



Mistakes and
Heartbreaks
in
Seabury

BETH RAIN

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HEARTBREAKS IN
SEABURY

SEABURY - BOOK 8



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Mistakes and Heartbreaks in Seabury (Seabury: Book 8)

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CHAPTER 1



Mary Scott wrapped her fingers tightly around the steering wheel and watched as her knuckles promptly turned white. For goodness' sake – did this really have to happen every single time she drove into Seabury?! She hadn't even set off yet and she was already quivering like a newborn lamb. She really *did* need to get over this silliness!

Unfortunately, Mary knew from long, *long* experience that she could keep trying to snap herself out of this ridiculous behaviour until she was blue in the face, but actually managing to do something about it was an entirely different matter.

'Mary Scott, you're an old fool,' she sighed, noticing with a certain amount of resignation that her heart was racing as the familiar wave of anxiety crashed over her.

Maybe she should just give up on the trip for today. Going into Seabury was clearly a bad idea. It would be so easy to leave her little car parked out here on the gravel patch next to the Old School House and head back inside for another pot of tea.

There was something wonderfully safe about her home. It had provided Mary with the perfect, private bolthole for decades now. She'd loved being headteacher there when it had still been a school. Both the work and the building itself had felt like a safe haven – somewhere she could forget the past... or, at least manage to escape it for a while.

When the local council decided to close the school, it had been a very natural step for Mary to buy the building and turn

it into her home. She knew it had caused a lot of raised eyebrows amongst the locals at the time, and there had certainly been mutterings about her “hiding from the world”. To a certain degree, they had been right.

The joy of the Old School House was that it was beautifully secluded. It simply wasn't a place people discovered by accident. Nor could anyone claim to be “just passing by”. The only way to reach it by car was by a very long, private drive that wound its way between high hedges all the way down from the coastal road. The only other access was by sea.

The Old School House had its very own stone quay and private beach. Luckily for Mary, the only visitor who ever arrived from that direction was Ben – and her former pupil was one of the few people who was *always* welcome. Of course, it did help that he was usually there to fix up various bits of the tired old building for her.

The thought of Ben and his cheerful, smiling face gave Mary a much-needed boost of bravery. The reason for her dash into Seabury this morning was to catch the fish van on its rounds... and with any luck, Ben might be driving.

‘Come on, old girl,’ sighed Mary. She wasn't quite sure whether she was talking to herself or the car. Either way, she turned the key at long last. Executing a nifty three-point turn on the gravel, she headed up the drive towards the coast road that would take her to Seabury.

Taking a long, slow breath, Mary fought the rabid fear mounting in her chest. This *wasn't* what she was like – not really. As Seabury's retired headteacher, she knew she had a reputation for being a little bit prim, proper and peppery. None of her ex-pupils would ever guess that a simple trip into town for some groceries would have such a huge impact on her. Still, that's what happened to fools in love, wasn't it?

‘Don't be an idiot!’ she muttered out loud, jamming her foot down onto the accelerator and sending her nippy little car flying at break-neck speed around one of the sharp bends of the narrow drive.

She wasn't in love. Of course she wasn't! How could she be after all these years...

Still – she couldn't deny that things had become even more tricky for her in recent months. More confused... and confusing.

Ever since Lionel Barclay had invited her to the grand reopening of The Pebble Street Hotel, Mary's entire world had felt like it was teetering on a cliff edge. She was waiting for... something. Whether that something was good or bad, she still wasn't quite sure. One thing she did know though – her rare trips into Seabury had become even more of a nerve-wracking ordeal than usual.

Seeing Lionel for the first time after long years of careful avoidance had been a huge shock – even though she'd had plenty of time to prepare herself for the event. That had been at the end of last summer. Now here she was, with spring beginning to bloom all around her, and she was still trying to recover.

In a way, Mary wished she'd turned down that blasted invitation. She'd been sorely tempted to do so at the time... but in the end, it had proved impossible. Lionel's great niece and new head chef, Hattie, had worked her magic on Mary until she'd agreed to let her in on the long-held secret of her mother's Pebble Street Pudding recipe. This had led to Mary being invited to the opening as the guest of honour, where her mother's pudding had been the star of the show.

If she closed her eyes, Mary could still smell the perfume of the single red rose that had been placed at the centre of her table. She could still hear Lionel's lovely, deep voice as he welcomed the community back to the hotel. Memories of being in the same room as him again haunted her every night as she lay in the dark, wishing for sleep so that she could escape the painful longing deep in her soul.

Lionel had said some truly lovely things about her that night - not to her face of course, but to the other guests. She hadn't *really* been eavesdropping... it had just been incredibly

difficult not to tune in whenever she caught her name on his lips.

It wasn't at all what she'd been expecting. Mary thought Lionel would still be bitter... or at least holding on to some kind of residual resentment after the way she'd treated him all those years ago. She really wouldn't have blamed him in the slightest - after all, he'd asked her to marry him... and she'd refused. She hadn't even given him the reason. She'd just walked away from him and torn both their hearts in two.

It was hard to believe that after such awful behaviour – followed by years of silence – he'd been perfectly nice to her... if a little distant. Perhaps their time together hadn't meant as much to Lionel as it had to her... or maybe he'd simply moved on years ago – just like she should have done. The thought of it made her feel a bit sick.

Mary had very much been hoping things would become easier after the event. Unfortunately, that hadn't been the case. She'd found the whole experience intensely painful – and it had added yet another regret to her already overflowing list. If only she'd been brave enough to talk to him about everything at long last. Instead, she'd spent most of the evening trying to avoid having to speak to him more than was strictly necessary.

Lionel had kept his distance too. She knew he'd probably done it to make her feel as comfortable as possible given the circumstances... but she had to admit that it had hurt every time he'd caught her eye and then turned away. He'd moved through the crowd with purpose that night, but every time he'd spotted her in his path, he'd pulled himself up short.

Even so – Mary's heart had rejoiced at seeing him again. Just to be in the same room and hear his voice... it might have been decades since they'd parted, but it seemed that he was still the beautiful soul she'd turned down all those years ago.

It had been a kind of torture, living so close to Seabury and knowing that Lionel was just down the road – so near, but at the same time so completely beyond her reach.

Lionel was the reason Mary avoided the little town as much as she could. She only nipped in when she was

absolutely certain she wouldn't bump into him. She'd either wait until she knew he was on one of his wine-buying trips to Upper Bamton, or make a mad dash for it when Ethel let her know that he was off giving Charlie a painting lesson. According to her friend, he would be spending this morning with Hattie going over the new spring menu for the hotel – so she should be safe enough for a quick trip in to visit the fish van. At least, that was the plan.

She'd still play it safe of course - just in case. Mary was in the habit of taking the narrow route into town that opened onto North Beach rather than risking the busier road that came in at the other end.

She certainly avoided driving past the front of The Pebble Street Hotel whenever she could. What if Lionel appeared just as she was passing? She'd have to wave! That could turn messy in a heartbeat... what if he didn't wave back? Would it be because he hadn't spotted her or because he didn't want to wave?! Frankly, Mary could do without acting like a giddy schoolgirl at her age! She was already suffering through more sleepless nights than she cared to admit.

Suddenly realising that she'd already reached the junction, Mary flicked her indicator on and slowed down. It was always a bit tricky navigating the narrow lane that led down the hill towards North Beach.

Whenever she made this trip, Mary was intensely grateful that she had a small, discreet car – nothing like the monstrosity Hattie from the hotel drove with those flowers Ben had daubed all over it. There was certainly no mistaking Hattie when she was out and about!

Mary would be hard-pressed to pick out her own car in a line-up. It blended in nicely, and she could tuck it into the smallest of spaces. She always preferred to leave it on the outskirts of town and walk the last stretch – that way, no one would even know she was there.

As she neared the bottom of the hill, Mary blew out a breath of relief. Her favourite parking spot was empty. It was little more than a cut-in next to the hedge, but it was perfect

for her little car. With any luck, she'd be able to load up her basket with fish, have a few words with Ben and then be on her way before anyone else even noticed she was there.

In a couple of well-rehearsed moves, Mary had parked neatly. She glanced at her watch. Blow – she was a bit early. She was usually so precise about these things, and given the amount of time she'd wasted before she'd actually set off, she had no idea how she'd managed to get here so quickly.

The drive usually took her exactly twelve minutes – give or take a few seconds. It would take anyone else a good twenty minutes, but after driving the same road for years, she knew it like the back of her hand. She must have practically flown here on autopilot while her head was full of thoughts of Lionel!

Ah well – she was here now, and it was such a lovely morning it would be a waste just to sit here in the car until it was time for the fish van to turn up. Perhaps she'd take a little walk down onto North Beach. It was a good long way from the hotel, so she was sure to be safe from any unwanted encounters.

Before she could change her mind, Mary quickly straightened up, locked the car and buttoned up her jacket against the chilly spring breeze. It was going to be a beautiful day – but the sunshine wasn't strong enough at this time of year to have much effect against the nip in the air down by the water.

Making her way down the narrow street, she rounded the corner and found herself on the seafront at the end of North Beach. Just in front of her stood Nana's Ice Cream Parlour with its custard-yellow paintwork. It had closed down at the end of last summer, and Mary thought that it looked a little bit lost and lonely with its painted-over windows and large *Closing Down* sign. Just underneath the gaudy poster, there was a little smiley face traced in the white-out paint – the only thing that hinted at the happy place it had been not so long ago.

According to Ben, Frank and his new partner Stella had moved to an island somewhere off the north coast of Scotland. Mary couldn't remember what it was called, but he'd told her all about it.

Apparently, the island was always cold, damp and windy. Mary shuddered - it sounded pretty dreadful to her... but then some people did crazy things for love. She shook her head quickly. She didn't really want to think about such things right now.

Coming closer to Nana's, Mary paused to peer at the darkened shop windows. It was quite sad to see the place empty – it had always been so bright, colourful and welcoming when Frank had been in there, concocting his ice creams from scratch.

Last time Ethel had called in at the Old School House with cake, she'd mentioned that there had been some interest in the lease, but nothing had been finalised yet. Then, Ben had told her that one of those new-fangled pop-up art galleries was taking the place on for a little while – though no one knew who was behind the venture.

Looking at it with a critical eye, Mary suspected that it would probably do quite well. The space seemed about right for a small exhibition. In fact, she had just spotted a small scrap of paper tacked to the inside of the glass door.

Mary leaned in, wishing that she had her reading glasses with her. She peered intently at the sign.

A retrospective exhibition of the works of our very own Lionel Barclay.

Oil Paintings and Drawings.

(If you have any of Lionel's work, please contact Kate at The Sardine or The Lighthouse or enquire within... if there's someone here!)

'Oh bother!' muttered Mary under her breath. That rather tore it – now what was she going to do?!

