours – once you're done with it, of course! In the meantime... the man's driving me nuts.'

Lizzie frowned as she grabbed another box from Margie's car and hefted it inside the shop. She'd just had an idea... but she wasn't sure if she should broach it yet. Perhaps now wasn't the time. She had the feeling one wrong move on her part could cause all manner of grouching between the Hatherleighs. Perhaps she'd mention it to Ted first... after she'd had the chance to think it through a bit further.

'I'll make sure I get up to yours as soon as I can to grab the last few boxes,' she said.

'For your own sake – that's probably a good idea,' said Margie, smiling at her. 'Before the old fool squirrels any more of it away. He thinks I don't notice, but I swear he's emptied at least two boxes and hidden the bits in behind those old mowers of his.'

Lizzie grinned. Ted Hatherleigh was a man after her own heart.

'I thought his hands were too sore to be able to do much now?' she asked, doing her best to make it sound like a throwaway comment.

'If he fiddles around in that cold barn day after day, then yes – his hands do get sore,' sighed Margie, pausing just inside the shop out of the rain. 'But the thing is, I think he misses the people... he always had someone turning up for something or other. He loves a good gossip – you probably noticed.'

Lizzie nodded, doing her best not to look too excited. This was sounding better by the second.

'Anyway, I'd better skedaddle – I'm off to bridge club over in Dunscombe Sands,' said Margie, giving her arm a friendly pat. 'Anything for five minutes' peace from him indoors. I tell you Lizzie – I'm not used to it! He used to be out in that barn all hours... but now he's under my feet from morning till night!'

'I'm sure you'll get used to it!' said Lizzie.



‘I don’t want to!’ said Margie looking horrified. ‘Anyway... see you soon.’

As soon as she’d waved Mrs Hatherleigh off, Lizzie clambered back up the ladder, drill in hand, intent on getting at least one job finished before Jason reappeared from his lunch break. She’d just got into position to start on the first hole when she felt her mobile buzz to life in her pocket.

‘For heaven’s sake!’ she muttered, switching off the drill and hurrying back down the ladder. She’d learned the hard way that playing with tools and mobile phones at the same time didn’t mix. There was a fresh scratch right across the middle of her screen where she’d tried to read a text while tightening up a pair of handlebars... it hadn’t gone well.

‘Hello?!’ she gasped, desperately tapping the screen to answer the call.

Damnit! It had already gone to voicemail. Maybe whoever it was would call back...?

Lizzie sighed impatiently as she stared at the screen, waiting for it to spring to life in her hands. A couple of seconds later it buzzed with a voicemail notification.

*“Hey, Lizzie. You don’t know me... it’s Amy... dad’s... I mean, Liam’s daughter...”*

Lizzie sucked in an involuntary breath as a bolt of fear shot down her spine.

*“Look, dad’s broken down on his way home. He says he’s really sorry he can’t call you himself, but his phone’s in the van - and the van’s on the back of the tow truck on the way to the nearest garage. He borrowed the driver’s phone. He couldn’t remember your number - so he called me and I had to call The Sardine to ask for your number!”*

Lizzie grinned as she imagined poor Amy having to phone her way around Seabury just to reach her.

*“Anyway, someone called Sarah gave me your details. I’ve left a message at your house too. Dad’s hoping to get back tomorrow sometime as long as the garage can do some kind of temporary fix.”*

Amy went quiet and Lizzie wondered if that was the end of the message, until she heard a long, tinny sigh.

*“Look, I know we’ve not met yet and he’d probably kill me for saying this - but dad’s the happiest I’ve seen him in ages. Be nice to him. He’s a good guy. Hopefully meet you soon. See ya!”*

Lizzie couldn’t help the goofy smile that promptly spread across her face. Was she really making Liam as happy as he was making her? She was suddenly very glad she was alone in the shop... because it meant there was no one to witness her doing a little happy-dance on the spot.

Then a wave of pure disappointment hit her as the other part of what Amy had just said sank in - Liam wasn’t going to be back today after all.

Still... maybe it was a good thing. He was safe and sound, and with any luck, the van wouldn’t take too long to sort out. In the meantime, she’d just have to get her head down and get as much work done here as possible so that she could skive with a clear conscience when he did finally get home!

With a newfound burst of energy, Lizzie grabbed her drill and headed back up the ladder. She’d just managed to get back in position when she felt the familiar buzzing in her pocket again.

‘What now?!’ she growled, heading back down the ladder again. At this rate, she’d have thighs of steel from all the extra exercise!

‘Hello?’ she huffed.

‘It’s Megan! You okay? You sound out of breath!’

‘I’m fine!’ laughed Lizzie. ‘I was up a ladder.’

‘Ah - sorry,’ said Megan. ‘I’ve just picked up a message from Amy - Liam’s daughter and-’

‘I got one on my mobile too,’ said Lizzie.

‘Oh, cool. So you know Liam’s not back until tomorrow?’ said Megan.

‘Yeah,’ sighed Lizzie.

‘Gutted!’ said Megan.

‘A bit!’ said Lizzie.

‘Amy’s really nice, you know,’ said Megan.

‘I’m sure she is!’ said Lizzie in surprise. ‘But how’d you get that from an answering machine message?’

‘I called her back, duh!’ laughed Megan. ‘I wanted her to know I’d picked up the message so that she didn’t worry.’

‘Oh!’ said Lizzie. ‘That was really thoughtful - thanks Meggie!’

‘No worries,’ said Megan. ‘Anyway, she’s really nice. She was telling me about her new place - I’m actually quite jealous!’

‘It *does* sound lovely,’ said Lizzie. ‘Last time we talked, Liam said he was surprised she’d finally moved - but it sounds like Amy had had enough of living with her mum.’

‘Well... not everyone’s mum is as cool as you,’ said Megan.

Lizzie’s jaw dropped. Blimey - that was one hell of a compliment coming from Megan!

‘Thanks, love!’ she said, surprised to find her voice had gone thick with emotion.

‘Don’t get all soppy on me!’ snorted Megan. ‘Anyway - you bog off and do whatever you were doing with that poor ladder. I’ve got a kitchen to clean!’

Lizzie opened her mouth to form some kind of half-baked protest, but Megan had already gone.

‘Well... I’m not going to stop you!’ she said with a grin, turning to eye the ladder again. ‘Right... third time lucky!’ Or maybe it was the fourth? She’d lost count!

This time, Lizzie managed to get all three holes drilled before climbing carefully back down to grab the bracket and screws.

‘You know, Boss - you really shouldn’t be playing on the ladder when you’re the only one here.’

Lizzie jumped and spun around, only to find Jason standing just inside the doorway, watching her.

‘Blimey! How long have you been lurking there?’ she gasped, resting her hand on her thumping heart.

‘Since the first hole,’ said Jason. ‘I didn’t want to make you jump – at least not while you were at height!’

‘Well... thanks?’ laughed Lizzie.

‘I’m serious, Boss - you shouldn’t be up the ladder when there’s no one else around,’ said Jason, stripping off a heavy waterproof jacket and hanging it over the corner of one of the doors before running his hands through his wet hair.

‘Okay - noted!’ said Lizzie, deciding not to tell him how many times she’d climbed up and down in the last few minutes. ‘When did you become so wise?!’

‘Dad’s often out on his own with the bees,’ said Jason with a shrug. ‘He’s always taught me to work safely – especially when you’re on your own!’

Lizzie nodded. The kid did have a fair point.

‘How’s your dad doing?’ she said, keen to change the subject.

‘Not great,’ said Jason. ‘He said he’s all achy. I made him soup and got him some pills and more water. He’s gone back to bed.’

‘Poor guy!’ said Lizzie.

‘Yeah,’ said Jason with a shrug. ‘I mean... I don’t think it’s serious or anything... he’s just feeling rough.’

‘Are you okay?’ said Lizzie, eyeing him closely. He certainly looked fine - no coughing or spluttering - not pale or ridiculously flushed either.

*Ah - to have a nice, youthful immune system!*

‘Fit as a fiddle, Boss!’ said Jason.

‘And you’ve had lunch?’ she said. She wouldn’t put it past him to just look after his dad and forget about feeding himself.

‘Yep - cheese on toast for me, so I’m all sorted!’ said Jason with a grin. ‘Thanks to Jenna giving me that lift, I had plenty of time.’

‘That was perfect timing!’ said Lizzie.

‘I like her,’ said Jason. ‘She’s really cool. She was telling me a bit about her travels!’

‘Uh huh,’ said Lizzie, raising an eyebrow as she made a mental note to ask Jenna not to put too many ideas into the impressionable head of her one and only member of staff!

‘Yeah,’ said Jason. ‘And she’s got some brilliant ideas for this place too... but I guess you know all that.’

‘For this place?’ said Lizzie.

‘Yup!’ said Jason. ‘If she hasn’t told you yet, you should definitely ask her about them.’

‘Maybe I’ll do that!’ said Lizzie.

Knowing how impulsive Jenna could be, Lizzie figured she’d better find out what was going on in that head of hers as soon as possible... otherwise, she might well rock up at the shop one morning only to find it had been transformed into a roller-disco or something equally as nuts!

‘Shall I?’ said Jason, waving the bracket she’d been about to install in front of her to get her attention.

‘Go for it!’ said Lizzie with a nod. ‘Mrs Hatherleigh dropped off some more boxes while you were out - I’ll see what new goodies we’ve got in this lot!’

## CHAPTER 3



‘*H*ellooooo? Anyone home?’ Lizzie closed the front door of the cottage behind her with a thump and inhaled deeply.

*YUM! Someone was cooking something nice!*

‘Hey mum - I’m in the kitchen!’ Jenna’s voice drifted along the hallway to greet her.

Slipping out of her jacket, Lizzie hung it on a peg to dry out. The rain had eased off a bit, but the walk home had still been decidedly damp. Pottering through to join her daughter, Lizzie came to an abrupt halt in the doorway.

‘Blimey... who stole my kitchen?!’ she gasped. The room was immaculate, barring a neatly stacked pile of dishes next to the sink waiting to be scrubbed. ‘And what’s that smell?!’

Jenna straightened up from the oven, her face flushed, and grinned at her. ‘It’s either paint... or lasagne.’

‘Ooh, my favourite!’ said Lizzie, her mouth instantly starting to water. ‘Wait though... paint?!’

‘Megan got a bit... *enthusiastic* with her cleaning earlier,’ laughed Jenna.

Lizzie’s eyes widened as she looked around. Not only had the kitchen been cleaned to within an inch of its life, but the slightly scuffed lavender blue that had graced the walls since the girls were little had disappeared. In its place was a fresh coat of primrose blush, along with rich, Jersey-cream accents.

The room looked like it was full of sunshine despite the heavy rain clouds still bruising the horizon.

‘She did all this today?!’ gasped Lizzie, admiring the neat paintwork. It was the exact colour combination she’d been dribbling over in one of Megan’s glossy household magazines just a couple of days ago.

‘Yeah,’ said Jenna, rolling her eyes. ‘You know what she’s like when she gets going.’

‘And the lasagne?’ said Lizzie, shaking her head, feeling like she’d slipped into an alternate universe.

‘That was me!’ said Jenna with a grin. ‘It’s always been my favourite... yours too... so I thought you might fancy it?’

‘Are you kidding me?’ laughed Lizzie. ‘Yes please! Blimey - if you don’t watch out I could get used to all this. I feel thoroughly spoiled.’

Jenna looked pleased but a bit sheepish at the same time. ‘Well yeah... I mean, after how the pair of us behaved when we first got here... you deserve it.’

‘Thanks Jenna,’ she said, moving over to her and giving her a big hug. ‘And thanks for lunch too - and for giving Jason a lift.’

‘Was his dad okay?’ said Jenna, pulling back and ushering Lizzie towards the sink so that she could wash the grime off her hands.

‘I think the poor man’s either got a really bad cold or a dose of the flu,’ sighed Lizzie. ‘Bless his heart, Jason was desperate to head home and check on him.’

‘Yeah I know,’ said Jenna. ‘Seems like a nice kid.’

Lizzie nodded as she lathered her hands thoroughly, doing her best to get as much of the filth out from around her fingernails as possible - though she had a sneaking suspicion that some of this grease was now a permanent feature.

‘Jason’s lovely - you’d never believe he’s just eighteen, would you?’ She shot a look over her shoulder at Jenna.

‘Seemed to be quite taken with you, though! He said you were “cool!”’

‘Aw blimey!’ laughed Jenna. ‘That’s quite a compliment... but why does it make me feel about a hundred years old?’

‘Welcome to my world!’ said Lizzie, snagging a fluffy hand towel she’d never seen before and drying her hands before waving it at Jenna. ‘Yours?’

‘Megan again,’ said Jenna, laying a tray with napkins and cutlery. ‘She said she wanted to treat you – and don’t worry about the paint - she got some kind of special deal on it.’

‘I don’t doubt it!’ said Lizzie. ‘I think people are too scared of her to say no!’

‘Idiots!’ laughed Jenna. ‘Anyway - I thought we could eat in the sitting room. It still smells of paint in here.’

‘Good plan,’ said Lizzie, nodding. ‘Sofa for three, then? Shall I go get Megan in?’

‘It’s just you and me this evening,’ said Jenna, shaking her head.

‘Why - where’s Meggie?’ said Lizzie in surprise, watching as Jenna opened the oven and drew out a huge glass casserole dish of lasagne, complete with a bubbling, cheesy top that had her weak at the knees with hunger.

‘I think she said she wanted to go for a walk,’ said Jenna once she’d set the hot dish carefully down onto a board. ‘She disappeared off to the caravan after finishing in here. She said she wasn’t up for a meal this evening.’

Lizzie frowned and then noticed that Jenna was doing exactly the same thing.

‘What’s up?’ said Lizzie.

‘There’s something not quite... right... with Meggie,’ said Jenna, pausing in her search for a long serving spoon. ‘And I don’t mean the usual pain-in-the-behind grouch we’re used to.’



‘Yeah,’ said Lizzie. Something uncomfortable squirmed in the pit of her stomach as she thought back to how bedraggled and exhausted Megan had looked when she’d first arrived in town.

‘You’ve noticed something too, haven’t you?’ said Jenna, watching her closely.

Lizzie nodded, not completely sure how much she should say. The last thing she wanted was for Megan to feel like they’d been gossiping about her behind her back.

‘I mean, it’s obvious why I came back here,’ said Jenna slowly, as she started to load two dinner plates with massive portions of steaming lasagne, ‘but what did Meggie say?’

‘Erm... she said that her upstairs neighbours were doing work on their flat, and she couldn’t hear herself think,’ said Lizzie, wracking her brain as she tried to remember the details of that bizarre phone call. ‘She said that she’d missed a promotion-’

‘Typical Megan to be upset about work,’ said Jenna cutting in.

‘Yeah, well... it *is* understandable,’ said Lizzie gently.

‘For complete control freaks,’ said Jenna.

‘For most people, to be fair!’ laughed Lizzie. ‘And then... she said Owen had dumped her... or she thought he had.’

‘The most boring man in the UK,’ said Jenna with a shrug. ‘No great loss.’

‘Well... yeah. I mean... we both know he wasn’t exactly thrilling company, but if Megan loved him-’

‘I don’t think she did,’ said Jenna, licking the serving spoon before turning to toss it into the sink.

‘That’s a bit harsh,’ said Lizzie.

‘Nah - it’s not,’ Jenna shook her head. ‘Personally, I think it only lasted as long as it did because he put up with her bossing him around.’

‘Hmm,’ said Lizzie, deciding that it was probably safest not to comment.

‘Well, I guess any of those things could have put her in a bit of a huff,’ said Jenna, grabbing the plates and nodding for Lizzie to pick up the tray before leading the way through to the living room. ‘But it’s not like Meggie to mope, is it? I mean, did you see the *state* of her when we got off the train?! *I* looked more pulled together than her - which never happens.’

Lizzie set the tray on the low coffee table, grabbed a fork and took one of the plates from Jenna before curling into her favourite corner of the sofa.

‘Meggie would normally have planned her way out of it by now,’ said Jenna, ‘but she’s still moping when she thinks we’re not looking.’

‘We’ll get to the bottom of it,’ said Lizzie, ‘don’t worry. Maybe she just needs a bit of TLC - maybe all three of us do!’

Jenna nodded and took a huge bite of lasagne. Her eyes promptly started to water.

‘Oh Jenna - don’t worry lovely!’ said Lizzie quickly. ‘She’ll be fine - we’ll make sure she is.’

‘It’s not that!’ spluttered Jenna. ‘Cheese! Hot!!’

Lizzie snorted. ‘I’ll grab some water!’ she said, dashing back through to the kitchen.

‘Ta!’ said Jenna, grabbing the glass the moment Lizzie was back and chugging half of it straight down, making panting sounds and fanning her face with her free hand.

‘You always used to do that when you were little, too,’ said Lizzie. ‘You were always the one burning your tongue or getting brain freeze from ice cream!’

‘Guzzle-guts, that’s what dad used to call me!’ said Jenna, picking her plate back up and taking a much smaller forkful - dutifully blowing on it this time.

Lizzie followed suit and let out a low groan of appreciation as she took the first bite.

‘See, I’m not completely useless,’ said Jenna.

‘I never said you were!’ said Lizzie in surprise.

‘No, but growing up with Megan, it felt a bit like that,’ said Jenna. ‘She’s the high achiever – all I want to do is fit in as many adventures as possible - and meet as many people as I can before settling down... if I ever do!’

Lizzie watched her. Suddenly Jenna wouldn’t meet her eye.

‘Hey - Jenna,’ she said, reaching out and prodding her on the knee with the handle of her fork to get her attention. ‘I’m proud of you.’

‘Really?’ said Jenna, pulling a face.

‘It’s impossible not to be!’ said Lizzie. ‘I’m constantly amazed by how brave you are. You’re completely fearless, and you go after what you want more than anyone I’ve ever known.’

‘But I don’t have a plan like Megan...’ said Jenna.

‘You don’t need one. That’s what’s so amazing,’ said Lizzie with a smile. ‘You’re resourceful - and you’ve never once let anyone or anything stop you.’

‘Apart from calling you when my van blew up!’ said Jenna.

‘That’s just a blip,’ said Lizzie with a shrug. ‘You needed a break. All you need now is a new van and you’ll be off again. In the meantime, you’re here - and I get to spend some time with you. Which I love - by the way. I want to hear every single story about the adventures you’ve been on.’

‘Really?’ said Jenna, perking up a bit.

‘Of course!’ laughed Lizzie.

‘I think you’re brave too, mum,’ said Jenna. ‘Doing your thing with the shop like you’ve wanted to for so long.’

Lizzie swallowed down a lump in her throat that had nothing to do with hot cheese.

‘Thanks love,’ she said with a smile. ‘Actually, that reminds me - Jason said you had some “cool” ideas I really should ask you about.’

‘Hmm... so the boy’s a blabbermouth!’ laughed Jenna, scooping up another great big gob-full of lasagne.

‘Poor Jason - I don’t think so,’ said Lizzie with a fond smile. ‘I think he meant it as a compliment. Like I said, he was a bit taken with you.’

‘Aw shucks!’ laughed Jenna. ‘Well... I do have some ideas if you really want to hear them.’

‘Shoot!’ said Lizzie.

‘Okay - so I got one of them from Liam’s shed down on the beach,’ she said. ‘I was thinking you could do some bicycle-powered tours of Seabury. Like - either have someone on a bike to lead groups around the place, or you could get hold of some of those trikes like Kate at The Sardine has or... wait wait wait! I’ve got it - how about a rickshaw so you’re cycling and the visitors are sitting in a thingy on the front.’

Lizzie bit her lip to stop herself from laughing. Jenna was getting more excited the more outrageous her ideas became. It was taking some effort to keep up with the slightly frantic stream of ideas... but Jenna’s excitement was contagious, and Lizzie could feel the fizz of possibility in the air. Even though a lot of what her daughter was saying was absolutely insane... there were definitely several grains of inspiration lurking in there somewhere.

‘Where does Liam’s shed come into the equation?’ said Lizzie, when Jenna paused to take a breath.

‘That’s where I come in,’ said Jenna. ‘I thought I could have a little hut like that down on the beach too. I could sell tour tickets for you!’

‘Right!’ laughed Lizzie.

‘I don’t want to do the actual cycling,’ she added quickly. ‘That’s more your thing. I mean - have you seen some of the hills around Seabury?! But I could wear a cute outfit and drum up some customers!’

‘A cute outfit, huh?!’ said Lizzie.

‘We could get matching dungarees!’ said Jenna, her eyes going wide. ‘Or... overalls with the Moore Bikes logo on them!’

‘I like the idea of overalls,’ said Lizzie lightly, glancing down at her current pair of dungarees and noticing that they were covered in smears of rust, oil and other random grime from the bikes she’d been working on that afternoon. ‘And I definitely need to sort out a logo!’

‘But you don’t like the other ideas,’ said Jenna, sounding downcast.

‘I didn’t say that,’ said Lizzie. ‘Tell me more about those rickshaw things?’

‘Well, I saw them when I went to Thailand,’ she said.

‘Wait,’ said Lizzie, relinquishing her empty plate with a sigh of contentment. ‘You didn’t make it to Thailand... I thought you said all the driving routes were way too dangerous and you didn’t fancy trying to across China on your own.’

‘Right... right...’ said Jenna distractedly as she did her best to scrape up the last flecks of herby sauce from the edge of her plate. ‘Yeah... so I saw them in one of the brochures when I was researching.’

‘Have you still got it?’ said Lizzie with interest.

‘It’s in my emails somewhere,’ said Jenna. ‘I can forward it to you if you’d like?’

‘Perfect,’ said Lizzie. ‘I can’t remember if I told you, but Ted Hatherleigh gave me his designs folder along with all the rest of his stuff. He’s the one who built Trixie - Kate’s tricycle.’

‘Oooh!’ said Jenna, her eyes shining. ‘I feel rickshaws in my waters!’

## CHAPTER 4



‘Hey Boss!’

‘Hi Jason - ooh thanks!’ said Lizzie, as he handed her a giant New York Froth takeaway cup.

‘No worries,’ he shrugged. ‘I was desperate for a coffee and I didn’t think it was fair to turn up without one for you too!’

Lizzie smiled at him, noticing that he looked pale and exhausted.

‘You okay?’ she said.

Jason nodded. ‘Yeah – just didn’t sleep that well, that’s all.’

‘Okay – well, I’ll return the favour later!’ she said, taking a grateful swig of coffee as she peered down the road towards the centre of town.

‘This is total déjà vu, you know!’ said Jason.

‘What is?’ said Lizzie, reluctantly following him inside.

‘You - staring down the road, looking for Liam!’ he said.

‘Cheeky blighter!’ laughed Lizzie, feeling her cheeks colour.

He was right, of course. She’d got a text from Liam first thing. He’d managed to get his hands on his errant mobile after a long, uncomfortable night in a grotty motel. According to the mechanics, the part they needed for the van would be

arriving on the early delivery, so all being well, Liam should be back in town before the end of the day.

‘How’s your dad?’ said Lizzie, wincing as Jason started to cough.

‘Rough still,’ he said.

‘And you’re sure you’re okay?’ she asked, raising her eyebrows.

‘I’m fine, I think it’s just-’ he cut himself off by coughing again.

‘Wooooow,’ she said, her eyes going wide even as she took a subconscious step away from him. ‘You - young man - are most definitely *not* fine.’

‘I’m fine if I’m not gossiping,’ he said with a weak smile.

Lizzie winced. The poor lad had turned even paler.

‘Nope,’ she said. ‘As much as you like to think you’re invincible... I’m afraid you’re in for it. I want you to head home and take the day off. You need a break.’

‘But I-’ started Jason.

‘Nope. Absolutely no buts,’ said Lizzie firmly. ‘I can handle things here. We’re not even meant to be open yet - so I can always just close the doors and get on with things.’

‘But-’

‘No buts. Full pay - but only if you go home and put your feet up this instant!’ said Lizzie, more than aware that she was using her “mum voice”. ‘I mean it. I prescribe tons of fluids, some truly mindless movies, and just chilling on the sofa, okay?’

Lizzie watched as Jason seemed to deflate in front of her. It was like he’d mustered the last bit of his energy just to get to work, and now that it was spent, all he was good for was a day in bed.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘I’ve got the car just around the corner. I’m taking you home.’

‘You’ve got the car?’ said Jason, his voice low.

Lizzie nodded. ‘I was going to leave you in charge this afternoon and head over to the Hatherleigh’s to see Ted and bring a few more boxes back. But that can wait!’

She half expected Jason to put up another argument, but instead, he seemed to sway on the spot as he rubbed his face.

‘That settles it. Stay put a second,’ she said, dragging a stool over for him to perch on. ‘I’ll bring the car around.’

‘Okay,’ he said, his voice coming out even quieter.

Lizzie glanced at him to check that he wasn’t about to pass out in the thirty seconds it would take her to fetch the car. Still, she’d have to risk it - there was no way he’d manage the short walk to the parking spot around the corner.

By the time she pulled up outside the shop and popped her hazard lights on, Jason had gone from white to grey and was shivering violently.

‘Bloody hell!’ she said. ‘Come on - that sofa’s calling your name!’

Without thinking about it, Lizzie put an arm around the lad and helped him out to the car. She could feel his whole body shaking against her.

‘Sit tight,’ she said, as he practically dropped into the passenger seat. ‘I’ll just lock the doors a second.’

Lizzie hurried to pull the shop doors closed. She wouldn’t be long, but she’d learned her lesson about leaving the place open. You never knew what - or who - would be waiting for you when you got back, otherwise!

‘You’re up the hill past North Beach, right?’ she said, pulling on her seatbelt and then making sure Jason had done the same.

‘Yeah,’ said Jason, his hands now covering his eyes.

‘You going to throw up?’ said Lizzie.

‘Nope,’ said Jason. ‘Just dizzy.’



‘Okay - let’s get you home. Your dad’s there isn’t he?’ she asked.

There was no way she was leaving him on his own in this state. If Mr Eaves wasn’t there for any reason, she’d just have to take Jason back up to the cottage and make him a bed up on the sofa.

‘He’s there. On the sofa under a duvet,’ said Jason.

‘Sounds like the pair of you’ll have to fight it out over the remote control, then!’ said Lizzie.

Jason shook his head and then frowned, clearly wishing he hadn’t. ‘No TV,’ croaked.

Lizzie raised her eyebrows but kept her mouth shut. After all, it had nothing to do with her - but she wasn’t sure how she’d get through a bout of flu without the medicinal value of watching her favourite sitcoms with her eyes closed.



‘Lemsip... flu powders... multivitamins... extra strength vitamin C...’ Lizzie muttered to herself as she meandered around the grocery store, tossing half the medicine aisle into two baskets.

She’d made sure Jason was safely inside his house before leaving him there. The poor lad had gone downhill really quickly, and after watching him fumble with his house keys for a couple of very long minutes, she’d ended up hopping out of the car to let him into his own house.

After knocking loudly - just in case Mr Eaves was wandering around in his PJs - she finally managed to get the door open. It hadn’t been particularly easy considering she’d been practically holding Jason up by that point. A grey-faced badger of a man had appeared, looking confused. Though he hadn’t looked much healthier than poor old Jason, Mr Eaves had had enough wits about him to instantly spot that his son was poorly.

Lizzie had offered to help get Jason inside, but Mr Eaves had gently taken his son's arm and thanked her for bringing him home – before firmly shutting the door in her face.

‘Totally normal,’ she muttered to herself, adding several boxes of tissues into each basket. She kept telling herself that – after all, there was nothing worse than having someone else in your space when you felt like death warmed up, was there? Still, she couldn't help but feel concerned for the pair of them in that state!

Instead of heading straight back to the shop, Lizzie had made an executive decision to nip to the nearest grocery store and stock up on two care packages. The one for Jason and his dad was already bursting with cans of soup and other easy-to-grab bits of food to keep their strength up - as well as all the cold and flu remedies she could lay her hands on. Her plan was to do a drive-by of their house on the way back to the shop and leave the groceries on their doorstep.

The second basket was for her and the girls - and included everything she could think of to help boost their immune systems. After all, both her and Jenna had been in close contact with poor old Jason over the last few days, and when an illness like this hit a small community - it tended to run rampant!

‘I don't have time for the flu!’ she muttered. ‘Oranges... blueberries... ooh - a bottle of tea tree oil!’



‘Helloooooo?’

The hammering on the closed shop door made Lizzie laugh... because there was simply no mistaking who could be on the other side!

‘Mother? Are you in there?!’

‘Two secs, Meggie!’ laughed Lizzie, hurrying over to the doors and removing the heavy block she'd put behind them to keep them from blowing open.

‘Wow!’ she said, blinking as afternoon sunlight came streaming into the shop. ‘It’s brightened up a bit since this morning, then!’

‘Erm... yeah!’ said Megan, eyeing her. ‘Are you okay? How come you’re not open... and why have you barricaded yourself inside?’

‘Well,’ said Lizzie, beckoning for Megan to follow her in, ‘for one thing, we’re not officially open yet.’

‘Well no - but you’ll *never* be officially open unless you... well... open?!’ said Megan, cocking her head to one side.

‘You do have a good point!’ laughed Lizzie. ‘Anyway, I decided to get on with some of the jobs I needed to catch up on with the doors closed.’

‘Why does it smell funny in here?’ said Megan frowning and wrinkling her nose.

‘Funny?’ said Lizzie distractedly, picking up the glass from her workbench and taking a long slurp.

‘And what on earth are you drinking?’ said Megan, eyeing the fizzy concoction.

‘Extra strength vitamin C,’ said Lizzie, licking her lips. ‘And I’m guessing the smell is tea tree oil.’

‘But... why?’ said Megan.

‘I had to take poor old Jason home earlier,’ said Lizzie. ‘The walk into work almost finished him off. He was all grey and shivery.’

‘Uh oh,’ said Megan. ‘And Jenna gave him a lift yesterday, right?’

Lizzie nodded and rattled the tube of soluble vitamin C at Megan. ‘Fancy one?’

‘Don’t mind if I do!’ said Megan gratefully, grabbing them and making a beeline for the little back room where Lizzie had stashed a few cups and plates and some bottles of drinking water.

Lizzie trailed after her, swigging her drink. It really was repulsive - and probably far too late to do much good... but then, there was something to be said for the placebo effect.

‘Hey Meggie,’ she said, ‘I’m glad you’re here! I’m so sorry I missed you last night!’

Megan turned and eyed her over the rim of her glass as she chugged the fizzy orange drink far too quickly.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ she said eventually, letting out a burp and then looking horrified. ‘Pardon. Sorry mum!’

Lizzie grinned at her. ‘I wanted to say thank you for painting the kitchen!’

‘Oh,’ said Megan. ‘That.’

‘Don’t say it like that!’ laughed Lizzie. ‘It’s amazing. Thank you so much - it was an incredible surprise to come home to.’

‘I know I should have asked first, but-’

‘Then it wouldn’t have been a surprise!’ said Lizzie, shaking her head. ‘Seriously - very sneaky way of getting me to choose a colour scheme by leaving your magazines lying around and then making secret notes when I told you what I liked!’

‘Worked pretty well, eh?’ said Megan, looking relieved. ‘You really like it?’

‘Love - it’s incredible. If it was left to me, it would be waiting for at least a decade for me to get around to it, and then it would be completely half-arsed. I can’t believe how fast you did it – and it’s so beautiful, it looks like the painting fairies have been!’

Megan shrugged, but she looked thrilled and had gone pink with pleasure. ‘I wanted to do it as a thank you - for letting me stay. And for making me realise I was being a dick.’

‘Hardly a dick...’ said Lizzie.

‘Ah, come on. Dick where dick’s due!’ said Megan seriously.

Lizzie snorted, and she saw Megan's eyes widen as she realised what she'd just said.

'Whatever!' she added quickly. 'Do *not* tell Jenface I just said that.'

'Promise!' giggled Lizzie. 'So - it's nice to see you... did you erm... did you come down to chat or...'

'If you've got a sec, I've got something important I'd like to talk to you about.' Megan paused and did her head cocking thing again. 'Actually, two things. But only if you've got time?'

'For you?' said Lizzie. 'Always!'

'Thanks mum,' said Megan. She paused and scuffed the floor with her toe.

'Shall we sit down a sec?' said Lizzie, wondering if she was about to discover what had been bugging her daughter for so long.

Megan plopped down into one of the ancient chairs and wobbled as it failed to settle properly on its wonky legs.

'You seriously need a decent staff room when you get everything else sorted out!' said Megan.

'On the list already!' sighed Lizzie. 'With about a million other things!'

'Right... so... ' Megan paused and took a deep breath.

'Are you okay?' said Lizzie, watching her closely.

Megan nodded, then started to shake her head, and then changed her mind and nodded again. 'I had an idea,' she said slowly. 'For the business. This business.'

'Oh, right,' said Lizzie, promptly checking that she wasn't frowning. She wanted a nice, neutral expression for whatever was about to come out of Megan's mouth.

Lizzie was glad and grateful that both girls seemed to be taking an interest in Moore Bikes rather than just dismissing her dream out of hand - but it was taking a bit of getting used to.

‘You don’t mind, do you?’ said Megan quickly.

‘Course not! Let’s hear it!’ said Lizzie.

‘Well... I was thinking... this shop is obviously a great idea,’ said Megan slowly.

‘Erm, thanks?’ said Lizzie.

‘It’s just a fact. You’re not even officially open yet and you’ve got work coming out of your ears. So much so, that you’ve already had to hire someone.’

‘Right,’ said Lizzie.

‘And I was thinking... it would make a great franchise business!’ she said. ‘You could sell the Moore Bikes way of doing things to other people, train them up, charge them through the nose for a business package that works - and rake in the cash.’

‘Uh huh?’ said Lizzie, doing her best not to look as poleaxed as she felt.

‘I mean - you’d need a Franchisee Manager. Someone who’s got business experience - someone who can help you set up a website, and social media, and actually sell the franchises of course!’ Megan paused and fiddled with one of her rings for a moment. ‘I could do it. I know how to do that sort of stuff... I’ve got great contacts. Web designers. Graphic designers. The lot! I mean, I’d need a decent wage - but the first sale of a franchise would sort that out.’

‘It would?’ said Lizzie, still feeling completely lost.

‘Definitely,’ Megan nodded. ‘I can pull a bunch of figures together for you first if you’d like. And I can find you a decent accountant - and set up all your social media?’

Lizzie nodded really slowly. She didn’t want to react straight away. After all, Jenna’s ideas had sounded completely nuts – but there had been a lot of possibilities once she’d had the chance to think everything through properly. She wanted to afford Megan the same respect.

‘Amazing ideas, Meggie,’ said Lizzie slowly.

Megan instantly beamed at her, looking thrilled.

‘Can you give me a little while just to let it all sink in, and then we’ll talk some more?’ she said.

‘Of course!’ said Megan.

‘Great. And... do me a favour while I’m doing that?’ she added. She needed to be soooo careful how she worded this next bit...

‘Anything,’ said Megan.

‘Have a think if this is what you really want,’ she said gently. ‘Do you really want to work with me... in Seabury... and with this business?’

‘Of course I-’ started Megan.

‘Long. Slow. Thinking,’ said Lizzie, shaking her head.

‘Right. Yep... yep, okay,’ said Megan with a sigh.

‘Cool,’ said Lizzie.

‘Cool?’ laughed Megan, getting to her feet. ‘You’ve been hanging around teenagers too much!’

‘Wait... before you go, what was the second thing you wanted to talk to me about?’ said Lizzie curiously.

‘Well,’ said Megan. ‘I was wondering if you’d be up for me redecorating the living room for you next?’

## CHAPTER 5



Lizzie ducked her head as she wheeled one of the hire bikes out of the shop. She might be her own boss these days but skiving off for the afternoon was making her feel super guilty.

It really was far too early to be closing up so that she could go off on a jolly - but Lizzie couldn't resist. She needed to feel the wind in her hair... or at least her helmet! She'd started to drive herself mad keeping a constant watch for Liam's arrival... and what better way to distract herself than to go for a ride?

Leaning the smart blue bike against the wall, she turned the key in the lock before pulling on her helmet. She'd deal with the lights and all the rest of it when she dropped the bike back on the way home.

'I'm sure the boss won't mind!' she breathed as she clambered onto the saddle.

Lizzie sighed. She really missed her old bike. That thing had been her pride and joy, and she'd been heartbroken when it was stolen from her back garden a couple of weeks before she'd moved.

'Sorry... you're just not the same,' she whispered as she kicked off and started to pedal. The bike might be unfamiliar, but cycling itself... well, that was her happy place - and she simply hadn't been doing enough of it lately. It was kind of ironic, really!



The minute Lizzie had waved Megan off after their little chat, she knew it was time for her to escape the shop for the afternoon. With both her daughters' suggestions for Moore Bikes sloshing around in her head, she had a lot to think about! What better way to let the old grey matter chew things over than taking a lovely whizz along the early-autumn hedgerows?!

Lizzie stood up as she began to pedal for all she was worth. She'd decided to take the route up the hill past the allotments and out of Seabury. She didn't want to cycle through the centre of town just in case anyone tried to talk to her. This afternoon was her time. Well... hers and Ted's!

Before leaving Moore Bikes, Lizzie had grabbed his folder of designs and tucked it into her bag. She wanted to pick Ted's brain and she just hoped that he wouldn't mind her turning up unannounced. From what Margie had been saying, though, Lizzie had a feeling he might rather enjoy having a random visitor!

By the time she reached the top of the hill, Lizzie was puffing hard. If she *did* decide to go ahead with Jenna's hair-brained rickshaw plan, she was either going to have to get in better shape or ask Jason if he had a couple of mates who'd like to join the team!

Signalling to the left, Lizzie pulled out and then relished the freedom of freewheeling downhill for a moment - stretching her legs out on either side of the bike. Thank heavens this stretch of road was quiet today because she probably looked like a total idiot!

Lizzie grinned. Pelting along this stretch of road with the wind whipping her cheeks was bringing back memories of childhood. What a wonderful place to have called home for so long!

'Woohooo!'

Lizzie's squeal of delight drifted on the sea breeze as she let her momentum carry her halfway up the next hill. Then, before she knew it, it was time to turn back off the main road

and onto the winding lanes that would eventually lead her to Ted Hatherleigh's barn.

Lizzie sucked in a deep breath as the calm of the afternoon stole over her. This was where she belonged! These lanes held so many memories – she'd grown up between these hedges – exploring every dip, corner, and hill on her trusty bike. The other kids had tried to keep up with her, but when she'd got going, they'd never really stood a chance.

Turning down an even narrower lane, Lizzie began to pick up speed again, weaving around the twists and turns, and leaning into the bends at speed as she let the unfamiliar bike carry her along her old stomping grounds.

Suddenly, Lizzie was ten years old again - pedalling as fast as her feet would go. The familiar roar of the wind in her ears was exhilarating. She might be puffing - but she still had a bit of extra energy left in the tanks!

'Yeah!!!' she cried, zooming down a hill and flying over a bump in the road, feeling like she was about to take off.

Uh oh-

Wait... that corner-

Maybe she didn't remember this lane quite as well as she thought! That was a seriously tight bend – and there was no way she was going to make it. If she hit the brakes now, she was definitely going to come off.

'Nooo!' gasped Lizzie.

Hedge or ditch? That was her only choice now.

The ditch looked like a seriously long way down... hell - it was going to have to be the hedge!

'Uh oh!' she yelled as she hit the bend at speed. Panicking, she yanked far too hard on the brakes and promptly flew right over the handlebars into the hedge. The fact that she'd chosen her landing place in advance did nothing to soften the blow.

'Holy mother of... OWWW!' she moaned.

Okay, so it was official - the hedge had been a terrible idea.

Lizzie froze for a long moment, trying to assess the damage. She couldn't see the bike - but she could still hear the front wheel ticking as it spun in circles somewhere nearby. As for her – she was spread-eagled – face first in a pincushion of brambles.

Taking a deep breath, Lizzie closed her eyes for a moment and thought longingly of the ditch. It would have been nice and soggy - probably quite muddy after all that rain. It might even have been a soft landing.

This... definitely wasn't soft.

Lizzie let out a little whimper, trying hard not to burst into tears from the sheer shock of what had just happened. Maybe she needed to look on the bright side - at least she'd missed the sycamore stumps that rose on either side of her. On the not-so-bright side though, she was now wedged between them with her bum in the air, feeling a bit like she'd had every inch of her body pierced.

Still... they were just prickles. She could deal with prickles. Everything hurt, but it didn't feel like there was any kind of *big bad hurt* going on... not as far as she could tell, anyway.

Right - there was no point waiting for someone to come to the rescue! She needed to get herself out of there... somehow!

Lizzie winced as she tried to shift against the spiny pillow.

'You've got to be kidding me!' she gasped. She could barely move. Not because she was hurt – but because the arms and neck of her jumper were so caught up in the brambles, it felt like she'd been velcroed face-down into the hedgerow.

*What on earth was she going to do? She was well and truly stuck!*

Trying to calm the rising tide of panic that felt like it was grabbing her by the throat, Lizzie wriggled again. Maybe if she managed to shift her weight around a little...

Nope. That wasn't going to work. In fact, if anything, she seemed to be sinking deeper into the undergrowth every time she moved an inch. Something hot and wet was trickling down

her face from somewhere near her right eyebrow. Fingers crossed it was sweat rather than blood.

‘Erm... help?’

*Lame. Pathetic. Pointless.*

The nearest house had to be more than a mile away, and someone standing right behind her wouldn’t have been able to hear that puny little warble!

‘Help?’ she tried again.

At least it came out a bit louder this time... though she really wasn’t sure she wanted anyone to find her in this state anyway! What had she been thinking? She was a business owner... the mother of two grown-up girls... she shouldn’t have been racing along the road like a lunatic. At least - not when she couldn’t remember where all the bends were!

Lizzie closed her eyes again and tried to calm down. Giving herself a hard time right now wasn’t going to help matters, was it?! She took a long, deep breath, trying to ignore the fact that the brambles beneath her were probably infested with spiders!

The thought made Lizzie’s eyes fly open again.

‘Dumbass!’ she muttered. She’d been trying to calm herself down, not freak herself out even further.

‘Get me out of here!’ she muttered, trying to push herself up again. It had no effect whatsoever. She was trapped in place... and there seemed to be an army of snails heading along the undergrowth in her direction.

‘HELP!’ she yelled, hoping against hope there might be a kindly dog-walker somewhere nearby.

As if in reply, a low rumbling sounded somewhere in the distance. That *had* to be a vehicle of some sort! The burning question was... were they heading in her direction?

‘What if they don’t see me?!’ she whispered, trying to crane her neck around and completely failing.

They *had* to see her! She was starting to get cold... partly because of the shock, and partly because she'd been sweating buckets from the unaccustomed exercise. Now she had goosebumps rising on her scratched and bruised limbs.

Lizzie shivered. What if she was here all night?!

'HELP!' she yelled again, though she was pretty sure it was pointless... there was no way the driver would be able to hear her over the racket that engine was making.

It was definitely getting closer. Maybe they'd be able to see the bike from the road? It felt like she'd flown meters before crashing into the brambles – but perhaps she hadn't gone quite as far as she feared.

Lizzie heard the engine roar... and then idle.

'Help help HELP!' she yelled as the clap of a door being closed rang out behind her.

'I'd have gone for the ditch, myself!' came a familiar voice.

'Liam?!' demanded Lizzie, struggling to peer behind her again and once again failing miserably.

'Are you hurt?' he said.

'No. I mean... I don't think so,' said Lizzie. 'Not really.'

'Thank goodness for that!' came the cheerful reply. 'You know, I wasn't expecting to find your bottom sticking out of a hedge on my way home!'

Lizzie spluttered, not quite knowing what to say. Part of her was completely horrified... but she was grinning from ear to ear. Not only had someone found her... it was *her* someone.