CHAPTER 2



As it happened, Ben was late turning up in the fish van. Normally this would have irritated Mary – having time to kill in Seabury was never usually something she relished. This morning, however, she was glad of the extra ten minutes to mull over her discovery. An exhibition of Lionel’s work... and a plea from Kate for additional pieces to show.

What on earth was she going to do?

As Mary strode along the pebbles of North Beach, she barely registered the exquisite colours of the sea in the early-morning light. Her mind was too busy back in the attic of the Old School House. Only two people in the world knew about the secret she kept there... but what if it got out? This exhibition certainly made it more likely, that was for sure. She couldn’t bare the idea of it.

Well – first things first – she needed to speak to those two people and make sure they hadn’t already blabbed. Luckily enough, one of them was due to turn up at any moment in the fish van!

By the time Mary clambered back up from the pebbles, Ben had appeared. Unfortunately, a queue of locals, eager to get their hands on the catch of the day, had turned up while she’d been wandering along lost in her own worries. Mary hung back. She’d wait for them to clear off before she got any closer – she needed a word with Ben in private, and she had no interest in making small talk with anyone else.

It didn't take very long for Ben to deal with the queue. As usual, he was cheerful and efficient, weighing, wrapping and chattering away at warp speed.

Mary couldn't help but smile as she watched him. She'd always liked Ben. He'd been a complete scatterbrain at school and had driven her to her wits end with his tendency to daydream. Then again – that had only been a problem when he'd actually turned up – which hadn't happened too often. Ben had always had a deep love for the sea and the local beaches, and he used to regularly set off from home wearing his uniform only to end up spending the entire day exploring Seabury's hidden coves instead. Still – he hadn't turned out too badly!

As the last of Ben's customers left with a wave and a smile before making their way back towards the centre of town, Mary made her way over towards him.

'Morning Miss!' he said with a grin as soon as he spotted her.

Mary arched an eyebrow.

'Erm... Mrs Scott... I mean... Mary!' he laughed. 'Sorry.'

Mary smiled and shrugged. 'I know, I know - old habits die hard!'

Even after all these years, Mary was more than used to answering to "Miss" whenever she ventured out. She guessed it was just one of those things that you had to put up with after being a teacher for so long – especially in such a small community.

'What can I get for you M... Mary?' said Ben, catching himself just in time.

'I'd like some mackerel, please. Usual amount,' she said, and then, lowering her voice she added, 'so... do you know about this exhibition then?'

Ben gave her a quizzical look, so she jerked her head towards the darkened windows of Nana's.

‘Oh yeah!’ said Ben with a nod. ‘Sorry – I actually meant to drop by and tell you about it. I’ve been so busy though... and I could swear I lost a week somewhere!’

Mary laughed and waved his apology away. Coming from anyone else it would sound like a rather weak excuse for forgetting to do something – but she knew that wasn’t the case with Ben. He had about half a dozen jobs including helping his dad drive the local bus, his rounds with the fish van, and acting as a much sought-after odd job man around the town. Every spare second and penny was spent doing up the love of his life – an old wooden boat called Sylvie. Add to that his new relationship with Hattie, and it was a miracle the poor boy was still standing.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said, noticing the troubled expression on his face. ‘I’ll let you off if you tell me what you know.’

Ben glanced over his shoulder, clearly making sure that no one was around to overhear their conversation.

‘Well, Kate asked me about it the other day,’ he said in a low voice. ‘She’s hunting for anyone else in town who might have more of Lionel’s paintings tucked away. And – what with me being in and out of so many of the houses doing odd jobs - she thought I might be able to give her the skinny.’

‘The skinny?’ repeated Mary in a faint voice. A cold lump of fear had just lodged in her chest and her hand flew to the front of her jumper as if was trying to settle her heart. ‘You... you didn’t *say* anything about me to her, did you?’ she said, mildly embarrassed to hear the quaver in her voice. ‘I mean... about the work you did for me... on the attic?’

‘Of course not,’ said Ben, glancing shiftily over his shoulder again. ‘Though she was pretty suspicious that I didn’t know *anyone* who had some of his work. I just played dumb and shook my head – it was safer that way!’

‘You were never a very good liar!’ said Mary with a little laugh, as a trickle of relief coursed through her.

‘Not saying anything isn’t strictly lying though, is it?’ said Ben with a shrug and a slightly sheepish smile as he handed

her the parcel of paper-wrapped mackerel.

‘I guess not,’ said Mary, stashing the fish into her shopping basket.

‘You know,’ said Ben, ‘I think Kate was planning on talking to Ethel next. I can’t imagine she’d let anything slip, but it might be worth having a word with her yourself - just so you can get your stories straight.’

Mary frowned again. It was a good idea. Ethel knew a great deal more about her little secret than Ben did. After all, she’d been involved right from the start – all those years ago. You could say that Ethel had been her right-hand man in making it all happen. They’d both been so careful not to get caught in the act, but if Kate had even the slightest whiff of the scent, Mary had a feeling she’d probably be more than a little bit tenacious when it came to finding out the truth.

Even though Mary had done her best to hold her at arm’s length all these years, Ethel was a good friend. Mary was fairly confident that she could trust her not to breathe a word to Kate. But Ben was right... There was no harm in making sure.

‘You know, I think you’re right,’ said Mary, nodding slowly. ‘I’ll go and find Ethel now. Besides, I won’t be able to settle to anything else until I’ve had the chance to speak to her anyway.’

‘Good luck!’ said Ben cheerfully.

Mary turned away, but she’d only got a couple of steps when Ben’s voice made her turn around again. He was calling her back in one of those whispers that drew more attention than a shout.

‘She’s not at home,’ he hissed.

‘Oh, really?’ said Mary, in a normal voice.

Ben shook his head and then continued in his ridiculous whisper. ‘No, I think she’s gone up to the allotments to find Charlie.’

‘Wonderful. Thank you, Ben,’ said Mary.

At least that would save her banging on Ethel's cottage door in vain. It did pose another problem though. If Ethel was on her way up to the allotments and Mary wanted to be sure to catch her, she'd have to drive right through the centre of town - which meant going straight past the door of The Pebble Street Hotel.

Drat it all. This morning was definitely not going to plan.

With a last nod and a final wave to Ben, Mary hurried back towards the car. She'd just unlocked it and was sliding into her seat when she let out an exasperated sigh. She could kick herself. She'd been so caught up in the discovery of the exhibition that she'd completely forgotten to ask Ben if he could come and do some more work on the Old School House. The front door latch had been failing for weeks and the blasted thing kept blowing open.

It wasn't like her to be so forgetful - she was usually organised about such things. Ah well, she'd just have to chalk it up as another case of Lionel Barclay turning her brain to jelly.

Mary stared ahead of her for a moment, doing her best to smooth back a couple of stray, grey strands of hair that had escaped her tight, neat style as she tried to decide what to do.

It was too late to go back and ask Ben now. He was probably halfway to his next stop already. Never mind - she'd just have to call him later and hope that he could fit her in soon. Besides, right now she had a much more important mission to see to. She needed to go and find Ethel!

Mary felt a little bit foolish for being so nervous about driving through the centre of Seabury. For a brief moment, she considered taking the other route, back along the coast road. She could easily drop down to the allotments that way, but then there was a good chance she'd miss Ethel if she was still toiling up the long hill out of the town.

'Nothing for it, old girl!' she sighed, starting up the car and crawling slowly towards North Beach.

Sure enough, Ben's van was already gone, and North Beach was once again blissfully quiet as Mary took the narrow seaside street slowly. She soon left Nana's and the Post Office in her rear-view mirror, passed the front of New York Froth, and then The Pebble Street Hotel appeared ahead of her. Mary's heart squeezed. Still – she didn't have a choice – she needed to speak to Ethel!

To be fair to her friend, Mary didn't think that Ethel would have said anything to Kate about her not-so-little secret. The real problem was that she couldn't rule out the chance Ethel *might* have said something to Charlie. After all, Ethel and Charlie were an engaged couple these days...they probably didn't have any secrets between them.

Even if Ethel hadn't gone into detail, Mary suspected it was pretty likely that Charlie would have a good idea about what had been going on. And that's where things could start getting sticky. Charlie might be a man of few words, but he *was* Lionel's best friend... and he was also very close to Kate.

Mary swallowed hard. Could Charlie have let the cat out of the bag? What would she do if Lionel found out about her secret? After all these years, was it about to come out?

No, she had to make sure that didn't happen.

What had seemed like an ordinary day had just become very complicated - very quickly. That was the problem with secrets - they were like shoelaces. They always came undone at the most inconvenient moment, and then you had to tie them up again quickly before you managed to trip yourself up.

Mary was nearly level with the hotel now, and she could swear that her heart was about to burst right out of her chest. She didn't know why she was being so silly – Lionel would still be in his meeting with Hattie – which probably meant the pair of them were safely tucked up in Lionel's apartment on the top floor of the hotel, sipping tea and looking out over the King's Nose and the sea on the other side. Still, she knew she'd feel much safer when she'd left the beautiful old building behind her.

It was hugely tempting to floor the accelerator and speed past the hotel to get this ordeal over as quickly as possible. Luckily, as the town's ex-headmistress, it was in her nature to be calm, well-mannered and to set a good example wherever she could. She'd certainly hate anyone to spot her in this state – so she drove steadily on, not daring to turn her head as she drove carefully past the hotel.

As soon as the front door was in her rear-view mirror, Mary breathed out a long sigh of relief. She'd done it – she was in the clear! Now all she had to do was-

'Bother!' gasped Mary, sinking as low as she could in her seat while still being able to drive.

There, on the pavement just ahead of her was none other than Lionel and Charlie. She'd been so fixated on the hotel, it hadn't even occurred to her to keep an eye out on the rest of her surroundings!

The two friends were obviously returning from one of their painting lessons Mary had heard about. Each of them had a folding chair and easel tucked under one arm and a bag slung over the other.

Mary attempted to slouch down even further in her seat, desperately hoping that they wouldn't notice her. As luck would have it, the friends appeared to be deep in conversation. In a matter of seconds, she'd left them behind her without any sign of being spotted.

Mary smiled softly to herself. She thought Lionel looked well – smiling and pink-cheeked as he chatted away to his best friend. Of course, she didn't really know him anymore – but she imagined that they were discussing the colour of the sea or the perfect brush stroke for painting the exact moment the sea met the sky.

When they'd been together, Mary had loved listening to him talking about painting – his excitement and passion for his work had been infectious. They'd chat for hours about something and nothing while she sat and watched him paint. How she'd missed that companionship after she'd walked away from him... how she still missed it!

Mary tried to swallow the hard, hot lump of sadness that had lodged in her throat. She couldn't bear the possibility that everything might get stirred up again because of this exhibition. It was bad enough that the past haunted her every single day – it would be even worse if Lionel knew that was the case.

Then again, she knew she was just being selfish. Lionel deserved to have his work recognised. His paintings were truly special – and completely underrated. It was about time something like this exhibition happened – everyone should know what an exceptionally talented man lived in their little town.

Suddenly, a polite little beep of a horn behind her jolted Mary out of her daydream and she realised that she'd somehow managed to slow to a crawl as she watched Lionel and Charlie disappear into the Pebble Street Hotel.

With a quick, apologetic wave over her shoulder, Mary increased her speed and made her way past West Beach and The Sardine. She had to resist the urge to duck down again just in case Kate was in there and spotted her... blimey, if she added anyone else to her "people to avoid" list, it would be practically impossible for her to ever venture into Seabury again.

Spurred on by the thought, Mary put her foot down, intent on making her way up to the allotments as quickly as possible. She needed to speak to Ethel - and fast.

There had to be a chance she could keep her secret safe for a little while longer. Just seeing Lionel for those few brief moments had settled it in her mind – selfish or not, she would do everything in her power to stop him from finding out what she'd been up to all these years.

CHAPTER 3



As Mary made her way up the hill out of Seabury, she kept her eyes peeled for Ethel. Somehow, she didn't think her old friend would be too amused to find out that Charlie was off gallivanting with Lionel – after all, it was a long, steep walk all the way up to the allotments and Ethel was no spring chicken. Neither was she, come to that... which made all this running around the neighbourhood because of a man all the more humiliating. Ah well – Ethel would understand.

Sure enough, it wasn't long before she spotted her old friend beetling along the narrow pavement next to the hedgerow. Ethel had already made it three-quarters of the way to the allotments... and Mary couldn't help but marvel at her speed.

With a quick glance in her rear-view mirror, Mary slowed to a stop and waved a surprised-looking Ethel over.

'What on earth are you doing here?' said Ethel, slightly breathless as she heaved her basket onto her other arm.

'Get in!' said Mary, 'we need to talk!'

Ethel rolled her eyes good-naturedly. She was more than used to Mary's brusque manner.

'I can't. I'm just on my way to find Charlie,' said Ethel.

'Well, you're not going to find him up here,' said Mary, shaking her head impatiently. 'I just saw him heading into Pebble Street. With Lionel.'

‘Did they see you?’ asked Ethel, her eyebrows shooting up.

Mary shook her head, trying to ignore the way her chest tightened at the thought of it.

‘No, thank heavens. Look – get in – I’m blocking the road.’

Ethel shrugged good-naturedly and made her way around the front of the car to let herself into the passenger side. The minute she’d placed her basket between her feet and made herself comfortable, Mary took off again. She was keen to find a secluded spot where the pair of them could speak in private.

Mary knew she was being ridiculous – after all, she knew exactly where Lionel was now, and it wasn’t as though he’d be able to hear what she had to say all the way up here... but whenever she was in Seabury, Mary could never quite shake the feeling someone was listening in on every word she said.

‘Erm... exactly how far are we going?’ said Ethel mildly after they’d been driving for ten minutes straight.

They’d left Seabury’s beaches far behind them and were now following the craggy coast road. The winding route peeped in on hidden coves, its twists revealed clusters of jutting rocks that carved their way out into the waves, and its turns overlooked breathtaking views that filled the windscreen with sea and sky.

‘I reckon that’ll do!’ said Mary, spotting a little pull-in where they could stare out across the waves. It always helped to have something to look at other than the person you were talking to... especially when it was going to be a bit of an awkward conversation.

Mary did her best to ignore the bemused expression on Ethel’s face as she parked the car and looked around. Yes – this was much better than having this conversation back in Seabury. It was about as secluded as she could have wished for, though a great deal further than she’d intended to drive.

Mary eyed the single, brave, windswept tree that was clinging on at the edge of the pull-in. It wasn’t in leaf yet, but

there were several clumps of cheerful daffs at its base, all nodding their heads in the sea breeze. Something about them made her feel a little bit calmer.

‘Alright, now that you’ve kidnapped me, let’s get on with it!’ laughed Ethel.

It was Mary’s turn to raise her eyebrows as she turned to her friend. Somehow, she had a feeling Ethel knew exactly what she wanted to talk about - even though she hadn’t said a word about it yet. Sure enough...

‘Come on, I know it’s about the exhibition,’ said Ethel.

Mary nodded her head slowly. Yes, it was about the exhibition, but now that they were here, she didn’t really want to talk about it.

‘Am I going to have to do all the work?’ said Ethel.

‘You know, that’s a distinct possibility,’ said Mary with an embarrassed grin.

‘Well, in that case...’ Ethel trailed off and, leaning forward, she started to rummage around for the basket at her feet. She moved aside a red and white checked tea towel, only to reveal a flask and several fat slices of cake. ‘I think we need sustenance and as Charlie wasn’t where he promised he’d be, he’s forfeited all rights to his morning snack! Care for a cuppa?’

Mary nodded gratefully. Yes, a nice cup of tea – even if it was from a flask - would definitely help matters.

‘Hold on to these then, my girl!’ said Ethel, passing her a pair of white enamelled tin cups before pouring a steady stream of dark, tarry brew into each of them.

‘Thanks!’ said Mary as Ethel added a splash of milk from a re-purposed water bottle, before screwing the lid back on tightly and taking her own cup.

Mary wrapped her hands around her mug, drawing comfort from the warmth.

‘So you know about the exhibition at Nana’s?’ prompted Ethel.

Mary pulled a pained face and nodded.

‘I was going to tell you about it next time I saw you. Kate only spoke to me about it yesterday, so I thought we had a bit of time.’

‘Don’t worry about that,’ said Mary quickly. The last thing she wanted was for anyone to be worrying on her behalf. After all – she knew she was being completely ridiculous. Fancy being so worked up over something after all these years!

‘I’m guessing you want to know if I’ve let the cat out of the bag?’ said Ethel, taking a loud slurp of tea.

Mary glanced across at her and for a second, she couldn’t help but wonder if her old friend was rather enjoying herself. She decided it was best not to comment. Instead, she simply nodded.

‘Well,’ said Ethel, settling back in her seat and resting her tin cup comfortably on her front, ‘Kate asked me if I know anyone with any more of Lionel’s paintings that she can put on display... especially the earlier ones.’

‘Oh,’ said Mary, her heart sinking. Well, that was that then.

Of course, there was no reason Kate *shouldn’t* ask. There was nothing sinister about collecting an artist’s work, was there? Nothing untoward at all... unless you happened to be the person who jilted that artist years ago, shattering his heart... before spending the rest of your life collecting his work as the only way to feel close to the man you were still in love with.

Mary let out a long sigh, and Ethel glanced across at her in concern.

‘Don’t worry, I didn’t say anything! Not a single word.’ She reached out and gently patted Mary’s arm. ‘I just did my best to look like I didn’t have an idea in my head. I told Kate that I’d make enquiries for her and keep my ears open, but that’s as far as it went!’

‘You really didn’t tell her about me?’ said Mary.

‘Not a word and I don’t intend to either. What you asked me to do is between us. So *what* if you happen to have a few pieces of Lionel’s tucked away at home? That’s your business and I’m not going to volunteer the information. Nor am I going to broadcast the fact that I’ve spent the last several decades being your personal art spy!’

Ethel started to laugh, and Mary found she couldn’t help but smile back. It was true – Ethel had been a most important go-between for her. But still...

‘Kate didn’t smell a rat?’ she asked. Mary knew her far too well to believe she’d just drop the matter. Kate was another one of her favourite ex-pupils, and she’d always been lively, bright, and determined.

‘I’m sure she thought it was a bit odd that I didn’t know anyone with some of Lionel’s work,’ said Ethel with a shrug. ‘After all, I do tend to know most of what goes on around here.’

‘Yes,’ said Mary dryly. ‘You do *tend* to!’

‘Oi,’ said Ethel, giving her a good-natured nudge. ‘It’s not my fault people like to confide in me. Anyway, Kate’s a good girl - she didn’t push.’

‘And you’ve not told Charlie?’ said Mary.

‘Ah. Now, that’s a different matter entirely,’ said Ethel, squirming slightly in her seat. ‘I’ve told him a bit. Not enough for him to put two and two together mind – but there aren’t any secrets between us now we’re going to get married.’

‘Of course,’ said Mary. ‘Sorry – I shouldn’t have asked.’

‘Don’t be daft!’ chuckled Ethel. ‘I don’t mind. Anyway – all he knows is that I’ve bought a few of Lionel’s paintings for a local collector – but I never mentioned you by name. He never asked me anything else about it. Charlie’s not a curious man, you see. He’s not one for details unless it’s about the weather forecast and what it might mean for his marrows or the state of his compost heap. But that’s exactly why I love him so much!’

Mary watched as Ethel blushed a pretty pink, and she felt a brief spark of envy. Not for Charlie – heavens no! Ethel and Charlie seemed to be perfectly suited and she wished her friend all the happiness in the world. No – the envy was for that first flush of love. There was nothing quite like discovering you were in an exclusive club with just two members. She'd only experienced it once... and then she'd managed to ruin it for the rest of her life.

‘So...’ said Mary, taking a jam tart from the little Tupperware box Ethel was waving at her, ‘who else has Kate asked so far?’

‘No idea,’ said Ethel comfortably. ‘You’ll have to ask her yourself. Probably all the Chilly Dippers I should think, and Doris from the Post Office – you know how she loves anything to do with seagulls. I think Lionel did some specially for her. My guess is, Kate will be asking anyone that might have something of Lionel’s in a decent frame.’

Mary shifted uncomfortably. That described at least three-quarters of her collection.

‘I would guess quite a few of his pieces will have been snapped up by tourists over the years,’ said Mary with a frown. She’d always hated the idea of his work leaving the area.

‘Well, you couldn’t buy them all!’ laughed Ethel. ‘Of course, Lionel knows there are lots more of his paintings out there somewhere, but I’m sure you remember what he’s like – he loves the painting part... and he doesn’t really care about where they go after he’s finished.’

‘Surely he’s got some clue,’ said Mary warily.

‘Only for a few, I think,’ said Ethel. ‘He knows Kate’s got a fair few – but only because she used to have them all hanging in her living room above The Sardine. I don’t think he ever guessed I was the one buying most of them. I did everything anonymously as you asked. I’ve lost count of how many there were over the years...’

Mary didn't answer. She hadn't lost count, but no way was she about to admit the extent of her collection. Not if Ethel had conveniently forgotten that not-so-little detail.

'Do you think there's anyone else who might know about our arrangement?' said Mary.

Ethel shook her head, her mouth full of jam tart. Mary waited impatiently for her to answer properly.

'The only person who might have back then was Veronica,' said Ethel, wiping away a stray crumb with the back of her hand, 'and I don't think she ever found out - even though we did it all right under her nose.'

Mary nodded, her jaw clenching at the mention of that awful woman.

'It must have really annoyed her,' continued Ethel, taking a sip of tea, completely unaware that Mary was starting to seethe next to her. 'Just when she thought she'd be able to chuck Lionel out of the hotel for not paying his rent, suddenly he had that lovely stream of money coming in - seemingly out of nowhere.'