'Are you sure you're not hurt?' said Liam.

'Pretty sure,' said Lizzie, 'but am so stuck, I've not been able to test that theory!'

'Okay. Let's get you unstuck and go from there.'

Lizzie could hear the barely suppressed amusement in Liam's voice, but she was too happy that he'd found her to

care.

‘I’ve got something in the back of the van that might work on these brambles,’ he said. ‘Don’t go anywhere!’

‘Oh, har-de-harhar my sides are splitting.’ Lizzie’s mouth twitched, but she didn’t dare let out a giggle in case it made her sink even further into the mess.

‘Alright, I’m back,’ came the disembodied voice. ‘I’ve got some gloves and a pair of wire cutters... not exactly perfect, but we should be able to get you out of there.’

Liam paused, clearly assessing the situation.

‘Right, I’m coming around to your head. Hang tight.’

Lizzie rolled her eyes but then spotted Liam’s boots searching for safe footholds just in front of her.

‘What are you waiting for?’ Lizzie asked the boots.

‘Erm... to be honest, I’m trying to work out where to start,’ he said.

‘Anywhere... please!’ begged Lizzie.

‘Okay...’ he blew out a long breath. ‘I’m going in!’

Lizzie did her best not to move as she heard the wire cutters get to work – though it was hard not to jump every time Liam tugged on her jumper as he tried to free her.

‘Stop squirming!’ he begged. ‘You’re making it worse.’

‘Sorry,’ said Lizzie. ‘I’m getting pins and needles in my legs.’

‘Okay. Just a couple more of these big ones and I might be able to pull you out,’ said Liam.

Lizzie grunted and bit her lip, trying to ignore the shooting pains in her legs.

‘Okay,’ said Liam. ‘Do not move. I’m going around behind you and I’m going to try to pull you out, okay?’

‘M’kay,’ muttered Lizzie.

‘Thank goodness you wear dungarees!’ said Liam from somewhere behind her.

‘Why?!’ said Lizzie, holding still.

‘Number one - hopefully, they’ll have protected your stomach a bit,’ he said. ‘And number two... they give me handles to work with!’

Lizzie let out a shriek of surprise as Liam took a firm grip of the denim straps and yanked her bodily out of her prickly prison.

## CHAPTER 6



*G*irls?! Jenna?! Megan?!

Lizzie winced as Liam's deep voice boomed through the little cottage. He had one arm around her, supporting her weight, and had managed to unlock and open her front door with the other.

'Shh,' she said. 'They'll hear you!'

'That's kind of the point!' laughed Liam.

'Oh... right,' said Lizzie as she snuggled deeper into his arm... then promptly wished she hadn't. The sleeves of her jumper were more chopped-up bits of bramble than wool by this point, and every time she shifted a new scratch or bruise made itself known.

Still, she couldn't resist clinging to him. As embarrassed as she was by the manner of their reunion - Liam was home! She had turned into a Lizzie-shaped puddle of happiness... though she might be an even happier puddle if she could stop the scratch on her forehead from bleeding.

Thundering footsteps upstairs heralded the imminent arrival of at least one of the girls.

'Mum?!' gasped Jenna as galloped down the stairs. 'Oh - *not just* mum!' she added pulling herself up short. 'Erm hi...'

'I'm Liam,' said Liam.

'Yeah... I remember... hi!' said Jenna, her eyes fixed in horror on Lizzie. 'Meggie? MEGGIE GET IN HERE!' she bellowed at the top of her lungs.



‘Wow!’ laughed Liam.

Lizzie flinched at the volume - and then flinched again as various prickles embedded themselves even further into her poor battered body.

‘Sorry,’ said Jenna, still staring at Lizzie. ‘She’s got her headphones in... she’s started on the living room.’

‘Already?’ said Lizzie faintly. She was desperate to sit down, but Jenna was completely blocking the hallway and barring their entrance.

‘You know what Meggie’s like,’ said Jenna. ‘But... what happened to you?’

‘Had an argument with my bike,’ said Lizzie, suddenly feeling more than a bit knackered.

‘Let’s get you inside,’ said Liam, taking more of her weight as the last of the adrenalin left her body and she sagged against him.

‘Kitchen,’ said Jenna quickly, eyeballing the undergrowth caught up in Lizzie’s clothes.

‘You called?’ said Megan drifting into the hallway, looking much younger with her hair pulled back under a scarf and smudges of dusky blue paint on her cheekbones.

‘Alright, dreamy Doris?’ said Jenna. ‘Mum’s had an accident.’

‘Oh shit!’ said Megan, her eyes going wide as she caught sight of Lizzie, still being held up by Liam. ‘Sorry - I mean... sugar,’ she amended, eyeing Liam warily.

‘Shit just about covers it,’ said Liam.

‘Into the kitchen,’ said Megan, instantly straightening up and taking charge.

‘That’s what I said!’ muttered Jenna.

‘Good call,’ said Megan. ‘Jenna - grab the first aid kit from mum’s bathroom cupboard?’

‘On it!’ said Jenna, pelting back up the stairs.

‘I’ve got a first aid kit?’ said Lizzie vaguely as she let Liam lead her towards the kitchen.

‘You have since I bought one and put it there a couple of days ago,’ laughed Megan. ‘I was unpacking your bathroom stuff for you and yours went out of date when I was about ten years old.’

‘Figures,’ said Lizzie, easing herself gingerly onto one of the wooden chairs.

‘Liam?’ said Megan, eyeing him again.

‘Nice to meet you properly,’ said Liam with a grin.

‘You too. Pop the kettle on? I’m going to need to bathe all these scratches... once I get all the prickles out. Plus - I’m guessing everyone could do with a cuppa!’

‘You don’t need to fuss,’ muttered Lizzie, attempting to stand up only to be greeted by a duet of protests from Megan and Liam.

‘Sit! Stay!’ said Megan.

‘I’m not a puppy in training,’ mumbled Lizzie.

‘No...’ said Liam gently, ‘but you are in shock and bleeding, so...’

‘Here!’ said Jenna, belting into the room. ‘First aid kit, antiseptic stuff, tweezers for the prickles, and a pair of PJs for you to change into, mum. I figure it’s best if we de-thorn your clothes out separately... without you in them.’

‘Perfect!’ said Megan.

‘I’m thinking a pair of gardening gloves for whoever undresses your mum might be a good plan, too!’ chuckled Liam as he flicked the kettle on.

‘You old romantic!’ laughed Jenna.

‘I’ve got some in the van,’ said Liam. ‘Two secs.’

Jenna watched him bustle out of the room and then dropped into a chair next to Lizzie.

‘So, what happened, mum?’ she said. ‘And where did Liam spring from - I thought Liam was away?’

‘Bike - meet hedge,’ said Lizzie, wishing she could just go and lie down in a darkened room for a moment.

‘But you don’t have a bike?’ said Megan, who was busy laying out an array of plasters, creams and cotton wool balls on the kitchen table in front of Lizzie.

‘One of the hires,’ said Lizzie. She swiped the back of her hand across her forehead and then examined it. To her horror, the streak of blood mixed with mud and sweat made her sway on her chair.

‘Steady!’ said Jenna. ‘If you’re going to pass out, we’d better get you sitting on the floor!’

Lizzie shook her head and took a long breath, feeling like an idiot.

‘I’m fine,’ she said.

‘Add some sugar to her tea!’ said Megan. ‘It’ll help with the shock.’

Jenna hopped up and rushed over to the worktop to make the drink.

‘Don’t worry about your head,’ said Megan gently, sitting in Jenna’s newly vacated spot and taking a closer look at Lizzie’s forehead. ‘It’s just a shallow scratch - probably feels much worse than it is. I’ll clean that first and see if we can get it to stop bleeding.’

‘Okay,’ said Lizzie, meekly.

‘Then we need to get you out of these clothes so we can see what else is going on,’ said Megan.

‘Is there anything majorly painful under there?’ asked Jenna, placing a bucket of builder’s brew in front of Lizzie as Megan snapped on a pair of medical gloves.

Lizzie shook her head and then shrugged. She reached for the tea and took a sip. It was insanely sweet... but as she took another mouthful, she felt it start to work its magic.

‘Nothing too bad I don’t think,’ she said. ‘It’s my arms that hurt most. They’re tingling and stinging all over!’

‘Right, let’s see what we can do,’ said Megan, dipping a cotton wool ball into a little bowl of warm, antiseptic-scented water.

Lizzie closed her eyes as Megan began to swab at the cut on her forehead. Having both girls fussing around her was oddly relaxing. She felt surrounded by their concern and love, and it seemed to be breathing a bit of life back into her.

‘You’ve not broken anything... have you?’ said Jenna.

‘No love,’ sighed Lizzie. ‘I don’t think so... other than my pride, maybe.’

‘Pfft - don’t worry about that!’ said Megan. ‘No one cares as long as you’re alright!’

‘Was it Liam who found you?’ said Jenna, lowering her voice.

‘Yep!’ said Lizzie. ‘Bottom-up in a hedgerow.’

‘Nice, mother!’ laughed Megan. ‘Sorry, sorry - didn’t mean to laugh.’

Lizzie shrugged and then winced. ‘It’s okay... it *is* pretty funny.’

‘Even funnier when I lifted her out by her dungaree straps!’ said Liam, his grinning face appearing in the doorway.

‘Oh my goodness!’ said Jenna. ‘Now that’s something I wish I’d seen.’

‘Well... just as well it wasn’t a bunch of teenagers who found me - otherwise, there’d probably be video evidence,’ said Lizzie.

‘Can you imagine?’ laughed Megan.

‘Wait... Liam... there *isn’t* video evidence, is there?’ said Jenna.

‘I’ve just been uploading it now,’ said Liam.

Lizzie's eyes flew open, and Megan stopped what she was doing to glare at him.

'Joke!' he said quickly, holding up his hands in surrender as he was pinned by three identical glares.

'Phew!' said Jenna.

'Yeah... because you and I would be having words!' said Megan. Then she grinned and shot a wink at him.

Lizzie stared between the pair of them. Well... this definitely wasn't the way she'd been hoping to introduce them all... but it seemed to be working out okay!

'I really need to get out of these clothes,' said Lizzie, shifting on her chair as Megan reached up and carefully extracted a long piece of bramble from her hair. 'I'm sure there are a couple of snails inside these dungarees somewhere!'

'Eew!' laughed Jenna. 'Shall I go and put the hot water on so that you can have a bath?'

'Good plan!' said Megan. 'Then we can make sure all the cuts are properly cleaned up before patching you up!'

Jenna nodded and hurtled out of the room.

'On that note, I'm going to make myself scarce!' said Liam, 'unless you need me?'

'Make me and Jenna a cup of tea before you go?' said Megan, shooting him a sweet smile that made Lizzie laugh. 'Jenna only made one for mum!'

'You've got it,' said Liam, moving towards the kettle. 'Lizzie – do you want me to drop your poor old bike back down to the shop?'

'Yes please,' said Lizzie, trying not to sound quite as pathetic as she felt. 'And my bag with Ted's folder... and can you make sure I turned everything off and then lock up properly?'

'Sure!' said Liam.

'Sorry to be a pain,' she added.

‘You’re not!’ said Liam, firmly. ‘I’ll send Jason home, shall I?’

‘He’s not there,’ said Lizzie. ‘He’s sick. I took him home pretty much as soon as he arrived this morning.’

‘Oh - poor lad!’ said Liam in surprise. ‘That’s not like him.’

‘Trust me, he wasn’t putting it on,’ said Lizzie. ‘He was all grey and wobbly. His dad’s been ill, so I guess he caught it.’

‘Sounds like it,’ said Liam. ‘I wonder if they need anything.’

‘I grabbed a few basics for them earlier and left them on the doorstep, but it might be a good idea to check in again,’ she said. ‘Maybe shoot Jason a text and check they’re doing alright?’

‘Will do,’ said Liam, bringing two cups over to the table and placing them next to Megan’s medical supplies. ‘Right... I’ll get out of your hair.’

‘Thanks for rescuing her!’ said Megan.

‘My pleasure,’ said Liam.

‘Yeah!’ said Jenna, bouncing back into the room. ‘You’re a hero!’

‘Hardly!’ laughed Liam. ‘Anyway - let’s all catch up properly... maybe when there are less prickles involved?’

‘Deal,’ said Lizzie. She knew it was ridiculous, but she felt her heart sink a bit. This *really* wasn’t what she’d had in mind when she’d pictured welcoming him home!

‘See ya!’ shouted Megan as Liam headed out of the kitchen, closely followed by Jenna.

‘Where’s your sister going?’ said Lizzie, shooting a worried sideways glance towards the door.

‘Don’t worry, I don’t think she’s about to give your *lover* the third degree... that’s more my style!’ chuckled Megan.

‘My *lover?!*’ laughed Lizzie, before pulling a face as various prickles prodded her sore skin.

‘Yeah. And for the record - he’s nice,’ said Megan.

‘He really is,’ said Lizzie.

‘Now then mother, don’t go all mushy on me!’ she laughed.

‘Sorry... can’t help it!’ said Lizzie.

‘Well, I guess that’s fair enough, considering he did just save you from a hedge,’ said Megan.

‘Not exactly the perfect, swooning heroine though am I, eh Meggie?’ said Lizzie. ‘Pulling an ageing tomboy out of a patch of brambles is hardly the stuff of romance novels!’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Megan, smiling at her. ‘You’re pretty cute, you know!’

‘Thanks,’ said Lizzie, reaching out and giving Megan’s hand a gentle squeeze. ‘I love you, you know?’

‘Okay... you’re definitely going into shock,’ laughed Megan.

Lizzie stuck her tongue out at her daughter and then glanced towards the door again. ‘Where *is* Jenna?!’

‘Still with Liam, I expect!’ said Megan

‘Why?’ said Lizzie. ‘She’d better not be giving him a hard time out there! The poor guy’s only just driven halfway across the country!’

‘Don’t worry!’ said Megan, grabbing her tweezers and angling Lizzie’s palm so that she could start removing some of the thorns. ‘Right now, my little sister only poses a threat to one thing...’

‘What?!’

‘Liam’s van!’ laughed Megan.

‘Uh oh,’ said Lizzie, her eyes going wide. ‘Do you think we should warn him?’

‘I’d say he can handle blondie,’ said Megan. ‘Right, that’s the big ones gone,’ she added putting the tweezers down

‘What next?’ said Lizzie.

‘Time for me to swap gloves!’ she said, removing the thin medical pair with a snap and reaching for the thick gardening gloves Liam had left on the table. ‘Right then... time to get you out of those clothes.’

Lizzie sighed. ‘See... those are definitely words I was hoping to hear today... just not from you!’

‘Mother!’ laughed Megan, helping her to her feet.

‘Okay, maybe you’re right,’ said Lizzie, pulling a face as she forced her rapidly stiffening limbs to support her weight.

‘About what?’ said Megan, unclipping the straps of the dungarees with some difficulty.

‘Maybe I am in shock,’ said Lizzie with a wink.



## CHAPTER 7



Lizzie smiled to herself as she limped towards town. The sun was out, and Seabury was glowing. Sure, she felt a bit battered and bruised after the previous day's escapades - and she could swear she smelled a bit like a walking pharmacy - but Lizzie felt strangely happy.

There was something weirdly familiar about being covered in a layer of antiseptic cream and sticking plasters! The big one Megan had pressed onto her forehead was her favourite. Her daughter's shopping trip for fresh first-aid supplies had clearly leaned heavily towards the children's section, and now Lizzie was proudly sporting a rainbow-coloured teddy bear on her face.

She might be enjoying the fresh air, but Lizzie would be glad to get to the shop this morning. She'd been desperate to head back down to Moore Bikes the previous evening - just to check how much damage she'd done to the hire bike and pick up her car while she was at it - but in an unusual moment of agreement, the girls had both thrown a hissy-fit at the mere mention of it.

Instead, Megan had forced Lizzie to enjoy a long, luxurious soak in the bath before tending to all her cuts and removing as many prickles as she could find. Lizzie had quickly discovered that she was banned from the living room until Megan had finished working her magic - but given how fast she'd completed the kitchen, she wasn't too fussed.

While Jenna cooked everyone a delicious fish pie for supper, Megan had joined Lizzie in her bedroom, and the pair

of them had stretched out on the bed, flipping through yet more swanky interiors magazines. The afternoon might have started out as painful, uncomfortable and mildly mortifying... but it had ended up being one Lizzie knew she'd treasure for a long time.

Smiling softly, Lizzie touched the plaster on her forehead again.

*Goodness... what were the customers going to think?!*

Shrugging, Lizzie did her best to pick up her pace again, wincing slightly as she went. It didn't really matter what anyone thought, did it? Besides, she was considering keeping the doors closed so that she could finish off getting the shop set up. She had some storage drawers and shelving turning up on the morning delivery, and if she could get a wiggle on and get them put together, she'd finally be able to sort and stash all the spares from the Hatherleigh's barn.

'Yoo-hoo? Lizzie?'

Lizzie blinked, coming out of her reverie only to spot Ethel waving at her. She was wandering along the seafront towards her, hand-in-hand with Charlie. Lizzie returned her wave and winced. Blimey – she'd definitely pulled a muscle or two when she'd taken that trip over her handlebars!

'Lizzie lovely!' gasped Ethel, coming to a standstill in front of her, her eyes resting on the teddy bear plaster.

'I heard you fell off your bike!' said Charlie. 'Are you okay?'

'Yep!' said Lizzie, staring at her feet and scuffing the pavement with her shoe before remembering that she wasn't actually ten years old.

'Riding too fast again?' said Ethel.

'Uh-huh...' said Lizzie, glancing up at her.

They were both shaking their heads, clearly amused.

'Nothing changes!' they said in unison.

Lizzie snorted.

‘It’s true,’ said Charlie. ‘Your old nan was always patching you up!’

‘Looks like you’ve got yourself some new plasters, though!’ said Ethel, her eyes back on her forehead again.

‘That was Megan,’ laughed Lizzie.

‘Good girl,’ said Charlie with an approving nod. ‘Glad to hear she’s looking after you!’

‘They both are,’ said Lizzie, feeling that warm ball of happiness bounce in her chest again. The fact that both girls had fussed around her the day before had made her feel so lucky. It was like a calm kind of contentment had descended on the cottage - one she couldn’t remember feeling for a very long time.

‘Good,’ said Ethel with a nod.

‘I heard on the grapevine that it was Liam who pulled you out of the hedge, though?’ said Charlie.

‘Who told you that?!’ said Lizzie, her eyes widening.

‘Oh you know what Seabury is like,’ laughed Ethel.

‘Heard he used your dungaree straps as handles!’ said Charlie, his eyebrows twitching with amusement now.

‘Honestly, ignore this one,’ said Ethel. ‘He’ll believe anything.’

‘Erm... it’s true,’ said Lizzie, feeling a bit bewildered.

Ethel bit her lip.

‘We’d better be off,’ said Charlie promptly. ‘You be careful now - you hear? No more antics.’

‘Roger that!’ said Lizzie giving him a little salute as they started to wander away, their heads bent together. She could swear Ethel’s shoulders were shaking with laughter.

Lizzie shrugged. There might not be a video on social media to worry about... but Seabury’s gossip grapevine was probably even better at spreading the news!

Unlocking the doors to Moore Bikes, Lizzie was just pushing her way inside when her mobile phone started to buzz in her pocket.

‘Yellow!’ she said cheerfully.

‘Boss?’ came a rasping voice.

‘Jason?!’ she said in horror. ‘That you?’

‘Mmhmm.’

There was a pause which contained an awful lot of coughing on the other end.

‘Is everything okay?’ she said. ‘You sound awful.’

‘Fine. I’m fine,’ said Jason. ‘That’s code for “I’m dying of man-flu” by the way.’ He paused to cough again. ‘I’m not going to be able to come to work today.’

‘A week!’ came a distant voice at the other end of the line. ‘At least a week!’

‘Is that your dad?’ said Lizzie.

‘Yeah,’ huffed Jason. ‘He said I’m not allowed back for at least a week, even if I feel better before then. He doesn’t want me spreading this crap around.’

‘That’s okay,’ said Lizzie quickly, secretly thinking he’d be lucky if he improved that quickly anyway. ‘Don’t you worry about it. Take your time and feel better. I’m not going anywhere.’

‘Thanks!’ said Jason, then promptly dissolved into another coughing fit.

‘And maybe text me if you need anything,’ she said, pulling a pained face. ‘Sounds like you’re going to lose your voice if you do too much talking!’

‘I’m ‘kay,’ he said.

Lizzie just raised an eyebrow and stopped herself from pointing out that if he was losing syllables, he most definitely wasn’t okay.

‘What about you?’ he rasped. ‘We’re worried!’

‘I’m fine,’ said Lizzie with a frown. ‘Why wouldn’t I be?’

‘Bike crash?’ said Jason, who’d obviously decided to resort to the minimum number of words necessary to get his point across.

‘Oh... that!’ said Lizzie, once again at the sensational speed of the Seabury grapevine.

‘That!’ agreed Jason. ‘You ‘kay?’

‘Fine. A bit scratched and battered... and Megan had to remove a serious number of prickles for me... but I’m fine.’

‘Phew,’ said Jason. ‘Northcliff Road?’

‘Yep,’ said Lizzie, pulling a face.

‘Forget about the corner?’ he wheezed.

‘Uh huh,’ said Lizzie.

‘Always go for the ditch,’ said Jason with the wisdom only a true local would possess.

‘Tell her - nettles over brambles every time!’ came the sound of Jason’s dad in the background again.

‘Hear that?’ asked Jason.

‘Mmm hmm,’ mumbled Lizzie in amusement.

‘Cool,’ said Jason. ‘Going back to bed now.’

‘Good plan,’ said Lizzie.

‘Don’t give my job away!’ he added.

‘No fear,’ said Lizzie. ‘Feel better - both of you.’



Lizzie was humming tunelessly to herself as she tidied up her workbench when there was a polite tap behind her. Turning, she spotted Ted Hatherleigh peering around the half-open door.