Mary gave a curt nod but didn't answer. This was the part of the whole affair she *really* didn't want to come out. Veronica had *hated* Lionel and his painting. She'd always accused him of getting paint on the carpet... which was ridiculous. She'd never seen anyone more meticulous in his work than Lionel. Besides, a bit of paint on those carpets would have been an improvement, they were that shabby.

'Really,' said Ethel, reaching over and giving her hand an unexpected squeeze, 'I think your secret is safe for now - but I wouldn't be surprised if someone around here noticed something over the years, no matter how careful we were.'

Mary chewed her lip and stared hard at the sea. Ethel was right. No matter how careful they'd been over the years, with Ethel buying the items anonymously and then smuggling them over to The Old School House for her - Seabury was a small town. Not much flew under the radar for long.

‘Can I just make a suggestion?’ said Ethel in a gentle voice. ‘Just once and then I won’t mention it again?’

‘Okay...?’ said Mary.

‘It’s just... our Kate can be a bit like a terrier when she gets an idea in her head. She’s dead set on getting her hands on as many paintings as possible.’ Ethel paused a moment, clearly looking for the right words. ‘I can’t help but wonder if it might be best for you to contact her yourself? You could offer her a couple, and that would be that – nothing strange or mysterious... and it would mean so much to her too.’

Mary gave an involuntary shudder at the idea of sharing her precious collection with the world... but then, she couldn’t help but admit that Ethel might have a point. Plus, she really liked Kate, and a huge part of her wanted to help her out... if only there was a way to do that without it stirring up the past.

‘Now then,’ said Ethel clapping her hands together, ‘please can you drop me back in town so that I can give my fiancé a piece of my mind for standing me up in favour of a painting lesson with his best mate?’

‘I think I can manage that!’ said Mary, forcing a smile onto her face while her insides squirmed at the thought of having to drive past Pebble Street for a second time in one day. Still... there was no need to admit the extent of her idiocy to her friend!

As she reversed the car carefully away from their cliff-edge vantage point, Ethel started to giggle.

‘What?’ demanded Mary.

‘Just thinking about the number of cakes you’ve had me deliver over the years as the perfect cover for dropping off all those paintings!’ chuckled Ethel, ‘and no one having the slightest idea of what we were up to! You and I should go into business together!’

‘As spies?’ said Mary with a smile.

‘Cake-obsessed art burglars!’ said Ethel.

‘I paid a pretty price for my paintings, thank you very much!’ said Mary.

That had been the whole point, after all. She got an attic full of his paintings, and Lionel got enough income to keep him living in Seabury. Because, no matter how much it broke Mary’s heart to have him living so close to her – the idea of Lionel moving away was even harder to bear.

‘At least you got bonus cake with every delivery!’ said Ethel.

CHAPTER 4



Mary dropped Ethel back into Seabury as she'd asked, but right at the last minute she chickened out of going all the way to The Pebble Street Hotel and pulled up next to The Sardine instead. She'd decided that, on balance, she'd rather put up with Ethel's gentle teasing for the next few weeks than risk the chance of bumping into Lionel again. Two sightings in one day might just finish her off!

As soon as Ethel heaved herself out onto the pavement, Mary executed a neat little u-turn and headed back up the hill the way they'd just come. Yes, it meant taking the longer route home, but she'd had her fill of Seabury for one day.

As much as she hated to admit it, Mary was feeling more than a little shaken, and she was keen to get back to The Old School House. Only then could she start figuring out what she really wanted to do about this whole mess. Yes – it was great news that neither Ben nor Ethel had let her secret slip – but she needed to decide what to do about Kate and the exhibition.

The minute Mary stepped through her front door, she breathed a sigh of relief. It was good to be home – not least because it meant there was no chance of anyone spotting the tears that had been tumbling down her cheeks for most of the drive home.

There was something about today that was making it impossible for her to keep her usual barriers in place. Driving past the hotel, seeing Lionel again, and then talking everything over with Ethel had brought past hurts several steps closer

than usual, and she wasn't sure how much more of it she could take.

Mary fished her handkerchief out from the cuff of her cardigan and dabbed her eyes with the already damp square of cotton. How ridiculous to be fawning over a man at her age!

Slamming the heavy front door behind her without a backwards glance, Mary took her shopping basket through to the kitchen. She'd pop the fish in the fridge for later and make herself a pot of tea – that was bound to help her regain some kind of sense of normality!

Two cups later and the magical elixir wasn't having the desired effect. Mary still felt stirred up and restless. Quickly getting to her feet, she threw an extra log onto the stove to keep it going and then headed out of the kitchen at speed. There was only one thing that helped to calm her down when she was this far gone – and that was a trip up to the attic.

Making her way up to the second floor, Mary quickly navigated the relatively new set of wooden steps Ben had installed for her. They led up to a squat wooden double door at the top.

Mary flung them wide and stepped into the dark, shadowy space beyond. She took a deep breath and then groped for the pull cord that hung to her left and gave it a tug.

Suddenly, she was surrounded by light as what seemed like hundreds of twinkling spotlights sprung to life.

Yes. This was better. When the pain of losing Lionel hit as badly as it had today, being surrounded by his work was the only thing that had ever helped.

The purpose-made gallery was clean and white, and lit to perfection, showing off the collection that had been decades in the making. The renovated attic stretched out across the entire roof space of The Old School House – and yet Mary had still managed to run out of space to display her entire collection. Hundreds of works of paintings hung on the walls around her – testimony to Lionel's incredible talent and love for Seabury echoed back at her from every surface.

Mary stared around as her tears started to fall again, but she just ignored them and let her eyes trail from painting to painting as she moved slowly between them.

Mary paused in front of a tiny oil painting and as usual, she felt the years fall away. She was back at The Pebble Street Hotel, admiring the view from a high window that looked down across The King's Nose. Lionel's bedroom window, in fact.

This was where her collection had started – and it was the only piece Lionel knew she had in her possession because he'd painted it for her birthday. That had been the year he'd proposed to her, and it was probably the most precious thing she owned.

Mary let out a shuddering sob and clapped her hand over her mouth in horror. How ridiculous! She really needed to pull herself together.

The thing was - these paintings helped her to remember that it had all been real. Once upon a time, she had been loved by a man she'd adored – and knowing felt like a blessing and a curse at the same time.

Mary moved on, letting the cool blues of Lionel's signature seascapes calm her frayed nerves. The colours really came to life under the new lighting – Ben had done wonders when he'd revamped the attic for her, that was for sure. Mary knew that it had been an extravagance having this private art gallery created just for her – but then, why not? She had precious few joys in her life, and besides, she had no one to answer to.

These paintings allowed Mary to re-live the happiest time in her life – and to her mind, that was priceless. Every time she came up here, she could indulge in memories of the time she'd spent with Lionel before it had all gone so wrong.

As Mary's collection grew, she'd come to realise that certain paintings triggered particular memories for her. The narrow panorama of West Beach always took her straight back to the very first moment she'd set eyes on Lionel all those years ago.

Although relatively young, Mary was already headmistress at the little school when she'd met him. Back then, there had been a lot more pupils and it had been an important part of the local community. Even so, headmistress had seemed like a rather grand term considering she'd been the one and only teacher. She knew every single pupil as well as all their parents. She was happy and busy and pretty content... even though there were moments when she felt her world was a little bit smaller than it should be.

On that fateful day, Mary had finished teaching, seen all the children off and made her way into Seabury to meet her mother for tea. Her head had been full of the mathematics paper she was planning for the following morning, and she hadn't been watching where she was going. Before she knew what was happening, she'd crashed headlong into a warm wall wearing a smart suit.

All it had taken was an embarrassed glance into the pair of kind eyes that were staring back at her, and she was a goner.

It had been love at first sight – for her at least. Mary was smitten. It wasn't a word that was used very often anymore – but it described her reaction perfectly.

Of course, after making their hasty apologies, they'd parted that day having barely said a dozen words to each other. Much to Mary's frustration, she hadn't run into Lionel again for several weeks. He had no children at the school of course, and she was busy with her young charges.

Still, word of the dashing newcomer from London reached her ears. According to local gossip, he'd moved into the suite right at the top of The Pebble Street Hotel... though no one was quite sure what he did for a living.

On the few occasions she'd caught a glimpse of him when she'd been in town with her mother, Mary couldn't help but think how different he was to everyone in Seabury – for starters, he wore a suit and tie. That had certainly been a novelty.

As it turned out, the pair of them were never formally introduced. Instead, one fine Saturday morning, Mary had

been dashing into Pebble Street to collect a recipe book her mother had left behind in the kitchen. Once again, as though fate was determined to have a hand in their story, she'd collided with Lionel in the doorway. This time it came down to Mary to steady him as he had an easel in one hand and a large bag full of paints and brushes in the other.

Mary had been so surprised to find herself clutching the easel to stop it from clattering to the floor, she forgot to be nervous. Waving away his apologies, Mary had asked him about his painting... and that had been the start of everything.

Painting had been one of Lionel's favourite things – even back then. From that first unguarded question, a delightful, deep, and months-long conversation had ignited. Mary and Lionel spent as much of their spare time in each other's company as possible. They'd talked for hours about artists they both admired. Mary's experiences tended to come from books, and she delighted at hearing Lionel describe the galleries he'd visited in London and all the wonders on display. He'd even promised to take her to London and show them to her himself one day.

It had been a magical time – in fact, Mary now knew that it was the happiest time in her life. She'd just been a mild-mannered headteacher from a remote seaside town – but Lionel was a man of law. In her eyes, he'd already lived a grand life, and at times she had to wonder why he'd left it all behind to settle in Seabury.

Mary had often tried to shift the conversation to his past. She'd wanted to know everything she could about the man she was so completely in love with. She soon discovered that Lionel didn't like to talk about it. As a lawyer and former judge, he'd dealt with what he once described as “some of the nastiest possible sides of life.” He'd come to Seabury to escape those horrors.

“I've fallen in love with the clouds and the sea – maybe in time this beautiful little town will heal my heart.”

Mary blinked hard, finding herself back in her attic gallery, staring at a sunset over the water. This was the painting that

always reminded her of the first time Lionel had kissed her. It had been so unexpected and sweet.

They'd been walking along West Beach together as the sun started to dip, and he was telling her about a painting trip to the south of France. He was halfway through describing the exact colours of a lake he'd taken a swim in at sunset when he'd suddenly stopped talking mid-sentence.

The moment had seemed to stretch as he'd turned to look at her, and every sound became magnified. The gentle shushing of the waves, the call of the gulls overhead, and the pounding of her heart had all told her that she was approaching a moment that would change her for the rest of her life.

When he'd kissed her, it was gentle and wonderful – and just so right. Pulling back without a single word, Lionel had laced his fingers through hers, and they'd continued along the sandy beach, their bare feet leaving gentle tracks in the sand behind them.

Letting out a long, slow breath, Mary fished out her sodden hanky and did her best to dab away the tears that were coming thick and fast. She really needed to get herself under control again. *Really!* Anyone would think she was a young girl suffering her first heartbreak, the way she was carrying on.

As it was... she was just a silly old woman who was *still* suffering her first heartbreak all these decades later. But, that time with Lionel before he'd proposed had been perfect. Why did it all have to go so wrong?

Of course, with it being Lionel, he'd done the whole thing properly. He'd gone down on one knee in the sand of West Beach and asked her to be his wife.

“Mary, will you stay with me forever? You’ve healed me – heart and soul.”

Mary shivered. It still gave her goosebumps whenever she thought about it... which was exactly why she did her best *not* to think about it too often.

She'd been so young and stupid back then. She knew now that she should have said yes straight away and never let

Lionel go. A love like theirs was a priceless gift – something you were very lucky to find once in a lifetime.

Unfortunately, back then, like the naïve idiot she was, she simply hadn't understood what was at stake. As well as spending time with Lionel, she'd been busy making a grand new friend with another newcomer in town, and a little part of her wanted to impress this Veronica Hughes. So, doing her best to ignore the hurt in his eyes, Mary told Lionel that she wanted time to think about it. Veronica had advised her to make him wait, so - even though she knew she'd accept him eventually, that's exactly what she did.

Little did she know then that fate had other plans for them. Mary hadn't had the faintest inkling that she was busy making the biggest mistake of her life – one that would haunt her for the rest of her life.

CHAPTER 5



‘Come on, Mary. Pull yourself together!’

Mary gave herself a little shake. She needed to get on with her day – she couldn’t spend all day up here surrounded by bitter-sweet memories of the past. It was time to head back downstairs to reality.

Giving her eyes one last dab with her hanky, she stashed it back up her sleeve and headed for the staircase.

She’d just reached the top of the final flight when she felt a familiar, chilly breeze sweeping up the hallway to greet her.

‘Drat it all!’ she sighed.

Sure enough, the front door had blown wide open – the faulty catch letting her down yet again. She hurried down the last few steps, keen to close it against the cool spring air that was swirling around and robbing the house of all its warmth. She really *must* remember to ask Ben to fix it for her the next time she saw him.

As she pushed the door closed and gave the catch a good rattle until she heard it click into place, Mary spotted a tell-tale wet footprint on the floor.

Hmm... had there been an unexpected visitor while she’d been mooning around upstairs?

Mary’s eyes swept the smooth grey flagstones that ran all the way down the hallway and through into the kitchen. She smiled. Sure enough, there was a line of wet footprints leading

all the way to the kitchen doorway and out of sight around the corner. She definitely had an intruder on her hands.

At least there wasn't any seaweed this time. That was an improvement on the last time she'd received this particular unexpected guest - when it had looked a bit like a high tide had swept through The Old School House.

Striding through into the kitchen, Mary already knew what she was likely to find. Sure enough, there was a large mound of soggy black, tan and white fur curled up in the warmest spot in front of the stove.

'Stanley,' sighed Mary, shaking her head with a fond smile. 'You naughty boy!'

She didn't know how he managed it, but this big bear of a Bernese Mountain Dog had the uncanny knack of turning up just when she most needed a cuddle. Mary bent low over her visitor and gave his large, wet head a pat.

Stanley blinked up at her lazily, his large tail – usually so feathery but right now a damp mess of fur with little strands of added seaweed – flopped back and forth in greeting.

'Well, Stanley old boy – you're a one for breaking and entering, I'll give you that! But – at least you're in here in the warm. I'm going to need to get a towel to you in a minute though!'

Given his soggy, bedraggled state, Mary guessed that he must have swum around the headland again. It had been a while since his last visit – but it wasn't that unusual.

Stanley waggled his eyebrows at her and Mary let out a little laugh. He was such a balm if you were feeling sad... but she had to admit that this little visit today – as nice as it was – certainly complicated matters even further.

Stanley belonged to Kate, and after Mary had done such a good job of managing to head into Seabury without bumping into her, it was rather a blow to realise that she was now going to be forced to call her. Still – she had no choice. It was only fair to let her know that Stanley had turned up safe and sound. The only other option was to load Stanley into her own car and

drive him out to the lighthouse herself – but that didn't help her much as she'd probably still have to speak to Kate, and then the topic of the exhibition was bound to come up.

'You are a pain in the rear end,' said Mary, shooting a wry smile at the wagging dog before heading over to the airing cupboard and choosing one of her most ancient, moth-eaten towels. 'It's lucky you're so handsome... those eyes mean anyone will forgive you in a second!'

Stanley just cocked his head, and Mary let out a delighted chuckle. With some difficulty, she stooped down next to the large puddle of soggy dog and settled herself as comfortably as she could on the stone floor.

Stanley sat up, turned to face Mary, and politely raised a giant paw.

'Silly boy,' beamed Mary, reaching out and taking the warm pads in her palm.

Stanley wiggled his eyebrows again.

Mary dropped his paw and plonked the towel right over his head and started to give him a vigorous rub. She knew from previous visits that Stanley adored being towelled, and sure enough, his back leg was soon going into a delighted scratch as she rubbed the towel down his back.

'Right, you horror,' sighed Mary, giving his head one last pat, 'I guess I'd better call your mum, otherwise she's going to be wondering where on Earth you've got to.'

Mary heaved herself back to her feet, cursing her aged knees as they clicked in protest. Then, feeling a bit like she was on her way to the gallows, made her way out into the hallway where her ancient rotary phone sat on a little table.

Staring down at the phone as if it might bite her the moment she touched it, Mary gave herself a good talking-to. She was being ridiculous – this was Kate, her beloved expupil, not some ogre. Still, it was with a shaking finger she dialled the familiar number and lifted the receiver to her ear.

Mary listened to the insistent ringing, imagining it sounding out over at the lighthouse. She wondered which of its

many floors Kate was working on today.

Kate and Mike were busy renovating the place – slowly turning it into a beautiful, unusual family home. They seemed to have been at it for months – but Mary had to admit that she'd never seen Kate so happy. It was true that she was now sporting several paint streaks in her hair and her clothes were invariably dusty and splattered, but none of that mattered because of the huge smile that seemed permanently fixed on her face.

Mary jumped as she felt a heavy, slightly damp head lean against her leg. She reached down and gave Stanley's ears a tickle.

'It's okay, boy,' she said, taking comfort from his warm presence. 'It's not your fault - it's mine. I'm just being silly.'

'Hello?'

Kate's voice at the other end of the line made Mary jump again.

Really! She'd turned into a gibbering wreck of nerves!

'Kate?' said Mary, glad to hear that her voice was steady, even if it was the complete opposite of how she was feeling inside.

'Yep! Who's this?' asked Kate.

Mary raised her eyebrows as Kate's slightly breathless panting reached her from the other end of the line.

'Mary Scott,' said Mary, sounding a little bit doubtful now. 'Is this a good time?'

'Of course,' said Kate. 'Sorry Miss – I was right at the top of the building... that's quite a lot of stairs. I was worried you were going to give up and hang up before I got to the phone! What can I do for you, Mrs Scott?'

Mary smiled and rolled her eyes good-naturedly. She could hear her ex-pupil instantly going on her best behaviour. It might have been a good couple of decades since she'd taught her here at the school, but just like with Ben, old habits died hard!

‘It’s Mary, dear,’ she chided gently.

‘Of course... sorry Mary!’ laughed Kate. ‘Maybe I’ll get the hang of it one day...’

‘Give it another couple of decades!’ said Mary with a light laugh.

‘I’m glad you’ve called, actually,’ said Kate. ‘I don’t know if you’ve heard, but I’m putting on an...’

‘Exhibition of Lionel Barclay’s work?’ Mary finished for her.

‘Ah-ha! Seabury’s bush telegraph is working well today then?’ said Kate.

‘Yes,’ sighed Mary. After all, it was that very telegraph that had her living in fear of her secret getting out anyway. ‘But before we talk about that, I’ve got a rather large and decidedly damp and furry guest here!’

‘Stanley!’ sighed Kate. ‘Mary, I’m so sorry. I thought he was out in the garden. No matter what we do to try and keep him here, he always seems to get out and go wandering.’

‘Well, if you’re looking for gaps in the fence, I’d suggest you try the seaward side of the garden,’ said Mary, smiling down at the big bear of a dog as he wiggled his eyebrows at her, clearly hoping for a stray rich tea biscuit or two. ‘By the looks of him, I’d say he swam over here.’

‘Of course he did,’ laughed Kate. ‘I swear that dog is part seal, part mermaid!’

‘Would you mind popping over for him when you get a moment?’ said Mary. ‘There’s absolutely no rush, and I *would* bring him up to you, but last time I did that my car smelled of wet dog for a week, and I’m afraid I’ve just had it cleaned!’

‘Of course!’ said Kate, ‘No problem. I’ll come right down in Mike’s car – I would bring Trixie, but she’s at The Sardine and if I’m honest, I’m not sure I’d have the energy to pedal that hairy lummoX all the way home anyway.’

‘Mike won’t mind?’ said Mary quickly.

‘Not at all!’ laughed Kate. ‘It won’t make any difference to him – his car’s permanently doggy these days anyway!’

‘Wonderful,’ said Mary. ‘And there really isn’t any rush – I just wanted you to know that he’s safe. I rather enjoy his company if I’m honest!’

‘I’ll be right over,’ said Kate. ‘I could do with a bit of a break anyway.’

‘In that case, I’ll get the kettle on.’

Mary was just about to say her goodbyes when she decided that it was time to screw up her courage and follow Ethel’s advice. It would be better to get the ball rolling and at least let Kate know that she had *something* to contribute to Lionel’s exhibition. If she didn’t mention it now, she had a nasty feeling she might well just back out of the whole thing when Kate turned up.

‘If you’ve got a couple of minutes when you come over, I think you and I need to have a little chat.’

‘Oh?’ said Kate, sounding half-startled, half-curious.

‘It’s about the exhibition,’ said Mary. ‘I think I might be able to help.’

CHAPTER 6



Mary was more than a little bit surprised by just how quickly Kate appeared at her front door. It was quite a drive from the lighthouse – the road wound its way around the headland and was a bit like a goat track for the first few miles.

Suddenly, Mary had a sneaking suspicion that Kate had been more than ready for an excuse to take a break from her endless renovation work. She was certainly as paint splattered as ever - and Mary couldn't help but think she looked rather tired.

If she was being honest, Mary had been hoping for a little bit longer to mull over how much she wanted to share with Kate about her collection. As far as she could see, she had two choices – she could offer her a couple of paintings and keep the extent of the collection quiet, or she let her old pupil in on the secret and take it from there.

Now her time was up, and she'd still not come to a decision. Ah well... she'd just have to figure it out as they went along!

‘Hi!’ said Kate, beaming brightly at Mary.

‘That was quick!’ said Mary, returning her smile warmly and beckoning for Kate to follow her through to the kitchen where the big dog had curled back up in front of the stove.