‘You open... or... not open?’ said Ted with a grin.

‘Erm... half and half if that counts?’ said Lizzie. ‘I’m on my own - but I didn’t want to miss anyone if they needed me... so I kind of opened one door and left the other one closed.’

‘Very logical!’ laughed Ted. ‘I’ve got a couple of boxes for you.’

‘Oh blimey!’ said Lizzie guiltily. ‘Thanks so much - I’m sorry it’s taken me so long to pick them up. I-’

‘Don’t go worrying about that!’ laughed Ted. ‘They’re just my excuse for getting out of the house, to be honest. Margie’s mithering on worse than ever this morning. I don’t really have much to do out in the barn these days - I’m a bit bored of the mowers - so I thought I’d come and see you instead!’

‘Oh!’ said Lizzie. ‘Well, that’s wonderful - thank you! Fancy a cuppa?’

‘Don’t mind if I do!’ said Ted, his whole face lighting up as he limped inside. Lizzie noticed that his walking stick was nowhere to be seen - it was something his wife tended to insist on but Ted abandoned it at every given opportunity.

‘Erm... shall I grab those boxes first, so that you can move your car?’ she said.

‘Nah, I’ve got them in me pockets,’ said Ted, patting his beige jacket. ‘The car’s parked up already. Didn’t want to risk that parking warden. Vicious piece of work!’

‘So I’ve heard!’ said Lizzie. ‘I’ve not actually met him yet though.’

‘Lucky you,’ said Ted, feeling around in his pockets. ‘Right - here you go.’ With that, he pulled out two of the tiniest boxes Lizzie had ever seen and handed them over.

‘Screws?’ she said.

‘Screws,’ Ted confirmed with a straight face. ‘I told Margie I’d bring down at least two boxes... and I’m a man of my word.’

Lizzie snorted with laughter and Ted grinned at her.

‘Right,’ she said, ‘I’ll shut the door so that we don’t get disturbed, and then I’ll put the kettle on?’

‘Don’t you go making special arrangements for me!’ said Ted, taking his jacket off, hanging it over her stepladder and then looking around with interest. ‘Keep that door open and we’ll deal with any customers that come our way. I’ll watch the shop while you make the tea? Or do you want to point me towards the kettle?’

‘I’m on it,’ said Lizzie with a smile. ‘Thanks Ted.’

Two minutes later, Lizzie returned from the back room with two steaming mugs and her mind made up. She’d been on her way to see Ted yesterday and got rather... side-tracked. Not today, though – today she was determined to put her plan into action... even if she wasn’t quite sure how to broach the subject.

‘Ooh lovely!’ said Ted, taking the builder’s brew from her and taking an appreciative sip. ‘Thank you! I say, pity that young lad of yours has taken ill - I’ve heard good things about him. I’d like to have had a chat.’

‘He’ll be back before we know it, I’m sure,’ said Lizzie, sipping her tea. ‘Though that’s a nasty bug they’ve got, so it might be a couple of weeks. Actually... he was in here just yesterday... are you sure you’re alright to be around me? Just in case I go down with something...’

‘Don’t you start mithering too!’ said Ted in horror. ‘I’m as strong as an ox, me!’

‘Fair enough,’ said Lizzie.

‘Besides - you smell that strongly of antiseptic, I don’t think any cold or flu would dare come anywhere near you!’ said Ted, grinning at her over his mug.

‘I’ve got my daughter to blame for that... Megan got a bit enthusiastic when she was making sure I was all patched up after I crashed my bike yesterday.’

‘Hmm... I heard about that,’ said Ted. ‘Just down the road from us, weren’t you?’

Lizzie nodded, not bothering to ask how Ted knew about it, considering everyone in town seemed to have received the memo!

‘Always was a devil of a corner,’ said Ted. ‘Doubly-nasty if there’s been a frost.’

‘I don’t have that excuse!’ said Lizzie. ‘I was just going too fast.’

‘Nothing changes,’ laughed Ted. ‘Was your bike alright?’

‘It wasn’t actually my bike,’ said Lizzie, suddenly feeling decidedly guilty. ‘It was one of the hires!’

She hadn’t even checked it over yet! If it had been her old bike, she’d have been at the shop first thing to start work on any repairs it might have needed. But, because it was one of the hire bikes, she didn’t have any kind of attachment to it!

‘And is it alright?’ said Ted again.

‘Honestly? No idea!’ said Lizzie, pulling a horrified face. ‘I’ve not even looked at it. Liam dropped it back down here for me last night. There it is... in the rack.’

‘The blue?’ said Ted, popping his mug down on the workbench and heading straight for it.

‘Yes, but don’t worry... I’ll...’

Lizzie had been about to say that she’d sort it out later, but before she could even get the words out, Ted had it out of the rack. She watched as he cast a practised eye over every inch of it before flipping it over so that he could get to the wheels.

‘Two broken spokes,’ he said before making a sucking sound through his teeth. ‘Bent derailleur hanger,’ he added, ‘but that’s not surprising... and the wheels will need truing up.’

‘Could be worse,’ said Lizzie.

‘Yep,’ said Ted with a nod. ‘And no time like the present. I’m sure there was a whole box of derailleur hangers in that stuff you brought down from my place.’



‘I’m pretty sure you’re right,’ said Lizzie, feeling guilty again. ‘Problem is, I haven’t actually managed to sort it all out yet. It’s a bit jumbled, I’m afraid. I had some new storage arrive earlier, so I’ll soon be able to put it all away. Building those units was my plan for today!’

‘I’ll help!’ said Ted, rubbing his hands together eagerly. ‘That’s if... if you don’t mind?’ he added, suddenly sounding unsure. ‘Sorry... I don’t want to go inviting myself to the party!’

‘Are you kidding me?’ laughed Lizzie. ‘I’d love your help - as long as you really don’t mind?’

‘Mind? I can’t imagine anything better to be doing with my afternoon!’ said Ted.

Lizzie smiled. Considering it was only about half past ten in the morning, it sounded like Ted might be with her for the long haul.

## CHAPTER 8



‘Oh my giddy aunts, what happened to your face?!’ demanded Sarah.

The young girl had just ambled into Moore Bikes, flicking her hair and peering around in a way that made Lizzie decidedly suspicious that *she* wasn’t the person Sarah was really hoping to bump into. Then she’d spotted Lizzie and had stopped in her tracks.

‘Bombing around the lanes and ended up in a hedge!’ called Ted helpfully from his perch on a stool behind the rack of hire bikes.

‘Oh!’ said Sarah. ‘Wait... is that Ted?’

‘The one and only!’ called Ted cheerfully.

‘Did you really fall off your bike?’ said Sarah, moving forward to take Lizzie’s hand so that she could turn it this way and that to inspect the cuts and scrapes on show on her bare forearm.

‘Yep. I can’t believe you didn’t know already!’ said Lizzie.

‘Why would I know?’ said Sarah, looking confused.

‘Erm... because I swear the rest of the town heard the news before Liam had even managed to free me from the bramble patch!’ laughed Lizzie.

‘That’s Seabury,’ said Sarah with a shrug.

‘Yeah... so where have you been to miss out on all the gossip?’ said Lizzie, watching Sarah’s eyes as they drifted

around the shop. ‘He’s not here!’

‘What? Who?’ she said sounding dazed.

‘Jason,’ said Lizzie with a slight smile. ‘He’s ill – the poor lad’s managed to catch that horrible flu his dad’s got.’

‘Oh, that sucks!’ said Sarah, sticking her lip out.

‘Yeah - he’s going to be missing in action for a while, I think,’ said Lizzie.

‘I wonder if he needs anything,’ said Sarah. She promptly turned bright pink. ‘I just meant... from the cafe. It’s horrible being stuck at home when you’re too ill to cook or anything. At least I’ve got Kate and Dad to cluck around me – but if Mr Eaves is poorly too...?’

‘Well, you could text him?’ said Lizzie.

‘Don’t have his number,’ sighed Sarah. ‘And we’re not friends online... yet.’

‘Oh...’ said Lizzie, thinking hard. Then a cunning plan nudged its way into her head. ‘Hey - have you guys got your soup on the go every day at The Sardine, now that we’re heading into autumn?’

‘There’s always soup - even in the middle of summer,’ laughed Sarah. ‘Just in case the Chilly Dippers need to warm up.’

‘Great. I was going to grab some for Jason and his dad and take it over to their place so that they’ve got something hot for lunch. Are you working this week?’

Sarah nodded.

‘Would you guys be able to deliver soup to their house for me - every day around lunchtime? And maybe a roll each, and a cake or pastry? Then at least they’ve got something to keep them going. If Kate’s willing, we could put it all on my tab and I’ll clear it in one go once they’re better?’

‘Sure,’ said Sarah. ‘I mean, I can take it up to them even if it doesn’t fit in with our usual delivery round timings.’

‘That would be amazing,’ said Lizzie. ‘Thanks. And make sure you just leave it on the doorstep - you seriously don’t want whatever those two have got!’

‘Right,’ said Sarah, deflating slightly. ‘How’ll they know it’s there?’

‘Well... I guess I’d better give you Jason’s mobile number,’ said Lizzie, keeping her face as innocent as possible.

‘Cool!’ said Sarah. ‘Or... you know... whatever!’ she added with a shrug.

Lizzie did her best to ignore the sound of chuckling coming from Ted’s direction as she scribbled Jason’s number on a scrap of paper and handed it over.

‘Now... what were you after?’ said Lizzie.

‘After?’ said Sarah, already entering the number into her mobile. ‘Oh – right - that! Kate asked me to pop in to see if it’s okay to bring Trixie in for a service. She always likes to get it done before winter... and as you’re right here...’

‘Sure!’ said Lizzie, thrilled at the idea of getting her hands on such an important Seabury mascot. ‘And you can tell her I’ve got the tricycle guru on hand if I need any guidance!’ she added, grinning at Ted.

‘I love that trike,’ sighed Ted.

‘That’s because you made her!’ laughed Sarah.

‘Too right. I think she’s my favourite child,’ he said. ‘Just don’t tell Margie!’

‘I promise!’ said Sarah. ‘So it’s okay for Kate to bring her over? I think she was hoping to do it before lunch - while it’s not raining!’

‘Any time,’ said Lizzie nodding. ‘We’re going to be here until about five. Or... I am, at least!’

‘Me too... can’t get rid of me that easily!’ said Ted. ‘Send a couple of cakes over with the old girl, will you?’ he added, fumbling in his trouser pocket and bringing out an old-

fashioned folding wallet. He flipped it open, grabbed a five-pound note and waved it at Sarah. ‘Just-’

‘Don’t tell Margie?’ said Sarah.

‘You’ve got it! And for that, the change can go in your tip jar!’ he said with a wink.

Sarah disappeared and Lizzie was suddenly aware that Ted was watching her closely.

‘What?’ she demanded.

‘You’re limping,’ he said.

‘Am not,’ said Lizzie.

‘Are too... and I should recognise the action!’ said Ted.

‘I’m fine,’ sighed Lizzie, ‘just bashed my knee when I went for my prickly flying lesson yesterday. I didn’t really notice it to start with, what with all the brambles... I guess it’s had a bit of time to swell up.’

‘Ouch!’ said Ted. ‘Well, don’t overdo it today - no going up and down that ladder!’

‘You sound like Jason!’ said Lizzie.

‘Good lad, sounds like he’s got his head screwed on straight,’ said Ted. ‘Mind you, not surprised with that dad of his. Eaves is quiet, but a nice enough chap!’

‘I’ve not actually met him,’ said Lizzie.

‘Not surprised,’ said Ted, hauling himself to his feet and stretching. ‘The man’s a bit of a recluse... or at least, as much as you can be, living in Seabury!’

‘That’s quite a challenge!’ laughed Lizzie.

‘You could say that,’ said Ted, ‘especially with lovely old busybodies like Ethel Watts around.’

Lizzie grinned.

‘Anyway,’ said Ted, nodding towards the boxes that had arrived just before Sarah, ‘shall I give you a hand with putting those storage thingies together?’

‘But your fingers?’ Lizzie blurted, then wished she hadn’t. It wasn’t fair to mention Ted’s stiff hands when they were the reason he’d given up working on his beloved bikes in the first place.

‘They’re fine for a bit,’ said Ted with a shrug. ‘It’s just when I’m doing fiddly work for too long they start to give me gyp!’

‘Well – in that case – yes please! Blimey - if I get you and Jason working together, I’ll never have to lift a finger myself!’ laughed Lizzie.

‘Just think how bored you’d be!’ said Ted. ‘Anyway, the sooner we get them done, the sooner we can put away everything you’ve already brought down from the barn... and then you’ll be ready for the last few loads.’

‘Sounds like a plan to me!’ said Lizzie. ‘Shall we shut the door?’

‘No! Where’s the fun in that?’ laughed Ted. ‘If we get any customers, you can let me at them... as long as you’re not worried an old codger like me might frighten them off!’

‘I *definitely* wouldn’t call you an old codger!!’ laughed Lizzie, enjoying the company of her twinkly new playmate.

‘Well no... maybe that’s just the wife!’ said Ted with a smirk.

‘Let’s unbox the first lot and see what’s what then, shall we?’ said Lizzie, leading the way to the pile of boxes and packages the delivery driver had left in the corner.

Grabbing a knife from her pocket, Lizzie made quick work of the straps and tape. Then, between the pair of them, they started to unpack the various bits.

‘Ah ha! Instructions!’ said Ted, triumphantly waving a crumpled piece of paper at her. He did his best to smooth out the creases and then peered at it.

“*Angle ramrod diagonal down. Twist with the whistlefinger?!’*” said Ted, pushing his reading glasses up his nose.

‘Give that here!’ laughed Lizzie. ‘It says... what the actual...?’

The instructions appeared to have been translated by someone who’d never even heard English before, let alone spoken it.

‘I want to know what a *whistlefinger* is?!’ chuckled Ted.

‘Let’s start with the *ramrod* first!’ hooted Lizzie.

‘I know what to do!’ said Ted.

‘Excellent, that makes one of us,’ said Lizzie.

‘Give that here again,’ he said, taking the instructions from her. He promptly screwed it into a ball and tossed it over his shoulder. ‘You and I can do a better job without that rubbish throwing us off the scent.’

Lizzie nodded.

Ten minutes later, they already had three of the five units set up. Sure - there was quite a pile of nuts, bolts and washers that didn’t seem to have a home... but it didn’t really matter because they’d used plenty of extras pilfered from Lizzie’s stash, along with some metal brackets to reinforce everything.

‘We’ll be able to get all those boxes unpacked and put away before the end of the day at this rate,’ said Ted.

‘That would be ammmmmazing!’ groaned Lizzie.

‘Let’s do it, then!’ he said, his eyes alive.

‘Hey Ted?’ said Lizzie, as she made a start on the next unit.

‘Yes Lizzie?’ he said with a grin, holding the other end of a strut in place without her even having to ask.

‘I was actually on my way over to your place yesterday, you know!’ she said.

‘Oh!’ said Ted in surprise. ‘I do love visitors - pity you never made it!’

‘Yeah, you could say that!’ she said, blowing a puff of air upwards as her fringe tickled the edge of the plaster.

‘I’m guessing you weren’t on your way to pick up boxes,’ said Ted, ‘seeing as you were on a bike and all.’

‘No,’ she said, ‘though I guess it would have made more sense if I’d brought the car.’

‘Sense is overrated, in my opinion,’ said Ted cheerfully.

‘Man after my own heart!’ said Lizzie. ‘Anyway - there’s two things I wanted to check with you.’

‘Lucky I’m here today then, eh?’ he said, taking the screwdriver from her and tightening the screws on his side of the unit.

‘So... first thing... and please don’t take this the wrong way, but...’ Lizzie trailed off, trying to figure out how best to word the question. The last thing she wanted to do was offend Ted in any way.

‘Spit it out,’ said Ted. ‘Don’t worry about rubbing me up the wrong way... remember who I’ve got to live with!’

‘Right. Fair point,’ said Lizzie with a grin. ‘So - I just wanted to double-check you’re still happy about me half-inching all your stuff?’

‘Lizzie, you kno-’

Lizzie held up her hand to cut off his instant protests. ‘I’m serious Ted. I was in dire straits and you helped me out... and I’m so grateful. But Margie said you’d been out looking for bits and pieces in the boxes that are still there, and I hate the idea that you didn’t really want to get rid of it all.’

‘For one thing - you worry too much,’ said Ted with a kind smile. ‘And for another - Margie talks too much!’

‘But-’ said Lizzie.

‘No buts, Lizzie. You did me a favour. It would have broken my heart if it had all ended up at the tip.’ He paused and switched screws. ‘I know Margie calls it rubbish, but you and I know better. So – the short answer is - you’re still welcome to all of it... and if you try to give it back, I might end up with a divorce on my hands!’



‘Better not risk it then!’ said Lizzie, grinning at him.

‘Indeed,’ laughed Ted. ‘My only regret with it all is that I wish I could have seen more of those designs through to the end.’

‘Is that what you were doing out in the barn?’ said Lizzie, raising her eyebrows.

‘Nah, I just get a bit bored in the house, that’s all,’ said Ted with a sigh.

‘Well... that leaves me with two more questions if that’s okay?’ said Lizzie.

‘Fire away,’ said Ted with a shrug.

‘Number one - you know that trike design you were working on,’ she said slowly, ‘the one with the two back seats for passengers?’

‘I know the one,’ said Ted. ‘I could never quite figure out the balance.’

‘Do you reckon it could be turned around as a kind of rickshaw? A backwards trike almost... two passengers up front and a rider behind?’ said Lizzie. She grabbed her phone from her pocket and flicked through the photos for a moment until she found the one Jenna had forwarded to her.

‘Now there’s an idea!’ said Ted, peering at it. ‘We’d need to have a look at the weight distribution so that it wasn’t a complete pig to steer... but I don’t see why not!’

‘Brilliant,’ said Lizzie, feeling a swoop of excitement in her stomach.

‘And the second question?’ said Ted, who was now eyeballing her with something bordering on suspicion.

‘I don’t suppose you’d be up for joining me down here in the shop a bit more often?’ she said.

‘I’m never going to say no to a cuppa surrounded by bits of bikes and tools,’ said Ted, looking pleased. ‘Especially if there are people to chat to that aren’t *her indoors*.’

‘Well...’ said Lizzie, ‘I was thinking more along the lines of you working here.’

‘I know!’ laughed Ted. ‘That’s what I thought you meant!’

Lizzie started to giggle.

‘Right... so does that make me your official Saturday boy?’ he said, looking delighted.

‘Or even a bit more often until Jason comes back to work, if you’d be willing,’ she said, crossing her fingers in her pocket.

‘Lizzie love, I’d set up camp and sleep here given half the chance!’ said Ted.

‘Definitely *not* necessary!’ she laughed. ‘But... well, I’d love to work with you on some of those designs... and you can handle chatting up the customers whenever your hands have had enough.’

‘Sounds like heaven to me,’ said Ted simply.

‘Well then, that’s settled,’ said Lizzie.

‘Thanks Boss!’ said Ted.

‘Wait... that’s just weird,’ laughed Lizzie. ‘Are you sure you haven’t been talking to Jason?’

## CHAPTER 9



‘Hey lady - that’ll be a pound for the chair!’

Lizzie cracked her eyes open and grinned up at the silhouette looming over her. One of her favourite people in the entire world was outlined against the washed blue of the perfect afternoon sky.

‘I’m sure I’ve got some money in one of these pockets,’ she said, starting to pat at her dungarees - the memory of her first meeting with Liam making her wriggle with pleasure.

*How was it so recent? She somehow felt like she’d known this wonderful man forever!*

‘Don’t worry, I’ll let you off,’ said Liam, leaning down to drop a gentle kiss on the top of her head before sinking into the chair next to her. ‘How are you feeling after yesterday?’

‘Not too bad,’ said Lizzie, ‘could definitely have been so much worse. I’m just a bit battered and bruised... especially my pride!’

‘Rubbish!’ said Liam. ‘That corner’s been the end of many a joyful cycle... it’s where you yanked me out of the nettles and put my chain back on for me when we were kids.’

‘Seriously?’ said Lizzie.

‘Yep... only I had the sense to go for the ditch instead of the hedge,’ he smirked.

‘I don’t know why I thought it was a good idea,’ said Lizzie. ‘I guess I was hoping it meant I wouldn’t have to fall so far!’

‘Rookie mistake... you’re definitely out of practise,’ said Liam.

‘Yeah - comes with not having my own bike,’ she sighed. ‘I’m really going to have to sort that out.’

‘But you’ve basically got an entire shop of bikes at your disposal now,’ laughed Liam.

‘Yeah - and I’ll wreck one after the other if I’m not careful,’ she said, sitting forward and readjusting herself slightly so that her various cuts and bumps weren’t getting smooched by the chair.

‘The bike didn’t look too bad,’ said Liam.

‘Nothing Ted couldn’t sort out in about a second,’ she said with a shrug.

‘Ted?’ said Liam. ‘Wait... Ted Hatherleigh?’

‘My new Saturday boy,’ said Lizzie with a grin that was bordering on triumphant.

‘Oh wow! Excellent choice,’ said Liam.

‘So why are you pulling that face?’ said Lizzie in surprise. He looked... horrified!

‘I’m just imagining what Margie will do to you when she gets her hands on you!’ he laughed. ‘She’s just managed to get Ted to give up his barn full of bikes, and now you’ve invited him to hang out in yours!’

‘Blimey... I hadn’t thought of it like that!’ said Lizzie, widening her eyes. ‘He just seemed to be so happy - and I’m loving his company. He’ll be amazing with Jason, I reckon.’

‘Yeah... they’ll definitely make a brilliant team,’ said Liam with a shrug. ‘Just as well... they can run the place when Margie’s put you out of action.’

‘Oh hush!’ laughed Lizzie, reaching over to give him a playful prod, only to wince as her muscles protested.

‘Are you sure Megan managed to get all those prickles out?’ he said.