‘I thought I'd escape before someone handed me a paintbrush again!’ laughed Kate. ‘Anyway, I'm so sorry about Stanley turning up!’

‘Don’t you worry about that,’ said Mary. ‘It’s nice to have him here – only, I thought I’d better call you straight away. I was... erm... working upstairs. I have no idea how long he’d already been here when I came back down to make a pot of tea. He’d let himself in!’

‘Stanley!’ said Kate, frowning down at the wagging troublemaker. ‘You absolute horror!’

‘Ah well – better that he’s safe and sound and warm than roaming around outside,’ said Mary, taking a rich tea biscuit from the plate on the counter, breaking it in half and feeding a piece to the delighted dog.

‘Honestly! This naughty boy thinks he owns the entire town, the way he carries on,’ laughed Kate.

‘Shall we go through and sit in the living room?’ asked Mary, starting to set out things for a pot of tea.

Kate shook her head. ‘I’d better not. I’m so covered in dust and paint and wallpaper and goodness knows what... Sorry – I should have changed before I came over.’

‘Don’t worry about that!’ said Mary. ‘We’ll sit in here at the table instead. It’s nice and warm, and a bit of paint or glue paste won’t damage these old wooden chairs!’

Kate smiled at her gratefully, clearly relieved that she wasn’t about to destroy her old headmistress’s house. She sank down onto one of the chairs.

‘Oh, thank goodness,’ she sighed. ‘I’ve been run off my feet today!’

Mary watched her for a moment, suddenly mesmerised by a scrap of old wallpaper that had stuck itself to the grubby front bib of Kate’s dungarees. It had a strong pattern on it... something with vines and grapes, though it was difficult to make it out properly. One thing was for sure though – a whole wall of it would have been horrendous.

‘So, how are the renovations going?’ she asked, snapping out of her trance and picking up the teapot. She carried it over to the sink and rinsed it out with boiling water before scooping in a couple of teaspoons of leaf tea from the caddy. She knew

she was old-fashioned, but she didn't hold with teabags. They simply didn't taste right.

'Honestly?' said Kate, resting her elbow on the table and leaning her whole head in her hand as Stanley rested his great head on her lap. 'Exhausting!'

'I can imagine!' said Mary, placing a fine china cup and saucer in front of her guest and then turning to fetch her latest cake subscription box from The Sardine. 'You're not too bored of your own cakes, are you? I do have some biscuits if you prefer?'

'I never tire of Ethel and Sarah's cakes,' said Kate, perking up a bit. 'I barely ever get my hands on any these days – they're too popular! To think there was a time I practically lived off cake and café leftovers!'

'Well... that's got to be a good thing!' said Mary, joining her at the table.

'Yes – it's wonderful the café's doing so well. And, in proper answer to your question – the lighthouse is looking amazing. It's a dream come true to be able to live up there – and the fact that I get to do it with Mike and Sarah is just...'

'The icing on the cake?' said Mary gently. Her heart gave a little squeeze as she said it. She'd marvelled at the way the three of them had just settled into such a happy, family unit. Of course, it was wonderful that Kate had found Mike – but it was Kate's relationship with Mike's daughter that she found so moving. Sarah was partway through college now and if she didn't know better, Mary would have assumed that she and Kate were mother and daughter.

'Yes. Definitely the icing on the cake,' said Kate through a large mouthful of frosted ginger.

Mary smirked as she spotted her guest slip a chunk of cake under the table to Stanley. That hound had the whole "starving puppy" routine down to a fine art... it was all in the sorrowful eyes!

'Now... you said something about being able to help me out with Lionel's exhibition?' said Kate, taking a grateful sip

of tea with an expression of pure bliss on her face. ‘You know – it’s actually great that you called as I was going to give you a shout soon anyway.’

Mary nodded, stirring her cup of tea slowly. She didn’t really need to, given that she didn’t take sugar, but it gave her something to do while she willed the clench of fear in her stomach to ease a little. She knew, rationally, that she was being ridiculous. But when was fear ever rational?

‘See,’ said Kate, blithely unaware of Mary’s discomfort, ‘I’ve got a lot of pieces already – I had them all in my flat above The Sardine – but I’ve had them packed away since I moved up to the lighthouse. Anyway, I think they’ll be safer on the walls of Nana’s for a little while – with all this decorating going on.’

Mary nodded along quietly, dreading the moment when she was actually going to have to decide one way or another.

A couple of paintings – or the whole collection?

‘But... the thing is...’ continued Kate, ‘even though I’ve got a lot of Lionel’s work, it’s not enough for an actual exhibition. Besides, I really want to show how broad his range is, you know? Or... maybe you don’t know?! Sorry, I always just assume that people around here know his work... but...’

Kate trailed off and blushed.

Mary raised her eyebrows slightly. Clearly, her guest was doing her best to be as tactful as possible, but she had a sneaking suspicion that Kate probably knew at least some of her history with Lionel... if not the whole story.

Whether she knew about her secret up in the attic was another matter though.

‘I *do* know his work, yes,’ said Mary, doing her best to keep her voice completely even and lacking in any kind of emotion.

‘Great... well... yes,’ said Kate, still slightly awkward. ‘I mean... I had heard on the grapevine that you might own a couple of paintings? That’s the word around town... and if you

do, it would be amazing if you'd be willing to lend them to me – just for a little while?’

Mary frowned, and in a most uncharacteristic gesture, she started to pick at her thumbnail.

So – even though her two confidantes had kept her secret safe, it looked like the Seabury gossip train had been at work anyway. She trusted Ethel and Ben implicitly – neither of them had said a word, she was sure of it. Seabury was simply too small a place for such a long-held secret to remain completely hidden.

Mary still wasn't certain she was ready to share her collection with such a bunch of gossips, but she was suddenly sure that she could at least share it with Kate. She took a deep breath.

‘Well, I'm glad you're here in person,’ she said. ‘This would be impossible to do over the phone. Follow me?’

Kate's eyes lit up, and she hurried to her feet, clearly excited at the thought of adding new pieces to her pet project.

Mary led the way out of the kitchen, and Stanley followed hot on her heels, plodding so close behind her that she could practically feel the warmth emanating from him. He'd never ventured this far inside The Old School House before and was eager not to miss the opportunity to do a bit of exploring.

‘Come on upstairs a moment?’ said Mary lightly.

Kate nodded in surprise and followed her up to the top floor. For the second time that day, Mary found herself climbing the wooden steps that led up to the attic. Her heart was hammering so loudly in her chest that couldn't help but wonder if Kate could hear it too.

Mary paused for a moment and took a deep breath. She knew she was being ridiculous – after all, Ethel and Ben both knew about it already, and that hadn't been an issue. This was different though. This wasn't just about showing Kate. If she agreed to it - this might be the first step in sharing this strange collection of hers with the world.

‘Ready?’ said Mary, more to herself than to Kate, who was standing patiently behind her on the stairs. Without waiting for an answer, she opened the doors and pulled the light switch before she had the chance to change her mind. Then she quickly stepped out of the way, making room for Kate to enter the attic.

As if sensing that Mary needed him, Stanley sat right on top of her feet and leaned his considerable bulk back against her skirt. She could feel the dampness from his still-wet fur seeping into the fabric, but right now she didn’t mind one little bit. She put a hand on his head, glad of his steady, calming presence as she watched Kate stare around her in wonder.

Mary glanced around too and for a moment, it was as though she was seeing the space through Kate’s eyes.

‘Lionel said that he thought there were more pieces out there somewhere... but I never expected to find them all in one place - especially not here in Seabury!’ gasped Kate turning on the spot.

Suddenly, Mary wasn’t quite sure how to tell her that there were plenty more hanging just around the corner.

‘How many are there?’ asked Kate.

‘I’ve got two hundred and fourteen oil paintings in total,’ said Mary, a strange sense of resignation settling over her. ‘There’s only one hundred and seventy-two framed and hanging up here at the moment though. That chest over there contains a collection of sketches and prep drawings, and I’ve also got about thirty watercolours stored elsewhere.’

Kate’s mouth was now hanging open as if she couldn’t quite believe this jackpot she’d somehow managed to hit by accident.

‘How...? Why...? When...?’ she stammered, clearly searching for the right way to ask Mary how on earth she’d ended up with the majority of Lionel’s life’s work. ‘I mean, I was hoping you had one or two... I never guessed it would be anything like this!’

‘Have a bit more of a look around the corner there,’ said Mary calmly, ‘and then I think we’d better go back downstairs. I’ll tell you all about it over another pot of tea if you’d like?’

‘I think you’d better!’ said Kate, still staring around with wide eyes.

It had been some years now since there had been enough room up here to display all her paintings at the same time. Even the cavernous classrooms downstairs wouldn’t have been big enough to accommodate the entire collection... not that Mary would have dreamed of hanging them downstairs anyway – they’d be far too easy to spot.

Suddenly, she felt a tiny flicker of excitement kindle at the idea of being able to hang some of the stored works once again.

Mary took a deep breath. The moment she’d been dreading all day was over... and it looked like Kate was in more of a state of shock than she was.

A strange sense of lightness seemed to settle over her as she watched Kate exploring the attic. Her vast collection had built up into a huge secret in her mind over the years, and it had started to feel a bit like her version of hiding a wife in the attic... though decidedly less Gothic since Ben had put the new lighting in for her. Perhaps sharing her collection with the public would help bring it into the light and make it feel a bit less like a sordid little secret.

The only problem with that was... how on earth was she going to be able to face Lionel?

CHAPTER 7



‘So,’ said Mary as she set yet another pot of tea on the kitchen table. ‘It’s a story that goes back a long way. I’m guessing you know that Lionel and I were once involved? What you youngsters would call dating?’

‘I only know a little bit,’ said Kate awkwardly. ‘But I know it didn’t work out between you.’

Mary smiled softly. ‘There was a bit more to it than that, I’m afraid.’

Kate pulled a rueful face.

‘Lionel asked me to marry him,’ said Mary, keeping her voice as matter-of-fact as possible.

‘Oh!’ said Kate.

‘And I said no,’ continued Mary.

Kate stared at her, clearly not knowing what to say.

‘It was the biggest mistake of my life and I’ve regretted it ever since.’

‘I’m so sorry!’ said Kate. ‘I didn’t realise... what happened?’

Mary chewed her lip for a moment. Did she really want to re-hash all this now – so many years later? Did it really matter? Yes. Actually, it did. There was one word – one name – right on the tip of her tongue. It was the simple answer to Kate’s question.

‘Veronica,’ said Mary with a deep frown.

‘Her?!’ said Kate in surprise. ‘But... how?’

‘She was quite clever, really,’ sighed Mary. ‘She came to town not long after Lionel had moved in, and I decided to befriend her. In a way, I guess I brought all the trouble on myself.’

Mary paused for a moment, wishing yet again that she’d been a little bit more worldly-wise back then, and a little bit harder to manipulate.

‘I mean,’ said Kate, ‘I know she hounded your poor mum for her pudding recipe... and she caused Lionel years of angst – trying so hard to get him to leave the hotel after she’d bought the place... but I had no idea you knew her before all that!’

Mary nodded. ‘The thing was, back then she was new to town, so no one really had a clue what she was like. Anyway – to begin with I thought she was so glamorous. She seemed to know all about men and relationships – and she was buying a *hotel* of all things!’

‘So, Lionel hadn’t been living there very long before she bought it?’ said Kate, curiously.

‘That’s right,’ sighed Mary. ‘Mum had retired before either of them had arrived, but I was still in and out all the time, picking up bits and pieces from the kitchen that she’d left behind. Anyway, I started spending time with Lionel, and I suppose Veronica saw me as the perfect weapon to try to get him to leave so she wouldn’t be lumbered with a sitting tenant she didn’t want when she finally bought Pebble Street.’

‘But how?’ said Kate, looking horrified.

‘Well, as Lionel and I saw more of each other, I spent less and less time with Veronica. By then I’d realised that she wasn’t particularly... nice. Of course, I had no idea how awful she *could* be, but even I was bright enough to figure out that she had a bit of a mean streak.

‘The thing was, I was very naïve... very sheltered... and I trusted other people’s advice and opinions more than my own gut instinct. So, when Lionel asked me to marry him I followed the advice Veronica had given me months before...

“Mary, you mustn’t accept him if he asks – not the first time. He’ll just think you’re a fool. If he asks you, come to me and I’ll tell you what to do.”

‘So - I played silly buggers and didn’t accept him, though I wanted to more than anything.’

Mary stopped talking. She didn’t trust her voice to hold out any longer. She went to take a sip of tea, but her hands were shaking so badly she was forced to put the cup back into its saucer with a clatter.

‘Did you...’ Kate paused and then started again. ‘Did you go to Veronica and ask her what to do?’

Mary nodded. ‘That’s when she told me that she and Lionel had been seeing each other behind my back. According to her, he’d only proposed out of guilt.’

‘Lionel and Veronica?!’ squeaked Kate in horror. ‘I don’t believe it!’

‘Well... you’re far brighter than I was,’ said Mary bitterly. ‘Veronica was very plausible. By then she’d bought the hotel, and she used it to hammer her point home. *“Come on Mary, think about it. Why else would I let him stay otherwise?”*’

‘Because it was a legal stipulation of the sale!’ said Kate, bashing her palm against the table, making Mary jump. ‘Sorry!’ she added sheepishly.

‘Of course, I know that now,’ sighed Mary. ‘The problem was, Lionel was such a gentleman, he didn’t share the difficulties he was having with anyone to begin with. Not even me.’

‘But... surely he put you right straight away?’ said Kate, looking slightly nauseous.

Mary shook her head. ‘I didn’t give him a chance to - I never told him what Veronica had said. I found out soon enough that it was all lies, of course, but at the time I believed every word of it. I broke it off with Lionel. I didn’t give him a reason - I just retreated back here and hid away... and that’s basically what I’ve been doing ever since.’

‘But... I just don’t understand why she did it,’ said Kate. Her voice was quiet now and the look of pity on her face was almost more than Mary could bear.

‘I believe it was one of her earliest schemes to try and get Lionel to leave Pebble Street. It almost worked too. Eth... someone told me he got as far as packing the majority of his things into boxes... but then he started painting again and decided to stay.’

‘And you never told him what happened?’ said Kate, her hand now against her chest.

Mary shook her head. ‘No. How could I? It was all too late. I’d broken his heart by being young and foolish. I couldn’t admit my mistake... and I’ve had to live with that for a very long time.’

‘Oh Mary!’ said Kate. She reached her hand across the table as though she was about to grab her hand and then, probably being reminded of their old teacher-pupil relationship, drew back slightly.

Mary wasn’t having any of that. Right now, she needed Kate’s genuine sympathy. She clasped her hand briefly and gave it a squeeze.

‘Not to worry, dear. It’s all ancient history... but now perhaps you can understand a bit better why all that-’ she paused, removed her hand from Kate’s and pointed at the ceiling towards the piles of paintings on display in her attic, ‘had to remain as secret as possible.’

‘I do understand why you kept them quiet... but I still don’t understand how you came to have them all!’ said Kate.

‘Well – Lionel threw himself into his painting as if his life depended on it. He gave some away, apparently, but he didn’t sell very many to begin with... and that’s when I started collecting them in secret.’ Mary paused and rubbed her nose in embarrassment. ‘It sounds silly, but it was a way for me to feel close to him – for a long time it felt like a part of me was missing.’

‘I’d always loved his paintings. Of course, it served another purpose too. The money from my purchases helped Lionel to continue paying his rent at the hotel. Without the funds, he would have been forced to leave. After what I’d done to him, I wanted him to be able to live in the town he loved and continue to do what he loved. Plus, I have to admit, there was also the fact that every single painting I bought was like a tiny act of revenge against Veronica.’

‘But surely he must have known it was you,’ said Kate. ‘There’s no way you could keep such a thing quiet in Seabury!’

‘No chance. I didn’t want him to know – not after I’d treated him so badly. That would have been awful,’ said Mary, going slightly pale just at the thought of it.

‘Then how...?’

‘Ethel,’ said Mary. ‘She acted as my middleman. She smuggled them over out of town for me with my cakes.’

‘Oh my goodness,’ said Kate, smiling in spite of herself, ‘is that why you order our boxes twice a week?! Is this the reason Ethel usually volunteers to bring them over for you?!’

‘No,’ hooted Mary. ‘I order your cake boxes because they’re delicious and one a week is never enough – especially when young Ben’s over here doing work. That boy’s always been a bottomless pit. As for Ethel – we are very old friends, and we enjoy a good natter - I’ve got to keep up with the goings on in Seabury somehow. But if you’re asking whether your cake boxes have occasionally served as excellent camouflage for a painting or to... then... I’d have to say yes.’

Kate grinned. ‘You know, I rather like the fact that The Sardine has had even the tiniest part to play in an amazing love story... even if it doesn’t *quite* have the happy-ever-after ending I’d prefer!’

‘Sorry about that,’ sighed Mary, sipping at her rather tepid cup of tea.

‘Well – this certainly explains why Ethel was being so weird when I asked her if she knew anyone who might have a

painting or two of Lionel's stashed away,' said Kate.

'Don't tell her that,' said Mary with a smile. 'She's under the impression she was being incredibly subtle.'

'Hm... I'm not sure our Ethel's cut out for undercover work,' said Kate with a smirk.

'Don't knock it. She's managed to smuggle over two hundred pieces of art to me over the space of several decades without the good people of the nosiest town in Britain being any the wiser,' said Mary. 'From where I'm standing, she deserves a medal.'

'You make a good point,' said Kate. 'And... are you still adding to your collection?'

'I can't stop,' said Mary with a shrug. 'I love going up to the attic and seeing them all. They're like old friends. I get to see Seabury through Lionel's eyes.'

'It's so beautiful up there,' said Kate. 'I really wasn't expecting something like that.'

'It's a lot better since I got I Ben to fit the new lights and do it all up,' said Mary. 'Of course, I had to get him to promise to keep my secret too.'

'Ah! That explains why Ben was being so weird too!' said Kate.

Mary chuckled. 'That boy's not made for keeping secrets,' she said.

'Never was,' said Kate. 'Remember in school when he brought an entire bag of Fruit Salads in his pocket even though they were banned?'

Mary nodded. She remembered it well. She'd banned sweets in the hope of saving the kid's teeth at least a little bit of wear and tear. Ben had taken an illicit trip to the sweet shop before heading to school one morning and had burst into tears mid-way through a history lesson and confessed everything. She hadn't even had to prompt him.

'He's a good lad,' she said fondly.

‘I’ll never forget that day,’ laughed Kate. ‘You made him share one with everyone in the class and then you confiscated the bag until the end of the day.’

‘It only seemed fair,’ said Mary. ‘Besides... I have a bit of a thing for fruit salads myself! Anyway – maybe I’ve been a bit unfair on Ben, asking him to keep this secret for me – especially knowing what he’s like.’

‘Straight as an arrow,’ agreed Kate. ‘It was definitely a bit of a risk on your part considering he’s living with Lionel’s great niece!’

‘Hattie hadn’t moved to town by then,’ said Mary. ‘I must admit, it did give me several sleepless nights to start with, but I felt a lot better after spending some time with her. I like her very much... I wouldn’t have given her my mother’s pudding recipe otherwise.’

‘Oh goodness! I’ve just realised - you were there at Pebble Street’s Grand Opening... with Lionel!’ said Kate, her eyes growing wide.

Mary nodded but didn’t say anything. Nearly a year later and she still couldn’t quite figure out how she felt about that strange interlude. So many little meetings with Lionel after decades apart had been a strange kind of delicious torture.

It had taken her an awful lot of soul-searching before she’d accepted the invitation to the Grand Opening, and in the end, she’d only done so out of respect for her late mother. It had been heart-breaking and wonderful in equal measure – and she’d come away knowing one thing for certain - she still loved Lionel Barclay with all her heart. The problem was, all these years later, it didn’t hurt any less that one stupid mistake had cost her so much happiness.

‘Look,’ said Mary quietly. ‘This morning, I was desperately running around town trying to make sure my tracks were covered so that you wouldn’t find out about my secret. I thought if I could avoid bumping into you I wouldn’t have to own up. Then I came home to find Stanley waiting for me, and it somehow knocked some sense into me. You’d think

I'd have learned by now that avoiding an issue isn't the best way to solve anything.'

'Well... no, I guess not,' said Kate.

'The thing is... I *do* really want to help you with your exhibition... but I'm not quite ready to make the decision yet.'

Mary paused for a moment as Stanley's huge head dropped into her lap. It was as though he'd sensed the exact moment she needed a bit of extra comfort. She stroked his silky ears and smiled as he let out a huge sigh and closed his eyes.

'You see,' she continued, 'I still don't want Lionel to know I've got all his work here. I don't want him to know what a fool I was – believing Veronica all those years ago. Plus, I'd hate for him to think that I'd bought those paintings out of some kind of charity. I bought them because I love them... and they were my only way of staying connected to him.'

Kate frowned. 'I'm so sorry,' she said quietly. 'I never meant for this project of mine to cause so much pain.'

'Bless your heart,' said Mary. 'Don't you apologise! You've done nothing wrong at all – and I'm sure you can see that I think Lionel deserves this show more than anyone. I want to help – I really do. I actually think it would be incredibly selfish of me not to take the opportunity to share the paintings with everyone. But... I just can't have people knowing they're mine.'

'I'm sure there's a simple solution,' said Kate drumming her fingers lightly on the table.

'Will you let me think about it until tomorrow? I want to be certain I've made the right decision.'