‘Trust me - you don’t know Megan that well yet - but give that girl a pair of tweezers and I can promise you she’s extremely thorough!’ said Lizzie.

‘Doesn’t bare thinking about,’ laughed Liam.

‘You can say that again,’ she agreed. ‘And I’m sorry, by the way.’

‘What for?’ said Liam in surprise.

‘That *definitely* wasn’t the way I’d been planning to welcome you back to town,’ she said, pulling a face. ‘I didn’t even say thank you properly for saving me from the hedge!’

‘I’ll let you make it up to me,’ said Liam wiggling his eyebrows.

‘Maybe when I’m sporting fewer plasters and don’t smell quite so... medicated?’ she said. ‘Anyway, how’d it go with Amy? Is she happy in her new place?’

‘It was easy as pie, to be honest,’ said Liam. ‘Until the van conked out on the way home, that is! The new house is massive - so no issues fitting all her stuff in. I even got my own room to kip in while I was there, so that saved me having to deal with the ex.’

‘Well... small mercies!’ said Lizzie.

‘Huge mercies!’ muttered Liam. ‘I’m not sure I’d have been quite so keen on *dad-to-the-rescue* if it had meant sleeping under the same roof as Lucy.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Lizzie. ‘I mean – it was bad enough having Mark at Pebble Street for a few days!’

‘Yeah – and you’re on speaking terms with him,’ he sighed.

‘I am when he’s not being a giant knobhead!’ chuckled Lizzie.

‘Fair point,’ said Liam. ‘Anyway, that’s more than enough about those two! Sounds like you sorted things out beautifully - and I got a whole bunch of unexpected time to hang out with Amy, which was amazing. She had a bit of leave from work –

which basically never happens - so I decided to make the most of it.'

'Megan really liked her, by the way,' said Lizzie. 'Apparently, they were on the phone for ages.'

'That's... rare!' said Liam, raising his eyebrows. 'I mean Amy's lovely... but she's not usually one for long phone chats.'

'Megan neither,' said Lizzie.

'Maybe they kind of cancel each other's weirdness out?' laughed Liam. 'How's Megan doing, by the way? Has she chilled out any? She seemed to be on really good form last night.'

Lizzie frowned.

'Oh... not so much, then?' said Liam.

'I don't know. It's like she's at war with herself or something,' said Lizzie. 'One minute, she seems to be happy and relaxed, and the next she's descended into uber-grouch mode again. She seems to do better when she's busy - she painted my whole kitchen in about five seconds, and now she's working on the living room. Whenever she emerges she's totally chilled - plus we had a lovely time talking about colours and lamps and curtains and all those things last night.'

'I didn't know she was into all that!' said Liam.

'Well... nor did I,' said Lizzie. 'To be fair, I'm not sure Megan really did either... I think it's a new thing!'

'Well, it sounds positive,' said Liam.

'Yeah... but then it's like she catches herself at it, gets all grumpy again and disappears off to the caravan.' Lizzie paused and sighed. 'Even Jenna's noticed something's up with her. I keep hoping that if I leave it long enough - if I give Meggie some space - she might open up and tell me what's wrong.'

'Sounds to me like you might need to give her a bit of a prod in the right direction?' said Liam.

‘Yeah, you might be right,’ said Lizzie, pulling a face.

‘I mean... both girls are talking to you at the moment, right?’ said Liam. ‘And each other?’

‘Oh yes!’ laughed Lizzie. ‘The squabbling has well and truly stopped since my Mafia Boss moment!’

Liam let out a snort of laughter and Lizzie grinned back. When she’d filled him in on the phone about the showdown at The Pebble Street Hotel, his reaction had been to cheer and clap at every single one-liner she’d come up with. He’d also promised to buy her a stuffed toy of a long-haired, white cat if she ever fancied playing the role again in the future.

‘Right...’ said Liam, slowly. ‘So maybe it’s time to rope Jenna in. Perhaps if Megan knows she’s got both of you supporting her and backing her up, it’ll help her open up a bit?’

‘Or make her feel like she’s being ganged up on,’ said Lizzie dubiously.

‘I guess it all depends on how it comes up in conversation...’ said Liam, scratching his head.

Lizzie smiled. She loved this about him - Liam liked nothing more than to help people. All he wanted to do was fix problems and make life better... what he didn’t seem to realise was that just his presence was all that was needed to make her world a much brighter place.

‘Well... I *do* need to talk to them both anyway,’ said Lizzie. ‘They’ve both come up with a whole bunch of ideas for Moore Bikes.’

She paused and blew out a long breath.

‘Uh oh,’ said Liam. ‘You just said that like it’s a bad thing!’

‘It’s... not? I mean, not necessarily,’ she said. ‘Some of the suggestions have got me really thinking about the possibilities...’

‘But?’ said Liam.

‘But - both of them say they want to be a part of the business. And although I don’t hate the idea in principle... I know it won’t work.’

‘Because neither of them are staying in Seabury?’ said Liam.

Lizzie nodded.

‘Jenna definitely won’t - she’s been clear about that from the start,’ said Lizzie. ‘I don’t know about Megan yet. Obviously, if it was something she really wanted to do, that’d be different... but she just seems to be so lost right now.’

‘Right,’ said Liam.

‘Anyway,’ said Lizzie. ‘Even if they both wanted to put down roots here - I want their life to be filled with things they love... and that includes doing work they love. I know they’ve both come up with these ideas for Moore Bikes because they’re trying to support me - but it’s not what they want to do... not really.’

‘Sounds like the three of you have a lot to talk about,’ said Liam. ‘And – from my limited experience with these things – I’d say being open and honest is definitely the best way to go’.

‘Exactly,’ said Lizzie. ‘I don’t want to stamp on their ideas - there’s loads there that I can use, but...’

‘This is your dream, Lizzie,’ he said. ‘It’s fine for you to have it exactly the way you want. And the girls need to find their own dreams too.’

‘Exactly,’ she said again. ‘And with any luck - they won’t wait as long as I have. Maybe I’ll message them now... just to see if they’re free to have a meal with me this evening.’

‘Do it!’ said Liam, nodding as he settled back in his chair and closed his eyes.

‘Sorry - this is really rude of me,’ said Lizzie, pausing with her phone in hand. ‘I came to see you...’

‘I’m in no rush,’ said Liam with an easy smile.



‘Thanks,’ said Lizzie. She dashed off a message to both girls and had barely hit send when Megan replied.

*Sounds good.*

*I’ve got questions about the living room anyway.*

*Bring Liam? I’d like to get to know him better!*

‘Megan wants me to ask you to come too,’ said Lizzie, the surprise in her voice evident. The phone buzzed in her hand and she glanced down to find another one, this time from Jenna.

*I’ll cook. Homemade pizza?*

*Bring a bottle – and ask Liam to come!*

‘Okay - that’s a second request for your presence!’ chuckled Lizzie.

‘You know I’d love to... but...’ said Liam slowly.

‘But maybe not tonight?’ said Lizzie, nodding.

‘Right,’ said Liam. ‘You need to find out what’s going on with them... and they don’t know me yet. It’ll turn it into something else if I’m there. We can do that another time – I’m not going anywhere.’

‘Okay,’ said Lizzie. She glanced at him, wanting to crawl onto his lap and wrap her arms around him... but the deckchair would probably eat them both whole if she did that. ‘We’ll just have a girls night tonight.’

Lizzie blew out a long breath as she felt the first stirrings of butterflies in her stomach. She knew it was ridiculous, but who knew what she was going to find when she started delving into what was really going on with Megan. Even worse... how was Megan going to react?!

‘Changing the subject slightly,’ said Liam, ‘what’s Jenna up to at the mo?’

‘Mostly cooking for me!’ laughed Lizzie. ‘I think she’s got vague plans to pick up a bit of work while she’s here. She wants to save up for a van... though I think it’s proving to be a

bit of a non-starter so far... mainly because she's so chilled she's practically horizontal!

'You said she's pretty practical?' said Liam.

'Yeah,' said Lizzie with a nod. 'That's why I feel a bit guilty about not offering her work in the shop... but...'

Liam shook his head. 'You've already got your dream team in place now that you've poached Jason and dug Ted out of retirement!'

'Erm... I think you'll find you practically had Jason gift-wrapped and hand-delivered to the shop!' laughed Lizzie.

'Well, it *is* perfect for him,' said Liam with a shrug. 'No - I was just thinking that Ben and I could do with an extra pair of hands. Jason's off sick even if we could tempt him away from Moore Bikes for a few days... so I wondered if Jenna might be up for it. It's only for a week or two?'

'Oh,' said Lizzie in surprise. 'Do you want me to ask her?'

'If you don't mind - see if she's even slightly interested,' said Liam. 'Make it sound as unglamorous as possible - a bit of cleaning, some pre-winter garden tidy-ups - that sort of thing.'

'Okay - you're on,' said Lizzie. 'Thanks!'

'Don't thank me - we need the help and if she's up for it, she'll be busy busy busy!' laughed Liam.

'That might be a good thing,' said Lizzie, patting her stomach, 'before I have to go a size up from all her amazing cooking!'

'You are perfect,' said Liam, 'and... when we get everything sorted out... maybe we can have our first proper date?'

'I'd like that...' said Lizzie, feeling her cheeks glow at the compliment. 'Though I think we might be past first-date territory, somehow!'

Lizzie yawned and felt her eyelids flutter lazily as the soft sound of the sea lapping at the sand started to work its magic

on her. The temptation to lean back in her chair and have a little snooze was almost overwhelming.

‘Hey!’ she said with a slight yawn. ‘You okay?’

Liam had just sat forward in his chair and was looking weirdly uncomfortable. Suddenly, the impending snooze disappeared. Lizzie mirrored him, sitting forward and wincing slightly as one of her many scratches caught on the strap of her dungarees.

Liam glanced at her, looking uneasy. ‘It’s just... when I was with Amy... she said something that’s been kind of bugging me.’ He reached up and ruffled his hair. ‘Something about you.’

‘Oh?’ said Lizzie, as a cold finger of fear ran down her spine. She had nothing to worry about... did she? But then, if Amy had some kind of problem with her, Liam’s daughter was always going to come first, wasn’t she? ‘What... what was it?’

‘She said you’ve been waiting so long for this first date of ours... that I needed to make a “grand gesture”,’ said Liam, making air quotes with his fingers. ‘She said you’d probably be expecting it... and it was only fair.’

‘A grand gesture?’ said Lizzie, staring at him. ‘Like what?’

‘That’s the problem... I have no idea!’ said Liam with a sheepish grin. ‘I don’t want you to feel like you’re missing out on anything though... because you deserve everything. Dreams and sparkles... and even grand gestures... whatever that means!’

Lizzie reached out and grabbed his hand. Ignoring the stinging pin-prick cuts from her fall, she laced her fingers through his - relishing the feel of their firm, capable roughness.

‘I don’t need “grand gestures”,’ she said quietly. ‘Can we agree... to just be us? Because from where I’m sitting, that’s more than enough.’

‘Just be us?’ said Liam, his face splitting into a relieved grin. ‘That... that I can do.’

‘Good,’ laughed Lizzie. ‘Bloody daughters – they’ve got a lot to answer for.’

‘Agreed!’ said Liam with a long sigh of relief.

## CHAPTER 10



‘*I* brought wine!’ yelled Lizzie as she slammed the cottage door behind her and hurried through to the kitchen.

‘Fab!’ said Jenna, turning to her.

Lizzie eyeballed her. There was something about her smile that looked... wrong, somehow. Forced.

‘Where’s Meggie?’ she said, lightly.

‘In the caravan,’ sighed Jenna. She turned back to the worktop and upended a giant mixing bowl, tipping a large lump of dough onto the surface. Tearing it into three, she started to expertly knead and shape one after the other into perfect pizza bases.

Lizzie watched, mesmerised. Her youngest daughter really was a bit of an eye-opener sometimes.

‘I’m guessing she’s still joining us for dinner?’ said Lizzie, surreptitiously crossing her fingers.

She’d been really looking forward to a girly evening with the pair of them. It was a feeling that was relatively new... but entirely wonderful. Sure, she had some serious stuff to discuss with them - but that was life, wasn’t it?

‘I think she is,’ said Jenna, nodding. ‘I expect she’s, erm... sorting herself out?’

‘What do you mean?’ said Lizzie, shrugging out of her coat and hanging it over the back of one of the kitchen chairs

as she watched Jenna smearing the pizza bases with herby tomato sauce. ‘Is she getting changed or something?’

Jenna shook her head, not quite meeting her eye.

‘Jenna - what’s going on?’ said Lizzie.

‘I promised I wouldn’t say anything,’ said Jenna.

‘About what?’ said Lizzie.

‘Just... go see her?’ said Jenna. ‘Then I won’t have broken my promise, and you’ll find out anyway. Maybe take her a glass of wine while you’re at it?’

‘Okay,’ said Lizzie, picking up one of the bottles.

‘Red, mum - unless you want to incur her wrath!’ said Jenna.

‘Right, right,’ said Lizzie, quickly swapping the bottles and taking the glass Jenna pulled down from a cupboard for her.

‘I’ll hold off putting these in the oven until you reappear, okay?’ said Jenna.

‘Okay... erm... thanks?’ said Lizzie, now thoroughly concerned.

‘Take yourself a glass too,’ said Jenna, ‘you might be a while.’

‘But... then she’ll know I know something’s up?’ said Lizzie.

‘Trust me,’ said Jenna with a shrug, ‘she won’t even notice.’

Lizzie quickly poured two glasses of red wine and hurried back towards the front door. After a bit of juggling in order to let herself out, she made her way around to the caravan. Pausing, she tried to rearrange her hold on the glasses again so that she could knock.

*Wait... what was that?!*

Lizzie froze. She could *swear* she’d just heard someone crying!

‘Megan?’ she called, giving up on the idea of knocking.

There was a scuffling sound on the other side of the door, and then silence.

‘Meggie, love? I’ve brought you some wine!’ said Lizzie, forcing a smile into her voice. ‘Can you get the door? I’ve got my hands full!’

There was a beat of silence, and Lizzie was just considering facing the consequences of letting herself in when the door swung open. She nearly dropped the glasses in shock.

Megan was a total mess. Her eyes were red and swollen, her cheeks still shining with tears... and she was back in the same diamanté cat sweatshirt she’d arrived in... *never* a good sign!

‘Megan love - what’s wrong?’ said Lizzie, staring up at her daughter and feeling like her heart might break. Megan stared at her for a long moment before letting out a shuddering sob.

‘Alright - I’m coming in,’ said Lizzie urgently. ‘Make way!’

Megan stepped backwards obediently and Lizzie hopped up into the little caravan. In classic Megan-style, it was immaculate... apart from the bed which was covered with piles of magazines. Torn-out pages were scattered across the duvet like a drift of autumn leaves.

‘You said you’ve got wine?’ said Megan, her voice thick with tears.

‘Sure love,’ said Lizzie, offering her the glass containing the largest dose of red.

‘Ta,’ said Megan, taking a huge gulp even as more fat tears spilled from her eyes and made their way unheeded down her cheeks.

‘Shall we sit?’ said Lizzie.

‘What about dinner?’ said Megan, scrubbing her face with her sleeve and only succeeding in spreading tears and mascara everywhere.

‘Jenna’s in charge,’ said Lizzie. ‘It’s nowhere near ready yet.’

It was only a little white lie, but there was no way she was about to hurry. She’d take as much time as she needed to get to the bottom of Megan’s tears.

Lizzie perched right on the edge of the bed and pushed a couple of magazines out of the way so that Megan could join her. She sank down looking thoroughly miserable, clutching her glass of wine in both hands.

‘What’s up, Meggie?’ said Lizzie.

As much as she was desperate to pull her daughter into a hug, Lizzie knew it was a bad idea to initiate any kind of physical contact while she was in this state. It had always been the same - even when Megan was really little, she couldn’t bear being touched when she was upset.

‘I... I... everything’s just ruined!’ said Megan.

Lizzie watched her chin quiver, and she had to grip her own glass tightly to stop herself from reaching out to grab her daughter’s hand.

‘What’s ruined, love?’ said Lizzie. ‘Talk to me.’

Megan shook her head. ‘I’ll sort it. I’ll figure it out. I’m... I’m... f...f...f...fine!’

It was clearly as much as Megan could do to get the last word out on a shuddering sob. Then much to Lizzie’s surprise, her beautiful, strong, independent daughter crumpled onto her shoulder, crying her heart out.

Lizzie winced as the sobbing girl wrapped an arm tightly around her waist, coming into contact with various scratches she hadn’t even realised were there! Reaching out, she quickly rescued Megan’s wine glass. With her daughter still attached to her like a limpet, Lizzie placed both glasses on the bedside table, then moving slowly, she wrapped her arms around her heartbroken daughter.

It took a full five minutes for Megan to cry herself out. As she finally started to calm down, Lizzie half expected her to



pull away. It would be just like Megan to realise that her barriers were down and put some distance between them while she pulled her game-face back on – but not this time. It looked like Megan was well and truly broken.

The silence stretched out between them, and Megan just sat there with her head on her mum's shoulder while Lizzie gently stroked her hair.

'Tell me what's bothering you, Meggie,' said Lizzie eventually, realising that one of them was going to have to start speaking first. 'Is it Owen? Or your job... or...?'

'All of it?' said Megan, with a sigh. 'It's all of it.'

'Don't say that,' said Lizzie. 'Whatever it is, we'll sort it out.'

'I always thought I could plan my way out of anything,' said Megan, 'but not this... not this!'

She sniffed, and Lizzie braced herself for another torrent, but it didn't come. Instead, Megan gently pulled away from her and sat up straight. She turned and locked eyes with Lizzie.

'I want kids,' she said.

'Well... that's wonderful,' said Lizzie slowly.

Megan shook her head. 'It's not because... because...'

Lizzie held her breath.

'Because it was in my plan. And then Owen saw my plan... and he dumped me!' said Megan. 'Wine?' she added, making a grabbing motion in mid-air.

Lizzie quickly handed her back her glass.

'Ta,' said Megan, taking a fortifying sip.

'Right,' said Lizzie slowly. She really didn't want to say the wrong thing at this point. 'So - Owen didn't want kids?'

'Not with me!' said Megan, shaking her head. 'He said he didn't want to be with a psycho who knew the best days of the month to get pregnant.' She took a deep, shuddering breath.

‘But... had you two talked about kids before?’ said Lizzie.

‘Nope,’ said Megan. ‘But... that was in my plan too. I just wanted all the info first... you know what I’m like!’

‘I do,’ said Lizzie. ‘You’re amazing. And you will be an amazing mum.’

‘Not anymore,’ said Megan, her lip wobbling again. ‘He dumped me... and then I lost my job... and...’

‘Wait. You lost your job?’ said Lizzie in surprise. ‘I thought you said you missed a promotion.’

‘I did. Because they found out I wanted to start a family,’ said Megan.

‘How?’ demanded Lizzie.

‘Because Owen dumped me in the middle of the office with everyone listening!’ said Megan.

‘He did WHAT?!’ gasped Lizzie.

Megan nodded.

‘Wanker,’ said Lizzie.

Megan gave a surprised giggle.

‘Sorry,’ said Lizzie. ‘Sorry.’

‘No - don’t be,’ said Megan. ‘I mean, you’re right.’

Lizzie nodded, breathing a little sigh of relief. It had to be a good sign that she’d just smiled, didn’t it, no matter how briefly?

‘It’s just... I wasted so much time with him. And I want a family,’ said Megan. ‘And now I don’t even have a job!’

‘Back up a second,’ said Lizzie. ‘If they fired you when they found out you wanted a family, then you’re taking them to court for discrimination - pronto.’

‘Nah,’ sighed Megan, shaking her head. ‘It wasn’t like that. I walked out.’

‘You walked out?’ said Lizzie, feeling like she’d just lost the thread again.

‘I’m not working in the same company as him,’ said Megan. ‘And I’m not working for people who won’t support women. I’m just... not doing that. I’ve worked there for *years*. I am... I was... bloody good at my job. And that’s the support I get? They can take that job and shove it where the sun don’t shine!’

‘Shame someone doesn’t tell them exactly that,’ said Lizzie.

‘Mother... don’t you know me at all?’ said Megan with a tired smile. ‘Of course I told them! *All* of it – and trust me, it wasn’t half as polite as the version I just gave you.’

‘Good for you!’ said Lizzie.

‘Well... not really,’ sighed Megan. ‘Because now I don’t have a job and I don’t have a partner... I’m back to square one.’

‘Love...’ said Lizzie, ‘you might not believe this right now, but both those things mean you’re so much closer to what you want than before.’

‘How?’ said Megan, looking so young and scared that it made Lizzie’s heart squeeze for her.

‘Well, for one thing - you aren’t about to start a family with one of the biggest turds in the UK,’ said Lizzie.

Megan raised an eyebrow, and Lizzie quickly changed tack.

‘Sorry, that’s not fair and if you loved him then-’

‘I didn’t,’ said Megan quietly. ‘Love him, I mean. I just didn’t want all those years to be wasted.’

‘Oh love,’ said Lizzie, shaking her head. ‘Well in that case - it’s a *really* good thing you didn’t start a family with him. The fact that he doesn’t want kids with you... that should be enough for you to know he wasn’t the man you want as your babies’ father. The fact that he is an asshat who I’d quite like to help kick in the painful-plums right now has nothing to do with it!’

Megan smirked. 'Physical violence is never the answer, mother!'

'No... but sometimes it's so tempting!' said Lizzie, winking at Megan. 'As for starting a family - you're still young, Meggie. There's time. Time to meet someone and try for babies. Or *not* meet someone, if that's what you choose - you can have babies on your own. Or you can adopt or foster. You can draw a family to you without ever giving birth or doing any of the above. You can have the life *you* want. The life *you* deserve.'

Lizzie paused, breathing hard. Then she continued, her voice growing more earnest. 'Please... don't settle for some berk just because he's already in the picture. Life's far too precious for that. *You* are far too precious for that.'

Megan nodded and leaned her head on Lizzie's shoulder again. 'Thanks mum. You're amazing.'

'You too, kiddo,' said Lizzie with a soft smile. 'As for the job...'

'I was *so* bored,' sighed Megan.

'You were?' said Lizzie in surprise. She felt Megan nod against her shoulder.

'Yeah. But... do you mind if we go in for pizza before we talk about that,' she said. 'Crying makes me starving!'

'You realise if we go in there, Jenna's going to see that you've been crying?' said Lizzie.

'Erm... I hate to tell you this, mum...' said Megan, 'but little sis has seen me crying practically every day since we've been here.'

'She has?!' said Lizzie in surprise.

'Yup,' said Megan. 'I'm just surprised Jenna's managed to keep her trap shut for so long!'

'Oh,' said Lizzie, realising they'd been rumbled.

'To be fair,' sighed Megan, 'being around Jenna's really helped. Not with the whole *kid* thing, but she's helped me start

to see that there are different ways to live.’

‘Like what?’ said Lizzie. Somehow, she couldn’t imagine Megan traipsing around the world in a van that was constantly on its last legs.

‘Like... like the way you’re building your life now,’ said Megan. ‘You’re building it around your dream. You’ve found something that lights you up so much that it doesn’t matter how many insane hours you spend on it - because you love it! And Jenna - I mean... she does what she wants and then works to support it... though I’ve yet to see her actually do any paid work!’

‘That reminds me,’ said Lizzie, momentarily distracted. ‘Liam and Ben might have some work for her.’

‘See!’ said Megan. ‘It’s stuff like that. She doesn’t have a plan... but stuff just falls into place for her to support what she wants to do!’

‘Right,’ said Lizzie, nodding slowly. ‘So... do you know what it is you *want* to do?’

‘Not yet,’ said Megan. ‘I mean, I think I just need to take things one day at a time for a bit?’

Lizzie nodded, barely able to grasp that this was *Megan* saying these wonderful things.

‘I’m enjoying helping decorate the cottage, though,’ she said. ‘I’d really like to carry on... I’d love to do some of the other rooms for you while I’m here. But only if you don’t mind?’

‘*Mind?!*’ laughed Lizzie. ‘The fact that I’ve somehow landed myself my own personal interior designer with impeccable taste?! I love what you’ve already done!’

‘Cool,’ said Megan. ‘I just hope... maybe I can prepare for having a family by making sure I look after myself first? Designing my life in a way that means it’ll fit around kids... or whatever family I’m lucky enough to end up with.’

‘Sounds like a plan,’ said Lizzie.

Megan shook her head. ‘If there’s anything I’ve learned from all this... I think I’m done with plans for a while!’

## CHAPTER 11



### 2 Weeks Later...

‘Wow, wow, wow Boss!’ said Jason, his eyes growing wide as he wandered into Moore Bikes and stared around. ‘You’ve been busy!’

Lizzie followed his gaze. The place had really come together in the last few weeks. Her tool wall was set up as she’d always wanted it, and she’d made short work on the storage units with Ted’s help. They were lined up along the back of the workshop area and were neatly filled with all the goodies from the barn.

‘Okay – that is officially epic!’ said Jason, staring wide-eyed at the huge enamel sign that now graced one of the walls.

Lizzie grinned. It had been a gift from the girls – and it made her smile every time she looked at it. After several long chats with Megan and Jenna, they’d both admitted that they didn’t *really* see themselves settling in Seabury long-term. However, the girls had been adamant that they wanted to help with Moore Bikes as much as possible while they were still in town.

The three of them had put their heads together to work on some branding ideas - and Megan had pulled in a favour with a graphic designer who’d freelanced with her old company. Moore Bikes now had this gorgeous logo inspired by Rosie the Riveter... though in this version she looked decidedly like Lizzie and was wearing a pair of denim dungarees! The whole look was a little bit vintage... and seriously cool.

‘You know – the logo really suits you!’ said Jason. ‘I can’t believe how much you’ve managed to do in here!’

‘Not just me,’ she said quickly. ‘Jenna and Megan have helped with loads of ideas, and they’ve even set up social media for us - and I’ve got Wonder Ted to thank for sorting this place out!’

‘Wonder Ted?!’ sniggered Jason. ‘Wow, is that his official title?’

‘Yes it is,’ came Ted’s gruff voice from the back of the workshop. ‘Two little girls decided that’s what I should be called from now on – and I’m sticking with it! Anyway, it’s about time you came back to work. You’ve had far too much time on the sofa with your feet up - playing those computer games, no doubt.’

‘More like passed out in bed for a week,’ sighed Jason. ‘But yeah – I was getting seriously bored there for a bit!’

‘Man after my own heart!’ said Ted, shuffling over to shake Jason’s hand. ‘And you’re all better?’

Jason nodded, smiling broadly at Ted.

‘It’s great to have you back, Jason!’ said Lizzie. ‘We missed you.’

‘Cheers,’ said Jason, going pink. ‘Oh – that reminds me. Dad wanted me to apologise.’

‘What for?’ said Lizzie in surprise.

‘Shutting the door in your face when you dropped me off!’ laughed Jason, rolling his eyes. ‘He was so poorly, and so worried about getting me to the sofa before I passed out on him... well, he just said he wasn’t very polite.’

Lizzie shrugged. ‘The poor guy could barely stand!’

‘Yeah... and between you and me,’ said Jason, ‘he’s super shy. Or... well... not shy, but not very... people-y?’

‘I get it,’ said Lizzie. ‘And tell him not to worry. Hopefully, I’ll get to meet him properly sometime.’



‘Maybe,’ said Jason. ‘Don’t hold your breath, though – he definitely prefers bees to people!’

‘I won’t take it personally, then,’ said Lizzie.

‘Good,’ said Jason. ‘Because he’s really grateful for everything you’ve done... are doing... for me.’

‘Goodness, this is getting very soppy!’ laughed Ted, glancing down at his watch. ‘I think we all need a coffee! My treat - but Lizzie - you’re getting it.’

‘Wait a minute!’ laughed Lizzie. ‘I thought I was the boss?’

‘Exactly,’ said Ted. ‘You get to go out in the sunshine and sneak a little chat with that man of yours while you’re at it!’

‘Yeah, and don’t pretend you won’t!’ said Jason with a smirk.

‘Go! Enjoy some sunshine,’ said Ted, ‘and leave us lackeys to it!’

‘Well,’ said Lizzie, ‘when you put it like that - I don’t mind if I do.’

Doing her best to make an escape without taking the ten-pound note Ted was waving in her direction, Lizzie sighed as Jason promptly barred her way out.

‘Ah man... you two are going to gang up on me, aren’t you?’ she said with a grin.

‘Only when it’s for your own good!’ said Ted, winking at her as he thrust the money into her hand.

‘Don’t hurry back,’ said Jason.

‘Charming!’ she laughed. She only managed to get about a dozen paces down the road when Ted’s voice rang out behind her.

‘Don’t forget to buy some buns!’

Lizzie turned and gave him the thumbs up to signal she’d received his message and then carried on towards The Sardine. It really was a stunning day... though autumn was most

definitely showing its true colours now. It might be the morning, but her shadow was long, and the air had a fresh tang to it that hinted at mittens and bobble-hats to come.

Wrapping her arms tightly around herself, Lizzie wriggled with joy. She was glad the sun was out - she had a treat lined up after work, and it would definitely be better if it wasn't raining! A picnic tea on West Beach was always going to be a high point of any day – but especially when she got to share it with Liam, Jenna and Megan.

The four of them had already shared several happy evenings together - something that seemed to happen so organically that it was hard to believe she'd ever been worried about it. It was a regular occurrence for Liam to drop Jenna back from work and nip in for a cuppa, only to end up staying late.

Jenna had jumped at the chance to work with Liam and Ben - though from what Liam had told Lizzie - he had his suspicions that she was just doing it as an excuse to dribble over their vans.

As for Megan, she'd worked her way steadily through the whole of Lizzie's cottage. Somehow, she'd managed to bag herself a home worthy of any interiors magazine. Megan seemed to have a knack for figuring out what was inside Lizzie's head and turning it into a reality.

Not only had she decorated the entire cottage but, with Lizzie's blessing, Megan had also helped her to unpack properly. Liam had helped her to hang shelves, shift furniture, and even polish the floorboards in Lizzie's bedroom. At long last, she was really starting to feel like she was home.

Glancing down at the beach, Lizzie grinned. Liam's chairs weren't out this morning... which just went to prove how unobservant the boys were. She'd not been expecting to see him, though. Liam was off to a local dealership to trade in his old van for a new one – and Jenna had gone along for the ride.

Technically, this wasn't a work day for Jenna - but she'd jumped at the chance to ogle a whole bunch of shiny new vans. Lizzie had left Liam with strict instructions to stop her

youngest from trying any wheeling and dealing to get her hands on one. Somehow, Lizzie wouldn't put much past Jenna if it meant getting her hands on a new van!



After a good, long gossip with Lou and a quick cuddle with Stanley, Lizzie made her way back towards the shop, bearing a tray laden with cups and a bag of Ted's favourite sticky buns. She'd just been given the third degree by Sarah, who'd insisted on knowing how Jason looked - and whether he'd mentioned the soup deliveries at all. Lizzie was willing to bet almost anything that they'd be getting a visit from the young baker before the end of the day!

As Moore Bikes came into view, Lizzie squinted. There was a blue pick-up she didn't recognise pulled up right outside. As she got closer, it moved away, heading off towards the allotments.

'Ooh,' she breathed, 'some new repairs, perhaps?'

Lizzie instinctively sped up... and then slowed back down again. She didn't need to rush, did she? With Jason and Wonder Ted on hand - she didn't need to worry about anything - the shop was in very capable hands.

'Alright boys!' she said, as she bounded into the shop at last. 'Coffee and sticky buns are served!'

Ted and Jason turned to face her... and both of them looked ridiculously guilty for some reason.

'What are you two up to?' she demanded.

'Nothing,' mumbled Jason.

'Nothing at all!' said Ted.

'Uh huh?' she said, eyeing them both in turn. 'So... what's with the large mound of tarpaulin behind you that wasn't there before?'

'You spoiled the surprise a bit,' said Ted.

‘Yeah - you were meant to be out for ages,’ said Jason.

‘What surprise?’ said Lizzie.

‘We didn’t get a chance to put this on it!’ said Ted, fishing around in his pocket and pulling out a length of slightly crumpled blue ribbon.

‘On what?!’ said Lizzie, completely lost.

‘May as well?’ said Jason to Ted.

‘Yeah,’ said Ted. ‘What is it you youngsters say? Busted?’

Jason grinned and grabbed a corner of the tarpaulin. Ted took the other.

‘Tada!’ they said in unison, throwing it back with a flourish.

‘A bike?’ said Lizzie. She stared at the silver paintwork and the beautiful sweep of a pair of very familiar-looking handlebars.

‘Not any old bike!’ said Ted, looking excited.

‘*Your* old bike!’ said Jason.

Lizzie nodded slowly. It was the bike she’d ridden as a child. The one Ted had rescued from a hedge and then given back to her all these years later when it came to clearing his barn.

‘I don’t understand...’ she said. This was essentially her childhood bike - but now it was big enough for her to ride. ‘It’s... grown?’

‘Told you I got bored at home,’ said Jason with a shrug.

‘But... how?’ said Lizzie, running her hand over the new saddle.

‘Ted nicked it and brought it round for me,’ said Jason with a shrug.

‘You did?!’ said Lizzie.

‘Might have!’ said Ted, looking shifty. ‘He sent Sarah a message saying he was bored, Sarah told me, and we arranged

something for him to do. It wasn't like the bike could catch the flu, was it?! So I left it for Jason just inside their back gate.'

'And the parts?' said Lizzie, in wide-eyed wonder that she'd somehow managed to miss all this going on right under her nose.

'I *might* have half-inched what he needed from the pile from my barn!' said Ted.

'It's beautiful,' said Lizzie, looking it over. 'I mean... this is serious skill, Jason!'

'Thanks, Boss,' said Jason, looking pleased.

'You're missing something, Lizzie,' said Ted.

'What... wait... what's this?!' said Lizzie, staring at a long, black block that ran down the back of the seat post.

'Well... I know you like a bit of speed,' said Jason with a wink. 'This is my super-power... or at least, that's what I'm working on!'

'But what...?'

'It's a battery!' chuckled Ted. 'He's souped-up your ride for you!'

'Wait... what now?!'

'I can undo it if you hate it,' said Jason quickly. 'But I did this course – learning to retrofit regular bikes as e-bikes with a kit.'

'Wow!' said Lizzie. 'Wait... you've got that skill and you're only just mentioning it?' Suddenly an entire new possibility for Moore Bikes opened up before her eyes.

'How's that for a bit different?' said Ted. 'Kid reckons we could add it to your rickshaws too... if you wanted, of course!'

'How do you charge them up?' said Lizzie, completely intrigued.

'Oh, that's easy – just a mains charger,' said Jason. 'But... you could always look at getting solar panels installed on the roof. This place has got loads of space up there.'

‘Do you know how to do that too?’ said Lizzie, feeling like she’d believe just about anything right now.

‘I will soon,’ said Jason. ‘I’m doing a course on it in the new year – part-time. I figure it’d be a good thing to learn. Plus - I bet there are grants that would help pay for it if you wanted to do it here.’

‘Don’t know about that,’ said Ted, ‘but I’m betting those blighters on the council would jump on it. Nice little selling point for the town. Visitors would like it!’

‘You’re right, Ted!’ said Jason with a nod. ‘Boss - you could offer solar-powered battery top-ups for tourists in here!’

Lizzie stared at the co-conspirators with her mouth hanging open. It looked like the five-year business plan she’d been working on with the girls’ help might need an entire new section! She ran a hand lovingly over her old-new bike again, trying to let it all sink in.

‘How’d you get this in here without me noticing?’ she asked.

‘Dad brought it over in the pickup just now,’ laughed Jason. ‘He was waiting for me to message and say we’d managed to get rid of you!’

‘Charming!’ said Lizzie.

‘Do you like it?’ said Jason.

‘Like it?!’ said Lizzie, staring at Jason. Was it her imagination, or did he look nervous?

‘She’s shaking,’ said Ted. ‘It’s usually a good sign, I think.’

‘It’s amazing,’ she breathed. ‘And we definitely have the centre-piece for our window display!’

‘What - for the grand opening?’ hooted Ted.

‘Yeah... that!’ said Lizzie.

‘Grand opening,’ said Jason. ‘Thing of legend - kind of a mythical beast by this point!’

‘Cheeky blighter,’ chuckled Ted.

The three of them fell silent again and stood gazing at Jason’s incredible work.

‘Sorry boys...’ said Lizzie at last, ‘I’m going to play hooky again - I *have* to try this beauty out!’

Grabbing the handlebars, Lizzie pushed the bike outside, and then paused, suddenly aware that she didn’t have a clue how to turn it on.

‘Show me?’ she said, turning to Jason.

‘Here,’ said Jason, handing her a helmet which she dutifully pulled on. Then he stooped to turn a key near the battery. ‘Then this switch here, and then when you start pedalling...’

‘Like this? Oh... Wheeeeeeeeeee!’ laughed Lizzie as the bike took on a life of its own and she swiftly left Ted and Jason’s cheers far behind her.

## CHAPTER 12



The sun was low in the sky by the time Lizzie locked the doors to Moore Bikes. Jason had headed home a couple of hours ago having hit an energy slump mid-afternoon. She'd promptly put her foot down and sent him packing.

'Night, Boss, said Ted. 'You go careful on that new-fangled contraption!'

'I will!' said Lizzie with a smile, before pulling on her helmet and hauling the bike away from the wall. Both her boys - as she was quickly coming to think of Ted and Jason - had warned her over and over again that she wasn't to dare ride the thing without a helmet... and after her morning zoom around on it, she could see their point.

It had been the most wonderful day of making plans and talking about the future of Moore Bikes. The shop might not even be officially open yet - but Lizzie could already see so much potential with her new team of three that it almost took her breath away.

'To the beach!' she squealed, as she started to pedal and Jason's magical power assist kicked in so that she took off like a scalded weasel.

Of course, she didn't actually *need* to cycle - considering she was only heading to the far end of West Beach, but she couldn't resist showing off her amazing old-new bike to everyone!



Lizzie found herself whizzing past The Sardine before she'd even had the time to blink. Glancing towards West Beach, she spotted the other three waiting for her down by the deckchairs, but they disappeared in a blur before she dared to let go of the handlebars to attempt a wave.

Making the executive decision that the bike deserved to stretch its little legs properly, Lizzie continued to zoom towards North Beach, letting out a loud *whoop* of glee as she passed Lionel, who waved his hat at her.

In what felt like mere seconds, Lizzie had u-turned outside the post office and was pelting back towards West Beach. This time, she started to brake gently, giving herself plenty of time to slow down before drawing to a smooth stop right at the top of the steps that led down to the beach.

Panting - not from exertion, but from the sheer amount of adrenaline coursing through her system – Lizzie hopped off the saddle and leaned the bike against the railings. She unclipped her helmet and left it dangling from the handlebars before running down the steps - straight into Liam's arms.

'Who in their right mind gave you a souped-up bike?!' he whispered in her ear as he swung her around.

'Like it?!' giggled Lizzie.

'I have no idea! You were just a dungaree-and-silver-shaped blur on the horizon!' he laughed, setting her down on the sand.

'Jason made it for me,' she said proudly, 'it's my old bike from when I was a kid.'

'I remember that bike being a lot smaller!' said Liam. 'And I definitely don't remember it having a battery that meant you could basically fly!'

'What can I say,' said Lizzie. 'The kid's a genius.'

Liam grabbed her hand and led her towards the deckchairs where both the girls were lounging in the late evening sunshine.

‘Did you see my bike?!’ she demanded as soon as she drew near.

‘Of course!’ laughed Jenna.

‘Awesome!’ said Megan, with her eyes closed and a big smile on her face. Lizzie noticed that her cheeks still held the tell-tale traces of eggshell gloss which meant Megan had been putting the finishing touches to the bathroom. ‘I stopped looking when you two started being disgustingly cute though,’ she added, cracking an eye open and giving Lizzie a wicked smile.

‘Where’d you get the bike, mum?’ demanded Jenna, as Lizzie sank down into the sand next to her youngest daughter’s feet.

‘Jason made it for me. Apparently, he got bored of being ill, so turned my childhood bike into a flying machine!’ she laughed.

‘What... he did the power and battery and all that shizzle?’ said Jenna impressed.

Lizzie nodded. ‘Apparently, he did a course on it, and next year he’s going to do another one... something to do with solar power and green energy and... a bunch of stuff that went right over my head! She laughed.

‘Wow... just imagine one of those rickshaws with a battery!’ said Jenna, dreamily. ‘That’d make town tours a whole lot easier!’

‘And you could shout about the whole *green* thing all over your new social media pages,’ said Megan, sitting forward. ‘Though... how green are they?’

‘Very... if we leave it to Jason!’ laughed Lizzie. ‘He’s got this idea of installing solar panels on the roof of Moore Bikes and providing solar-powered charging points!’

‘Wow,’ said Liam, ‘that’s a great idea! Can you imagine... solar-powered rickshaw trips around Seabury?!’

‘And that’s what happens when you mix genius ideas,’ she said pointing from one girl to the other, ‘with my boys!’

‘Your boys?’ laughed Liam, flopping into a chair next to Megan.

‘Ted and Jason. My boys,’ said Lizzie, proudly. ‘Seems they teamed up behind my back.’

‘You’ve *so* got your hands full!’ laughed Jenna.

‘Mum can handle it,’ said Megan. ‘She’s had more than enough practise with us two!’

‘Amen!’ said Liam, making the three giggle.

‘Well... it’s been a day of gifts,’ said Jenna.

‘Ooh, yes!’ said Lizzie, turning to Liam. ‘Did you get your new van?’

‘Yep,’ Liam nodded. ‘Petula is in da house!’

‘Petula?!’ sniggered Lizzie.

‘I like it!’ said Liam.

‘That’s all that matters,’ said Megan, biting her lip, though Lizzie could see her shoulders were shaking, so it rather undid the effect. ‘Anyway,’ she continued mildly. ‘I don’t think that’s what Jenface was talking about.’

Jenna smiled beatifically and shook her head.

‘What’s going on?’ said Lizzie.

‘She’s relieved Liam of his old van,’ laughed Megan.

‘You didn’t?!’ gasped Lizzie.

‘They were going to crush her, mum,’ said Jenna looking horrified.

‘Erm... for good reason?’ said Lizzie, turning to stare at Liam.

‘There’s plenty of life in the old girl yet,’ said Liam with a shrug.

‘Exactly,’ said Jenna. ‘She just needs some TLC.’

‘But... I thought that repair at the garage was only temporary,’ said Lizzie. ‘I thought...’

‘I’ve got plenty of time to do her up... and then she’s taking me off on a jolly!’ said Jenna excitedly.

‘And... you just... *gave* Jenna a van?’ said Lizzie, turning to Liam again.

‘Nope,’ Liam shrugged. ‘She paid me exactly what the guy at the garage offered me for the scrap value.’

‘I did,’ said Jenna with a nod. ‘All fifty quid of it!’

Megan let out a snort. ‘Told you she’d get one from either Ben or Liam before she was done! Seems this one’s a soft-touch!’

‘Yeah... you might be right!’ said Lizzie, winking at Liam.

Liam grinned at her.

‘Thank you,’ she mouthed.

Liam just shrugged and Lizzie felt herself melt.

‘Urgh... you two!’ laughed Megan, ‘can you stop being so cute for a minute... I’ve got a favour to ask?’

‘Oh?’ said Lizzie, turning to face her.

‘I think you mean *uh oh!*’ laughed Jenna.

Megan stuck her tongue out at her little sister, making Jenna giggle even harder.

‘It’s not a big deal... well, maybe not,’ said Megan, suddenly looking a bit nervous.

‘What’s up, Meggie?’ said Lizzie.

‘Well... would it be alright if I use the bathroom first in the morning?’ she said. ‘I’ve got to get going early.’

‘Fine by me!’ said Liam, his face dead serious.

Jenna leaned across and slapped him on the leg.

‘Oi!’ laughed Liam. ‘I was just joining in!’

‘Works for me, Meggie,’ said Jenna with a shrug. ‘I’m not working tomorrow, so I’ll be slobbering around in my PJs for most of the day anyway.’

‘Nice, sis,’ said Megan with a smirk.

‘Yeah, go for it,’ said Lizzie. ‘Fine by me too.’

‘It’ll be mega-early anyway, so I should be out of the way before you want to get ready for work,’ said Megan.

‘It’s fine,’ said Lizzie. ‘Thanks for asking, though.’

Megan shrugged. ‘I just wanted to make sure. I don’t want to be late.’

‘For what?’ said Lizzie with interest.

‘I’ve got an interview tomorrow,’ said Megan.

‘When?’ said Lizzie.

‘More importantly - *where?!*’ said Jenna looking intrigued.

‘Erm... well,’ Megan looked nervous again. ‘I mean... it’s not likely I’ll get it... but I’m going up to stay with Amy for a few days.’

‘Wait... Amy?’ said Liam. ‘You mean... *my* Amy?!’

‘That’s the one,’ said Megan. ‘We really hit it off and we’ve been chatting nearly every day.’

‘Seriously?’ said Liam, looking delighted.

‘Yep!’ said Megan.

‘So... is the job at the hospital?’ said Jenna, looking confused.

‘Nope,’ said Megan. ‘That’s definitely not my scene! Amy told me some friends of hers have an interiors business, and they’re looking for a new member of the team.’

‘Wow Meggie!’ said Jenna. ‘That sounds amazing.’

‘It’s perfect for you!’ said Lizzie, nodding enthusiastically.

‘Don’t get too excited,’ said Megan ‘They might decide I’m not the right person for the job.’

‘I don’t think they’d dare,’ said Liam.

Megan smirked at him. ‘Thanks for that vote of confidence! Anyway - it’s a really junior role. I’d be going in

to learn the ropes - doing a lot of the grunt work and the basics.'

'Best way to start!' said Liam.

'Exactly,' said Megan with a nod. 'If I get the job, I'm basically going to start as an apprentice, and pair it up with a college course to get some qualifications.'

'I hope you get a place!' said Jenna.

'Oh – I've already got that lined up,' said Megan, 'I sent them photos of everything I've been doing at the cottage and they said I can start this term. So now... I just need the job to go with it!'

'Wow!' said Lizzie.

'Seconded!' said Jenna.

'I'll take you to the station in the morning if you'd like?' said Lizzie.

'Thanks, mum - but I've checked with Ben and there's an early bus that'll get me there in plenty of time,' said Megan.

'I'm proud of you, love,' said Lizzie. She instantly kicked herself for letting the words slip out. That had been far too soppy for Megan's comfort - especially given that Liam was there and they were basically sitting in full view of the whole town.

Megan scrambled out of her deckchair and dropped down into the sand in front of Lizzie. 'I'm proud of you too, mum,' she said, throwing her arms around her.

'Wait!' squealed Jenna, 'let me get in there!'

Lizzie felt a thud as Jenna threw herself at them. She peeped over at Liam, only to find him with his phone raised, capturing the moment.

'Get in here, Liam!' came Megan's voice, all muffled by Jenna's sleeve and Lizzie's hair. 'You're part of the family now.'

'Whether you like it or not!' added Jenna.

Lizzie watched as Liam pocketed the phone, a smile of pure joy spreading over his face. Striding towards them, he dropped to his knees and did his best to wrap all three of them up in one great big hug.

‘Like it?’ he said. ‘I like it a lot.’

## CHAPTER 13



Lizzie yawned widely. It had been an exhausting day - a *wonderful* day. Still... she had to admit that she was glad to be heading back up the hill towards the cottage. The shop had been insanely busy, and she'd been so grateful to have both Jason and Ted there to help... even if Ted wasn't meant to be in the shop again until Saturday! He'd turned up for a cup of tea and simply not left again until closing time.

Lizzie grinned to herself as the wind kissed her cheeks and the golden hedgerows blurred into autumn rainbows on either side of her. Thank heavens for Jason's wizardry! She didn't really have the energy to pedal home – but now, with just the click of a button, the battery jumped into action and hauled her up the hill. She could see she was going to get decidedly lazy at this rate!

Lizzie had spent some of the afternoon getting to grips with the new social media pages Megan had set up for her. She was under strict instructions to post at least once a day... so Lizzie had started with a picture of her beautiful, enamelled logo sign, along with a vague hint about the long-awaited Grand Opening. Not that she'd set a date yet... or that she was ever going to. Still... it gave her something to talk about!

Marvelling at just how quickly her new bike had navigated the hill, Lizzie arrived at her cottage in record time. She skidded to a halt and had a good giggle to herself at her less-than-graceful dismount. Yanking off her helmet, she let out another ginormous yawn as she leaned the bike up against the caravan.



It was weird to think it would probably be heading over to Ted and Margie's barn soon. She'd become so used to it sitting there, but if Megan got this job and moved north, she wouldn't need it any longer.

Megan had been decidedly nervous when she'd headed off to catch the early bus that morning, but there was no doubt in Lizzie's mind that her go-getting daughter would be moving onto the next chapter of her life before too long. If this was what she wanted to do, then nothing would stand in her way!

Lizzie glanced at her watch, wondering how the interview had gone. The company had arranged it as late in the day as possible to fit in around Megan's travel... but surely it must have finished by now!

A rumbling from the lane made Lizzie turn, only to spot a knackered white van heading in her direction. It wasn't Liam in the driving seat though - Jenna was waving at her excitedly from behind the wheel. Liam was next to her in the passenger seat, looking bemused.

Jenna pulled the van neatly in behind the caravan and killed the engine.

'Hey mum!' she said, hopping down and bouncing on the balls of her feet, looking like an excited six-year-old.

'So... this is your new van, eh?' said Lizzie, smiling at Liam as he climbed down.

'I'm already regretting selling her!' sighed Liam. 'Petula's not quite broken in yet!'

'As soon as you've scuffed her up a bit and rearranged the back just the way you like it, she'll be perfect,' said Jenna, patting him on the shoulder as he came to stand next to her. 'Anyway - no backsies!'

'Wouldn't dream of it!' laughed Liam, holding up his hands in surrender.

'Mum - is it okay if we do some work on her out here on the drive?' said Jenna. 'I'm not going to be in your way, am I?'

‘Go for it!’ said Lizzie, shaking her head. ‘I’m done for the day – I’m not going anywhere.’

‘Cool, thanks,’ said Jenna, heading around the back of the van and disappearing inside.

‘Are you staying for a bit?’ said Lizzie as Liam wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close.

‘As long as you’ll have me,’ said Liam.

‘Oi - no commandeering my helpmate!’ said Jenna, reappearing with a toolbox.

Lizzie grinned and relinquished her hold on Liam.

‘I’ll get the kettle on, shall I,’ she said

‘Yay!’ said Jenna.

‘Perfect!’ said Liam, giving Lizzie a kiss on the forehead and then letting her go somewhat reluctantly.

‘Right Liam, get the jacks!’ said Jenna.

Lizzie headed for the front door with a broad smile on her face. It looked like her easy-going daughter could be just as bossy as her eldest when there was a van awaiting some TLC!

Letting herself into the cottage, Lizzie drifted through to the kitchen, feeling like she was gliding around on a little cloud of happiness. Somehow, everything felt right with the world.

Flicking the kettle on, Lizzie went to stand at the window and watched Liam and Jenna laughing together as they busied themselves around the van.

The sound of the landline springing to life in the living room made her jump, and Lizzie dashed through to answer it.

‘Hello?’ she said, grabbing the phone, even as she ran an appreciative palm over the glossy dado rail that had appeared from thin air. Megan had done wonders in here and she felt like she’d wandered into a dream every time she stepped inside.

‘Mum! It’s me!’ squeaked Megan.

‘Hey love!’ said Lizzie in surprise.

‘You didn’t answer your mobile!’ said Megan.

‘Sorry... I only just got home. It’s still out on the bike,’ she said, realising she’d left it in the little zipped compartment at the bottom of the brand-new basket.

‘I got it. I got it mum!’ said Megan. ‘I’ve been with them all afternoon. They want me to start as soon as possible.’

‘Oh Meggie,’ breathed Lizzie, beaming. Could this day get any better? ‘Congratulations love, I’m so happy for you.’

‘Me too!’ laughed Megan. ‘I’m so excited. I called the college and they said if I can get up here by next week, I won’t even miss enrolment!’

‘But... where will you live?’ said Lizzie. ‘What about your flat in Bristol... and..?’

‘You worry too much,’ said Megan, though Lizzie could hear the smile in her daughter’s voice. ‘Owen can deal with the flat. I’ll just stop paying my half and he’ll just have to sort it out.’

‘Least he deserves,’ muttered Lizzie.

‘Yup!’ laughed Megan.

‘I can’t really imagine you in student halls, though,’ said Lizzie.

‘Halls? Come on mother,’ she laughed. ‘This is me we’re talking about. I’m moving in with Amy!’

‘You are?’ said Lizzie.

‘Her house is huge and we get on like we’ve known each other forever,’ said Megan. ‘And anyway... she’s practically family!’

Lizzie suddenly had to swallow down a huge lump of emotion. She hadn’t known Liam long... not in the grand scheme of things, anyway... but that was exactly the way she felt too. Liam was already family.

‘I’m so happy for you, Meggie!’ said Lizzie. ‘It sounds perfect.’

‘Nothing’s perfect,’ said Megan softly. ‘But today... this feels pretty damn close to it.’

‘Amen to that!’ said Lizzie.

‘Gotta go, mum,’ said Megan. ‘We’re all going out for a drink to celebrate.’

‘We’ll be raising our cups of tea to you, Meggie!’ said Lizzie

‘Thanks mum,’ said Megan. ‘For everything.’

And then, she was gone, leaving Lizzie cuddling the receiver to her chest and staring around the beautiful space her daughter had created just for her.

‘You too, Meggie love,’ she whispered. ‘You too.’

Lizzie had only just made it back to the kettle when the sound of the phone ringing again had her jogging back through to the living room.

‘What did you forget?’ she panted, figuring that it’d be Megan with a detail or two she’d forgotten to share.

‘Oh good, you’re home!’

*That wasn’t Megan!*

‘Erm... yes?’ said Lizzie, desperately trying to place the familiar voice. ‘Who’s this?’

‘Margie. Margie Hatherleigh!’ came the curt reply. ‘I wanted a private word with you... about my husband and that shop of yours!’

Lizzie swallowed.

*Uh oh!*

Was Liam’s prediction that she was “in for it” about to come true?

‘Are you still there?’ said Margie.

‘Oh – yes!’ said Lizzie. ‘Sorry. And... sorry I kept Ted for so long today. I had no idea-’

‘Stop that this instant!’ said Margie.

Lizzie shut her mouth in surprise.

‘Please,’ said Margie, her voice softening. ‘I’m calling to say thank you.’

‘You... you are?’ said Lizzie.

‘Yes, you ninny!’ laughed Margie. ‘Thank you for getting him out from under my feet.’

She paused, but Lizzie didn’t dare say anything.

‘Thank you for giving me my husband back,’ Margie continued, and Lizzie could swear she sounded almost tearful. ‘I’ve not seen Ted this happy in... well... a very long time. Working with you has brought him back to life. He brought me flowers home tonight. Flowers! For me! And he’s taking me out to Pebble Street for a meal after he’s finished work next week too!’

‘That’s... brilliant?’ said Lizzie, as a huge smile spread over her face.

‘You’re blummin’ right, it’s brilliant!’ said Margie. ‘Anyway – like I say – credit where credit’s due. You’ve done a good thing.’

‘Erm – Ted’s the one doing me a favour, working in the shop,’ said Lizzie. ‘He’s amazing... there’s nothing he doesn’t know about bikes.’

‘Don’t I know it!’ laughed Margie. ‘A word to the wise though? Don’t go puffing smoke up his behind too often... he’ll get too big for his britches otherwise!’

‘Noted,’ laughed Lizzie.

‘Oh... and do me a favour?’ said Margie.

‘Anything,’ said Lizzie.

‘Don’t let him have too many sticky buns!’

Lizzie was still chuckling as she replaced the receiver and headed back to the kitchen. Gathering three mugs together to make the tea at long last, Lizzie peeped out at the van again. Jenna now had her head deep under the bonnet, and it looked very much like Liam had been given the job of handing her the right tool whenever she snapped her fingers. Lizzie grinned. Maybe it was time to go and rescue him?!

‘I’ve got news,’ she called to both of them as she navigated the front path, doing her best not to spill the tea or drop the biscuits she was carrying as she went.

‘Oh yeah?’ came Jenna’s muffled voice from somewhere near the engine.

‘Good news?’ said Liam, taking his mug gratefully and blowing on the tea.

‘The best!’ said Lizzie. ‘Megan got the job!’

‘Amazing,’ said Liam.

‘No surprises there,’ said Jenna. ‘What Megan wants, Megan goes and gets... as long as she forgets to be a colossal asshat while she’s at it!’

Liam spluttered on the mouthful of tea he’d just taken and Jenna straightened up and grinned at him.

‘I apologise for my daughter!’ sighed Lizzie.

‘Why?’ said Jenna. ‘She’s miles away.’

‘Not *that* daughter!’ added Lizzie, winking at Jenna.

‘So... where’s Megan going to live?’ said Liam.

‘With Amy,’ said Lizzie.

‘Oh my goodness,’ said Liam. ‘Those two living together? They’ll take over the world by Christmas.’

‘So,’ said Lizzie, leaning in and peering at the engine, ‘what’s the verdict.’

‘She’s going to be as sweet as a nut when she’s had some work,’ said Jenna.

Lizzie turned to Liam for confirmation, but he just shrugged. ‘Don’t ask me,’ he laughed. ‘This one takes after you, I think. She just fixed something I didn’t even know was wrong in about three seconds flat.’

‘I just need to do a bit of welding underneath,’ said Jenna distractedly. ‘The garage who patched her up have done a decent enough job, but I want to strengthen up the arches and deal with a bit of the rust before we set off!’

Lizzie stared at Jenna with her mouth wide open.

‘You know how to do all that?’ she said.

‘Of course!’ laughed Jenna. ‘I’m not completely useless mum - not like dad! Like Liam said - I take after you. Anyway, how do you think I managed to keep the last one going for so long?!’

Liam raised his eyebrows and Lizzie grinned at him. Jenna was happy that she took after *her*? A warm blush of happiness kicked off in Lizzie’s chest and it was as much as she could do to stop herself from wrapping her arms around her daughter.

‘Anyway, I’ve already asked Ben,’ said Jenna, completely oblivious to the effect her words had just had. ‘He knows someone who’s got the kit I need to borrow... so I should have her all fixed up before you know it.’

‘And then... back to Morocco?’ said Lizzie, surprised to feel a pang of sadness that both her daughters would be heading back to their own lives before too long. She’d got used to them being around - and she’d miss their company.

‘Maybe not Morocco again,’ said Jenna, ‘I think I’d like to be able to pop back a bit more often. Someone needs to keep an eye on you two... and I’ve got friends in Europe I haven’t had the chance to visit for ages.’

‘Sounds like a plan,’ said Liam.

‘Oh no!’ said Jenna. ‘I don’t do plans. I do dreams.’

‘Something else she gets from you!’ said Liam quietly, as they watched Jenna dive back under the bonnet.

## CHAPTER 14



‘Are you nervous?’ demanded Jenna as soon as Lizzie reached the bottom of the stairs.

‘No!’ said Lizzie, her voice shaking slightly. ‘Why would I be nervous?’

‘Oh... you know,’ said Jenna, shifting the box of cooking implements onto her hip and looking her over from head to toe. ‘Official first date at long last...?’

‘Oh hush!’ said Lizzie, starting to feel decidedly breathless.

‘I mean... Liam might make a grand gesture or something!’ said Jenna, her eyes wide and serious before a slight twitch at the corner of her mouth gave away the fact that she was pulling Lizzie’s leg.

‘Well,’ said Lizzie, ‘that’s one thing I know I’m completely safe from. We agreed ages ago that we don’t do grand gestures. We’re going to just be us and see what happens.’

‘Uh huh?’ said Jenna, raising her eyebrows sceptically. ‘Is that why you’re currently wearing a little black dress I’ve never seen before? And... is that... mascara?!’

‘Oh hush, you,’ said Lizzie, fanning her face. ‘But seriously... do I look okay? Too much? Maybe it’s too much... maybe I should go and change!’

‘Oh no you don’t,’ said Jenna, promptly plonking the cardboard box on the floor and grabbing Lizzie’s hands before



she could make a break for it. ‘You look absolutely gorgeous. And I was just teasing.’

‘Oh,’ said Lizzie.

‘Breathe, mum,’ laughed Jenna.

‘Right. Breathe...’ said Lizzie, doing her best to take her daughter’s advice.

‘Seriously - it’s just Liam,’ said Jenna.

‘Just Liam?’ squeaked Lizzie, feeling more than a bit ridiculous.

‘You know I didn’t mean it like that. I mean... you *know* him. He’s lovely... and chilled. And you’re going to have a lovely time!’

‘He’s not even told me where we’re going!’ said Lizzie.

‘Breathe woman!’ laughed Jenna. ‘I expect you’re going to Pebble Street. With your ‘no grand gesture’ rule, I can’t imagine he’s about to whisk you away in a private jet or anything.’

‘Right,’ said Lizzie, nodding and trying to pull herself together. ‘You’re right.’

‘Though... if he did happen to have something a bit more exotic up his sleeve, you definitely look the part!’ said Jenna, looking her up and down.

‘I just fancied a night off the dungarees,’ said Lizzie, starting to feel self-conscious.

‘But not the boots?’ laughed Jenna, checking out her clumpy black boots, complete with their yellow laces.

‘They’re my comfort blanket,’ said Lizzie.

‘They look hot!’ said Jenna, approvingly. ‘Where did you get the dress?’

‘Megan lent it to me before she moved,’ said Lizzie, freeing herself from Jenna and peering into the box. ‘Hey - isn’t that my cheese grater?’

‘Erm... yeah... I was going to ask you if I can nab it? Mine’s still in the back of the van... in Morocco!’ she said. ‘And it’s not like I can replace it before tomorrow morning.’

‘I can’t believe you’re leaving tomorrow!’ said Lizzie straightening up.

‘I know - it’s come around so fast,’ said Jenna.

‘Maybe I should cancel tonight... so we can spend it together? I feel awful abandoning you for a date!’ said Lizzie.

‘Don’t even think about it!’ said Jenna with a stern frown. ‘You, me and Meggie had our last “girl’s night” before we got all her stuff moved up to Amy’s last week!’

‘But...!’ said Lizzie.

‘No buts, mum,’ said Jenna. ‘You’d break his heart if you cancelled now.’

‘I know, but...’

‘Too late!’ said Jenna. ‘That’s him now!’

‘Oh no... oh no...!’ gasped Lizzie.

‘In the words of Meggie... *Mother, you’re being ridiculous!*’ laughed Jenna, turning to answer the front door after just one knock.

‘Hey Liam!’ said Jenna. ‘Looking handsome!’

‘Erm... thanks Jenna?!’ laughed Liam, looking rather surprised to find them both loitering in the tiny hallway.

Jenna shuffled back out of the way, and then when Lizzie made no move to greet Liam or even take a step towards him, she pushed her forward.

‘Honestly,’ chuckled Jenna.

‘Wow!’ said Liam, his eyes going wide. ‘I mean... wow!’

‘Thanks?’ said Lizzie shyly. ‘I think?’

‘Definitely!’ said Liam. ‘You look... absolutely beautiful!’

‘Awwwww!’ sighed Jenna, earning herself a glare from Lizzie. ‘What?! He’s right!’ she laughed.

‘Shall we go?’ said Liam. The moment he reached out to take her hand, Lizzie felt all the awkward shyness melt away.

‘Yeah. Let’s go!’ she said, lacing her fingers through his.

‘You crazy cats have fun!’ called Jenna, standing in the doorway and watching as they made their way towards Liam’s van.

‘Hey!’ said Lizzie, raising her eyebrows. ‘Why are you hooked up to the caravan?’

‘Awkward!’ came Jenna’s voice from behind them.

‘I thought we could drop it over to the Hatherleigh’s... before our date,’ he said, ruffling his hair. ‘I didn’t expect... I mean... your dress... I...’

‘It’s fine,’ Lizzie laughed. ‘No grand gestures, remember? Good idea!’

‘Cool,’ said Liam, visibly relaxing. ‘Here!’

Liam opened the passenger door and held it for her while Lizzie clambered up.

‘Wait, wait!’ yelled Jenna just as Liam was about to close the door.

‘What?’ called Lizzie.

‘Can I have that grater or what?’

‘Take the grater, Jenna!’ laughed Liam.

Jenna gave him a salute and then blew them both a kiss.

Lizzie let out a long sigh as she relaxed into the seat and waited for Liam to climb behind the wheel. Everything was fine... this was just her and Liam off on an adventure... and the fact that she was wearing a little black dress didn’t change anything!

‘Are you okay?’ he said, turning to her once he’d strapped himself in.

‘Yep!’ said Lizzie. ‘I mean... why wouldn’t I be?’

‘No reason,’ said Liam lightly. ‘Just with Jenna off again in the morning and Megan all moved out last week-’

‘Thanks again for that,’ said Lizzie quickly, as they began to make their way along the lane towards the turning that would take them up onto the main road.

‘It’s no problem,’ said Liam with a laugh. ‘Like I said - it was a great excuse to visit Amy again.’

‘Yeah... and with both you and Jenna helping, it meant she got it done in one go,’ said Lizzie.

‘We made quite a good convoy!’ laughed Liam. ‘Plus, it meant that Megan had decent backup when it came to facing that boiled potato of an ex-boyfriend!’

‘Boiled potato?!’ hooted Lizzie.

‘Sorry,’ said Liam quickly. ‘That’s unfair to potatoes.’

‘I’m glad he’s out of the picture,’ sighed Lizzie.

‘He was definitely lacking in the personality department,’ said Liam.

‘And the kindness department too,’ said Lizzie with a frown.

‘Yeah well - I wouldn’t worry about our Megan anymore,’ said Liam. ‘She’s left her old life in her dust!’

He indicated and pulled out carefully onto the main road, glancing in his rear-view mirror to check the little caravan was still following behind.

Lizzie nodded – though she doubted that she’d ever stop worrying about her girls. She’d not heard much from her eldest since she’d moved into Amy’s massive house, but Megan had sent her and Jenna a couple of photos of her new room - already freshly painted - along with its very own ensuite!

‘Well, at least Amy’s house is a step up from the caravan,’ said Lizzie.

‘I think she was quite sad to say goodbye,’ said Liam with a shrug.

‘That makes two of us,’ said Lizzie with a long sigh. ‘But... now maybe you and I can spend a bit more time

together at last... without the added bossy gooseberries!’

‘I’ve enjoyed being ordered around by both of them if I’m honest,’ said Liam with a grin. ‘You’ll have to take over!’

‘Not really my style,’ said Lizzie.

‘I’ll remind you of that when I’m trying to reverse this blasted caravan into Ted’s barn,’ laughed Liam.

‘Don’t worry about that,’ said Lizzie. ‘I’m sure Ted’ll do it for you.’

‘Nah,’ said Liam, shaking his head. ‘He’s taken Margie out this evening.’

‘Out?!’ said Lizzie in surprise.

‘A party, apparently,’ said Liam, glancing in his mirror again.

‘Blimey - those two have a better social life than me!’ said Lizzie.

‘Snap,’ said Liam.

Lizzie glanced at him. For some reason, he seemed to be uncomfortable again. She quickly cast around for a random topic – just to keep the conversation going.

‘I thought there was still a problem with Ted’s driveway?’ she said. ‘Ted told me he’d been stalling because he couldn’t face having to fill all the holes by hand.’

‘Margie got bored of waiting,’ said Liam. ‘She paid me, Jenna and Ben to do the job yesterday behind Ted’s back.’

‘Oh, he’s going to be thrilled!’ said Lizzie.

‘Yeah,’ sighed Liam, ‘but now it means I’ve got to get this blighter down there in one piece! Maybe I should have left it for another day. I don’t think there’s room to swing it around at the far end without ruining Ted’s lawn... so I’m going to have to reverse it in all the way from the road.’

He paused, looking mildly sick at the idea.

*Was that all Liam was worried about?!*

‘Don’t worry,’ said Lizzie, quickly taking pity on him. ‘I can reverse it in if you can’t face it?’

‘Well... that *was* my sneaky plan but... you’re wearing a dress?’ said Liam. ‘I wouldn’t have agreed to do it this evening if I’d have known!’

‘Relax!’ laughed Lizzie. ‘It’s just a dress... it’s still me underneath!’

Liam shot her a grin, and Lizzie thought she caught the hint of a blush flushing his tanned cheeks.

‘Huh,’ he said, ‘there I was thinking it was your dungarees that gave you superpowers.’

‘Nah,’ said Lizzie. ‘Always the boots!’



‘Bingo!’ said Lizzie with a triumphant grin as she guided the caravan easily past the doorway and into the newly tidy barn. Parking up, she quickly hopped down and headed around to help Liam unhook it from the van.

‘Are we all good?’ she said, peering around the caravan to make sure she hadn’t managed to sandwich the door right up against one of the walls.

‘You nailed it!’ laughed Liam. ‘No - don’t worry, I’ve got this,’ he added quickly, ushering her away from the tow hook, clearly keen to stop her from getting covered in grease.

‘Ta!’ she laughed, feeling a bit awkward as she stepped back and waited until he was done.

‘Right... there’s one more thing I need to do before we head off again,’ said Liam, wiping his hands absently on his clean jeans and leaving two dark streaks along his thighs. ‘Damn it!’ he laughed, following her gaze. ‘I tried!’

‘I know!’ chuckled Lizzie. ‘Anyway, what is it you need to do?’

Liam took two swift steps towards her.

‘Hi!’ she said.

‘Hi!’

Liam wrapped one strong arm around her waist. Then he took her chin between his thumb and forefinger and tilted her head gently so that he could kiss her.

Lizzie let out a happy sigh against Liam’s lips as she stood on tiptoe and leaned into him... not something that was easy to do while wearing a pair of boots... but still, she managed it.

‘Ready for our date?’ breathed Liam.

‘Depends?’ said Lizzie, holding his gaze and briefly considering wrestling him right into the little caravan. After all, hadn’t he said Ted and Margie were out for the night?!

‘On what,’ said Liam.

‘Whether you’ve got any ridiculous grand gestures up those suspiciously clean sleeves?’ she said.

‘Sorry to disappoint,’ said Liam with a smile, ‘but we’re just going to Pebble Street... and I thought we might have a quick return trip to our favourite lamppost afterwards?’

‘Now that sounds just about perfect!’ said Lizzie.

‘There’s no rush though,’ said Liam, casting a mischievous look over his shoulder at the caravan and then wiggling his eyebrows at her.

‘You’re bad!’ she said, wondering if he was also a bit of a mind reader.

‘I’d be totally up for it-’ he said, pausing to drop a kiss on the end of her nose, ‘but Margie told me they’d had new cameras installed!’

Liam spun her around and pointed up at a tiny lens set in the corner.

‘Thank goodness she told you!’ laughed Lizzie. ‘That could have been a double-coronary in the making... and now that I’ve got him, there’s no way I can do without Wonder Ted at Moore Bikes!’

‘Still... let’s give Margie something to gossip about!’ said Liam, planting a huge kiss on her cheek before they both waved and blew kisses at the little camera.



## CHAPTER 15



‘I’m going to head this way into town,’ said Liam, taking the narrow turning that led down the hill towards the old ice cream shop.

‘Oh,’ said Lizzie. ‘Okay!’

‘We can park up outside New York Froth and wander along to Pebble Street,’ said Liam.

‘O-kay?’ said Lizzie, narrowing her eyes at him.

She wouldn’t have thought anything of it, but there was something about the way he’d just mentioned it - *oh so casually* - that made her immediately suspicious that he was up to something.

‘What?’ said Liam. ‘I don’t want to run into the traffic warden!’

‘You and that traffic warden!’ laughed Lizzie, instantly relaxing.

Liam had absolutely no side to him. In fact, she doubted that he had it in him to keep a secret for five minutes, let alone have some kind of plan up his sleeve.

‘I swear he’s got it in for me,’ muttered Liam.

‘Why?’ laughed Lizzie.

‘Because... he’s always... there!’ said Liam.

Lizzie shook her head. ‘I think I’ve seen him once. Maximum,’ she laughed. ‘There’s way more ticketing to be

done over in Dunscombe Sands. I don't think he really cares about Seabury much.'

'Hm... maybe he just follows me around, then,' said Liam, pulling into one of the parking spots and killing the engine. 'Wait right there!' he said, hopping down.

Lizzie sat in the deafening silence, wondering what on earth was going on. The next thing she knew, Liam opened her door and offered her a hand down.

'Wow, thank you,' said Lizzie. 'If I'd have known wearing a dress could cause such chivalry, I'd have tried it years ago!'

Liam grinned and pulled her towards him, kissing her lightly. Lizzie felt her knees wobble. Blimey, at this rate, she'd only manage the first course before begging Liam to accompany her back to the cottage. Jenna would just have to deal with it!

'Dinner,' said Liam, his voice slightly husky as he pulled away from her.

'Right!' said Lizzie. 'Let's go.'

Liam tucked her hand into the crook of his arm and they drifted along the pavement towards the hotel. Lizzie stared out at the sea, gentle under its blanket of low evening cloud. She shivered slightly as the promise of many wonderful days to come washed over her.

'Are you cold?' said Liam.

Lizzie shook her head. 'Nope. Just happy.'

'Me too,' said Liam, wrapping his arm around her shoulders as she snuggled into him.

They walked in silence, each of them grinning from ear to ear until they were standing in front of The Pebble Street Hotel. Lizzie's stomach promptly gave a loud grumble and she clapped a hand to her belly in horror.

'I heard that,' chuckled Liam.

'Yeah well... a girl's gotta eat!' she laughed.

‘Let’s do it!’ said Liam, taking her hand and leading her inside the sparkling warmth of the reception.

‘Oh!’ said Lizzie as they came face to face with a girl she didn’t recognise. ‘Hi! Is Lou not on tonight?’

The girl shook her head. ‘I’m Sandy,’ she said. ‘Lou’s off. You must be Lizzie... and Liam?’

Liam frowned and nodded.

‘How’d you know that?’ said Lizzie, desperately hoping she hadn’t met this person before and simply forgotten her.

‘Because you’re the only people left to arrive for the evening!’ laughed Sandy.

‘Oh,’ said Liam. ‘Fair enough. Is Lionel around?’

‘No, he’s... erm... out,’ said Sandy, shaking her head. ‘Now, I’m afraid there’s a bit of an issue with your booking this evening.’

‘Why?’ said Lizzie.

She felt all shivery again, but she wasn’t quite sure why. It wasn’t the same rush of overwhelming happiness that had overtaken her outside. This was more like... there was something out of place... and it bothered her.

‘I’m afraid we’ve had to close the dining room this evening,’ said Sandy.

Lizzie watched her closely, but her pretty face was completely calm.

‘Right,’ said Liam, ‘so are we in the breakfast room instead?’

It wasn’t unheard of for Lionel and Hattie to use the smaller, more intimate room when they didn’t have many bookings. It meant their dinner guests didn’t feel like they were rattling around in the cavernous dining room.

‘No,’ said Sandy, ‘no... I’ve got special instructions for you both.’

‘You have?’ said Lizzie, the back of her neck prickling.  
‘Who from?’

‘Lionel,’ said the girl. ‘He asked me to give you this.’

She handed a key over to Liam and he glanced at it.

‘Room twenty-two?’ he said.

‘That’s right. Second floor,’ said Sandy. ‘Why don’t you head on up.’

‘To a room? I *knew* you had something up your sleeve!’ said Lizzie, turning wide-eyed to Liam and batting him playfully on the arm.

‘Not me,’ said Liam, shaking his head. ‘Seriously!’ he added when she narrowed her eyes at him.

‘I believe Lionel left a note for you up there explaining everything,’ said Sandy.

‘I’m game if you are?’ said Lizzie with a shrug.

‘Fine by me,’ said Liam. ‘As long as there’s food involved.’

Sandy nodded.

‘Okay... let’s go!’ said Lizzie. ‘Actually, hold that thought!’

Lizzie abruptly changed course and instead of heading for the staircase, she made her way at speed along the hallway towards the dining room. Pausing briefly at the closed door, she took a deep breath before grabbing the handle and flinging it open.

‘Oh!’ she said in surprise.

The large room was full of shadowy gloom. The lights were off, and the tables all wore fresh, snowy linens, ready for a service that clearly wasn’t going to be happening that night.

‘What was that about?’ chuckled Liam, as he peered over her shoulder.

Lizzie shook her head and rolled her eyes at herself. ‘Nothing,’ she sighed. ‘Just me being paranoid. For a

moment... I don't know... I thought you might be in on some kind of surprise setup or something!

'Nope!' laughed Liam. 'No surprises in there! So... shall we go upstairs and see what's going on with this whole room thing?'

'Why not?' said Lizzie, shooting him a grin.

Liam grabbed her hand and, leading her back past a slightly bemused-looking Sandy, they took the wide staircase at a bit of a jog.

'Thank heavens I'm not wearing heels!' puffed Lizzie.

'You're telling me!' said Liam. 'I'd have to carry you.'

'Imagine!' chuckled Lizzie as they rounded the tight bend and took the second flight slightly slower. She still had Liam's hand clasped tightly in one of hers, and she trailed the other along the silky-smooth wood of the bannister as they went. 'This place is so beautiful.'

'Yeah,' said Liam. 'Lionel and Hattie have done a gorgeous job with it.'

'Here we are,' she puffed. 'Second floor... room...'

'This one!' said Liam, coming to a halt. 'Shall we?'

Lizzie nodded. Grabbing the key from him, she opened the door to a flood of golden light.

'Wow!' she gasped. 'It's a suite!'

'Blimey!' said Liam, staring around in surprise. 'I had no idea there was anything *this* grand at Pebble Street!'

Lizzie wandered into the smart sitting room and gazed around. There were two soft velvet sofas facing each other across a lovely little coffee table. Beyond that, there was a floor-to-ceiling window with a view out over The King's Nose and the sea. Directly in front of the window stood a linen-clad dining table, perfectly set for two. At its centre was a single red rose along with an ice bucket containing a bottle of champagne.

‘Look!’ said Liam, grabbing her hand and tugging her through a doorway into a bedroom with a four-poster canopied bed.

‘Wow!’ gasped Lizzie.

‘There’s a note - it’s got your name on it!’ said Liam, grabbing a heavy cream envelope from one of the pillows and passing it to her.

Lizzie frowned as she took it and tore into the envelope.

*Dearest mum,*

*This is a gift from both of us. Thank you for everything you’ve done for us. Not just on this visit - but always. You’re the best. We’re both so proud of you for chasing your dreams - and encouraging both of us to do the same.*

*Go grab that life, mum - you deserve it.*

*And Liam - we know you’re there too. We’ve agreed that you’re pretty okay. Be nice to our mum, or you’ll have to answer to us.*

*Enjoy the suite. It’s from both of us - a thank you for letting us crash the cottage for so long and getting in the way of all that nookie!*

*We love you.*

*Megan and Jenna*

*X*

*P.S We left this on the bed because we figured that’d be your first stop ;)*

*P.P.S Jenna wrote the P.S! (Meggie x)*

‘My classy daughters!’ laughed Lizzie, handing the card to Liam, who scanned the words and barked out a surprised laugh.

‘Wow,’ he said, still chuckling.

‘No... this is *wow* - check it out!’ said Lizzie, who’d just pushed open yet another door only to discover a stunning ensuite bathroom, complete with a claw-footed bathtub.

‘We’ve got it for the whole night?’ said Liam, wide-eyed as he peered over her shoulder.

‘Yep!’ said Lizzie, turning to him with a grin.

‘So... do you fancy ordering room service?’ he said. ‘Or maybe we could have a glass of that bubbly before...?’

‘Before what?’ said Lizzie, wiggling her eyebrows.

‘Before we get you out of those boots?’ chuckled Liam.



‘What’s the time?!’ said Liam, leaning back in his chair at the dining table and stretching his arms over his head.

Lizzie watched him lazily, admiring the expanse of bronzed skin that came into view as the fluffy towelling robe he was wearing parted slightly.

‘Why?’ she said, slowly. ‘You in a rush or something?’

Liam shook his head, grinning at her.

Lizzie let out a long, happy sigh. She was warm, cosy and full of amazing food. This was such an amazing surprise from the girls, and both of them had agreed that - even if they weren’t “grand gesture” kind of people - the girls deserved some kind of prize for this one!

‘Not in a rush,’ said Liam, yawning widely, ‘but I’d love to go for a wander along the seafront... if you’re up for it?’

‘Only if I can go in my towelling robe?’ she said.

‘I think we’d probably have to get dressed first,’ he laughed. ‘Just imagine bumping into Charlie and Ethel!’

‘You do have a point,’ smirked Lizzie. ‘Do you *really* want to go out?’

Liam nodded. ‘I kinda want to visit our lamppost... like on our first non-date!’

‘You old softy!’ said Lizzie with a smile. ‘Okay - I’m game... if you don’t mind zipping me back up?’

‘Deal,’ said Liam, getting to his feet. ‘You know... I think Hattie’s food just keeps getting better,’ he said, eyeballing his empty dessert bowl that had held the mythical Pebble Street pudding just ten minutes before.

‘The woman’s a genius!’ agreed Lizzie. ‘C’mon... let’s go visit our lamppost!’



The air outside had grown cold. The evening had that inky quality about it - not quite dark, but the shadows had deepened and the lights seemed brighter as Lizzie and Liam strode, hand in hand, along the seafront. Neither of them said a thing, but there didn’t seem to be any need for words right now.

Lizzie was so happy, she felt like she might float away... if it wasn’t for the three-course meal she’d just inhaled!

Liam glanced at his watch briefly.

‘Here we are!’ she laughed as he nearly shot right past their lamppost.

‘Sorry,’ he said, coming to a halt. ‘I was miles away.’

‘Oh,’ said Lizzie, suddenly feeling a bit deflated. ‘Oh...’

‘Not like that!’ he laughed. ‘And that was an exaggeration. I wasn’t *miles* away... not even a single mile, in fact!’

‘Okay... you’ve lost me,’ said Lizzie smiling up at him. She was feeling a bit hazy around the edges – that bottle of bubbly had a lot to answer for!

‘Here,’ said Liam. ‘Let me show you.’

Liam took Lizzie’s hands and drew her towards him. After placing a long, slow kiss on her lips, he turned her gently on the spot and pointed in the direction of Moore Bikes.



‘What am I looking at... oh!’ she said. ‘Lights... and loads of people?’ Lizzie suddenly became aware that her heart was hammering. ‘What’s... what... I’m confused!’ she laughed.

‘Ready for a party?’ said Liam, his eyes glittering with mischief as she turned back towards him.

‘Party?’ she said.

‘Your party,’ said Liam. ‘Or should I say... your Grand Opening!’

‘You didn’t!’ gasped Lizzie.

‘Not me!’ said Liam. ‘Okay... maybe a little bit. But mostly the girls... and Wonder Ted... and Jason... and Charlie... and Ethel... and Lionel... and...’

‘The whole of Seabury, then?’ said Lizzie.

‘Pretty much,’ said Liam with a shrug.

‘Thank goodness you didn’t let me come for a walk in my robe!’ laughed Lizzie. ‘Is my hair okay?’

‘Lizzie,’ said Liam, leaning down and kissing her again, ‘you’re perfect.’

Lizzie clung to him for a long moment, trying to take it all in.

‘Ready?’ said Liam.

Lizzie didn’t answer – she simply laced her fingers through his and let him lead her towards Moore Bikes.

‘Here she comes!’ cried Ted the minute they were spotted striding along the seafront.

‘Who’s got the scissors?’

‘Lionel!’

‘Not me!’ said Lionel. ‘Megan had them last.’

‘I gave them to Jason,’ came Megan’s shout from the back of the crowd.

‘I haven’t got them, ask Amy!’ said Jason, who was standing next to Sarah.

‘Here they are,’ said Kate, moving to the front of the crowd. ‘Is the photographer here?’

‘Ready!’ cried a guy from behind an impressive-looking camera.

‘Oh my goodness!’ laughed Lizzie, squeezing Liam’s hand. ‘Look, there’s a ribbon!’

‘And Megan... and Amy!’ laughed Liam, waving back at the visitors.

‘Here!’ said Kate, handing Lizzie the scissors. ‘You’re going to need these!’

‘Wait – presents first!’ said Jenna, moving to the front of the crowd. ‘No... not for you!’ she laughed as Stanley greeted her, his tail wagging frantically as he eyeballed the three parcels in her arms. Kate quickly tempted the furry roadblock out of the way with half a Rich Tea biscuit from her pocket.

‘Here’s yours, mum,’ said Jenna. ‘And Jason? This one’s for you... and Ted?’

Lizzie beckoned for her boys to join her, and the three of them lined up in front of the ribbon that was stretched across the doorway of Moore Bikes.

‘Open them, then!’ called Ethel, who was standing with Charlie and a huge group of people from the allotments.

Lizzie untied the denim bow and then peeled back layers of tissue paper to reveal a brand-new pair of slate-grey dungarees. Shaking them out, she started to laugh as she spotted the word “Boss” embroidered across the back.

Turning to watch Jason and Ted open their identical parcels, she grinned as they unwrapped two pairs of overalls. Jason’s bore his name and their logo.

‘Let’s see yours!’ she said to Ted, whose shoulders were shaking with laughter.

He dutifully turned them around to reveal the words “Wonder Ted” stitched across the back.

‘Brilliant!’ chuckled Jason.

‘Wonder Ted... I’ll second that!’ called Margie from the middle of the crowd, earning herself a titter of appreciation.

‘Open the shop already, Mother!’ yelled Megan.

‘Cut, cut, cut!’ agreed the crowd.

Lizzie grinned at them and handed her dungarees to Jason.

‘Ready?’ she yelled.

‘For weeks!’ came the reply from Ethel’s direction.

‘Okay!’ said Lizzie. ‘Moore Bikes is now... officially open!’

Lizzie snipped and the ends of the ribbon fluttered away from the doors in what felt like slow motion. The crowd cheered and applauded and the photographer took shot after shot of their happy faces.

Lizzie swallowed hard, beaming around her - at her community - the town she’d always loved – all out in force to help her mark her dream coming true.

As Liam wrapped her in a hug, only to be joined by Megan, Jenna, Amy, Ted, Jason and then everyone else in the biggest group-hug Seabury had probably ever seen - Lizzie knew one thing for sure - she really was living the dream.

THE END

I hope you enjoyed living the dream with Lizzie! We’ll be heading back to Seabury soon - [join my newsletter](#) for all the gossip! In the meantime, why not head to Billingham’s Finest Chocolates for my brand new Christmas standalone...

[How To Be Angry At Christmas](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Beth Rain has always wanted to be a writer and has been penning adventures for characters ever since she learned to stare into the middle-distance and daydream.

She has recently moved to a windswept, Scottish island, and it is a dream come true to spend her days hanging out with Bob – her trusty laptop – scoffing crisps and chocolate while dreaming up swoony love stories for all her imaginary friends.

Beth's writing will always deliver on the happy-ever-afters, so if you need cosy... you're in safe hands!

Visit [www.bethrain.com](http://www.bethrain.com) for all the bookish goodness and keep up with all Beth's news by joining her [monthly newsletter!](#)