Kate nodded and smiled at her. 'Of course. And I'll have a think about the best way to do it – if you agree, of course.'

'And... can I ask you another favour?' said Mary, feeling more than a little bit foolish now. 'Can you keep everything to yourself – just for now?'

'Of course!' said Kate quickly. 'Blimey – if *Ben* can manage to keep his mouth shut, then I definitely can!'

Mary had to laugh at the look on her face – she was suddenly reminded of Kate as the determined little girl she'd taught all those years ago.

‘Well – see that you do,’ said Mary, sounding far more like her old, brisk self again, ‘otherwise it’s going to cost you more than a bag of Fruit Salads!’

‘Yes miss,’ muttered Kate with a wink.

CHAPTER 8



Considering Kate was the long-time owner of The Sardine over on West Beach, it felt like a decidedly odd choice to meet her at the other end of Seabury in New York Froth. It might be her other half's café, but it was still her direct competition.

However, this morning, Mary didn't feel too bad about it given it had been Kate's suggestion in the first place. In fact, she'd readily agreed to the plan the minute Kate had pointed out that Mike's café on North Beach would mean that they'd be able to talk in *relative* private. When she stopped to compare it with The Sardine, it was definitely preferable. As much as Mary loved Kate's cosy little place, you were guaranteed to be overheard – and then the rest of the town would know every single detail before bedtime.

On top of all that, if they'd decided to meet in The Sardine, there was always the possibility that Lionel himself might turn up at any moment. According to Kate, even though he now had an entire restaurant on the ground floor of his home, he still loved to frequent the café for breakfast.

Stifling a yawn, Mary paused on the pavement outside New York Froth to gather her wits about her. She was exhausted after the emotional rollercoaster of the day before. The trip into Seabury and the initial shock of learning about Lionel's exhibition would have been enough, but Kate's visit and their long talk about the past had left her drained.

Not that Mary had been able to get to sleep when she'd finally fallen into bed. Images of the past had bombarded her

as she'd tossed and turned, wishing she could turn back the clock and be allowed to make her choices all over again.

Against all odds, Mary had to admit that she'd awoken that morning feeling lighter and far more positive than she had done in a very long time... even if it did feel like she needed to sleep for a week. She put this new optimism down to the fact that she'd finally shared her whole story with someone.

Of course, both Ben and Ethel knew certain parts of what had happened, but telling Kate had been different – this time, Mary felt like it had been her choice. She wasn't sure why it made such a huge difference, but – even though she knew that it was far too late for her to change the past – perhaps she could start forgiving herself at long last...

Mary yawned again before she could stop herself, and then hastily peered around her to check that no one had caught her in the act.

Phew! The coast was clear!

The one thing she hadn't expected today was to be making a return trip to Seabury. However, Mary had woken up with a fierce determination to let Kate have the pick of her entire collection for Lionel's exhibition. She'd called her the moment she thought it was late enough to be at least vaguely acceptable – but Mike had answered and told her to try Kate's mobile instead because she was already down in the old ice cream shop.

Mary glanced at her watch. Right – she'd better head inside. As usual, she was a little bit early, but Kate would be here in just a couple of minutes and the last thing she wanted to do was bump into anyone else before she had the chance to speak to her. Mary didn't think she'd change her mind about the exhibition now that she'd made her decision - but if she happened to catch sight of Lionel on his morning stroll, then all bets could well be off.

Tugging at the heavy door, Mary hauled it open and stepped into the cavernous café. Goodness – Kate hadn't been exaggerating when she'd said it was full of corners that were perfect for a private chat – this place was huge! It was actually

surprisingly nice inside - certainly a lot less claustrophobic than The Sardine. New York Froth was large but its subtle, low lighting, squashy sofas and bookshelves full to bursting with novels lining the walls gave it a cosy, relaxed atmosphere. She could see exactly why Kate had chosen it.

Glancing around as she tried to take everything in, Mary made her way over to the counter and smiled at the young barista.

‘Hi!’ he asked. ‘What can I get for you?’

Mary eyeballed his nametag before answering.

‘Good morning Robbie. I’d like a pot of tea, please,’ she said, and then instantly cringed a little. No matter how much she practised trying to sound a little more casual, she could never quite shake the fact that she still came across as a prim and proper headteacher.

Robbie shot her an easy grin and for some reason, Mary felt herself grow slightly warm.

‘We don’t really have pots,’ said Robbie, cocking his head and ruffling his hair with his fingers in a gesture that Mary was sure went against about a dozen food hygiene mandates. ‘I can make you a cup or a mug with a tea bag in it?’

A mug with a tea bag?

‘No thank you very much,’ said Mary. The thought of it appalled her. She hadn’t drunk tea bag tea in a very long time. ‘In that case, I’ll have a coffee, please.’

Then she noticed that they had one of those ghastly, posh coffee machines.

‘You don’t happen to have just normal, instant coffee, do you?’ she said hopefully.

It was Robbie’s turn to look appalled. He shook his head in horror. ‘Nobody wants that muck,’ he said with a shudder.

Mary had to bite her tongue – she came very close to telling him not to answer back as though he was one of her five-year-old pupils who needed to be taught a lesson in manners. She took a deep breath. She’d simply change her

order to a glass of milk. Yes, that would be nice - refreshing and cool.

‘May I have a glass of skimmed milk, please?’ she said, her tone becoming even more clipped than usual.

‘If you want cow juice, we’ve only got the enriched full-fat stuff as it makes the best coffee. Or I can do coconut, almond, soy...’

Mary interrupted him with a spluttering sound.

What on earth was the world coming to?!

‘Actually, I’ll just stick with water, thanks. No lemon.’

‘Still or sparkling,’ said Robbie.

Oh for the love of...!

‘Still and straight out of the tap,’ she said, praying that would be the last ridiculous question she had to answer before she actually had a drink in her hand. What a to-do!

Robbie moved to her to fetch a glass, but Mary still caught a definite eye roll as he turned away. Much to her surprise, she had quite a job resisting sticking her tongue out at him. What on earth had got into her this morning?!

Mary had just started to tap her nails irritably against the counter as she waited for Robbie to deliver her *very* easy drink when Kate appeared at her shoulder.

‘Hi!’ she said, giving Mary a weary smile. ‘Sorry – am I late?’

Mary shook her head quickly. ‘No, not at all. I’m afraid I’m always a bit early – hangover from being a teacher,’ she laughed.

Kate smiled in relief, and Mary couldn’t help thinking that she looked even wearier than yesterday, if that was possible.

‘Excuse the state of me – I’ve been over at Nana’s since sparrow-far... erm... since first thing,’ she said, quickly censoring her language. ‘I want to get everything ready as soon as possible so I can start the fun bit of actually hanging up some paintings!’

Mary winced slightly as the mention of the exhibition so close to Robbie put her instantly on edge. She knew she was being ridiculous though – the fact that there was going to be an exhibition was public knowledge... and she really needed to learn to lighten up a bit about it all if she was going to go through with her decision.

‘So, how’s it going over there?’ she asked.

‘It’s been a bit of a struggle, actually,’ sighed Kate. ‘Taking the counters out and giving everything a fresh coat of paint wasn’t too bad...’

‘Those counters must have been very heavy!’ said Mary.

‘Luckily, I had help from Robbie here,’ said Kate, smiling at the young lad as he finally placed Mary’s glass of water down for her on the counter.

‘That was my pleasure,’ he said, smiling at Kate. ‘And just shout if you need me to do anything else for you – I’m only two seconds away and I’m betting the boss won’t mind!’

Mary instantly warmed to the lad, and she smiled at him approvingly.

Kate quickly ordered a coffee without having to answer a single additional question – clearly Robbie knew exactly what she wanted without having to be asked.

‘I’ll bring it over,’ he said, turning straight to the gleaming coffee machine and setting it whistling.

‘No Stanley today?’ asked Mary as Kate led the way over to a table that sat in a book-lined alcove at the back of the café.

‘Nope,’ said Kate. ‘He’s at home with Mike... or at least he should be. It’s high tide and the Coast Guard has been alerted that there’s a good chance a big, fluffy dog might be seen out in the shipping lanes.’

Mary chuckled, though she knew Kate was only half joking.

‘Right,’ said Kate the minute Robbie had placed her coffee in front of her with a flourish and then disappeared back

behind the counter to fiddle with his phone, ‘are you ready to get down to business?’

Mary frowned slightly as a spike of nerves hit her in the stomach. She took a deep breath and nodded. She was determined to see this through.

‘Okay,’ said Kate, ‘what’s the verdict.’

‘Well,’ said Mary, ‘I’ve decided that I’d very much like it if you’d be willing to include my collection in your exhibition.’

Kate’s face broke into a beaming smile, and Mary had the sneaking suspicion she’d have let out a cheer if this hadn’t been quite such a sensitive conversation they were having.

‘Oh *Mary!*’ said Kate. ‘I’m so thrilled!’

‘I’m glad,’ said Mary tightly, returning Kate’s smile though she couldn’t relax fully yet - she hadn’t quite finished. ‘I’m afraid there have to be a few conditions though.’

‘Okay,’ said Kate, hesitantly.

‘Oh, it’s nothing too onerous,’ said Mary quickly. She didn’t want Kate to think she was being difficult. ‘I’ve just got two requests. The first one is that I want my paintings to be marked with “*private collection*” instead of my name.’

Kate nodded, a look of relief crossing her face.

‘Not a problem,’ she said. ‘All the pieces are going to be labelled – both for the visitors but also, more importantly – so that I can make sure they’re returned to their rightful owners when it’s all over. I can add “Private Collection” to your pieces and because all the others will be from named people, I’ll know exactly which ones are yours.’

‘But no one else will?’ said Mary nervously.

‘Exactly,’ said Kate.

‘Thank you!’ said Mary, letting out a sigh of relief. ‘My second request is that I *really* don’t want Lionel to know where they came from.’ Mary paused and took a calming breath. ‘Unless he asks directly,’ she added.

‘That’s a simple enough request,’ said Kate. ‘I won’t tell a soul – not even Mike. But... if Lionel *does* ask me, what do you want me to say?’

Mary bit her lip for a moment, thinking hard. Lionel was *bound* to be in and out of the exhibition – he was just that sort of man – full of life. He loved people and he adored a good party! There was no doubt in her mind that he was going to be curious... of course he was. Mary knew *she* would be if the shoe was on the other foot. She’d want to know exactly where Kate had found such a large number of paintings that ranged over so many years.

‘Just tell him the truth, I suppose – that I love his work and have been collecting it for years.’ Just saying the words made her feel slightly sick. ‘I don’t want any more secrecy if I can help it – and I certainly don’t want you or anyone else to have to lie for me. There’s been far too much of that nonsense already.’

Kate smiled at her and nodded. ‘Okay – as long as you’re certain?’

Mary nodded. She was.

‘Right,’ said Kate, looking delighted. ‘Was there anything else?’

‘Just one more question I need to ask you,’ said Mary.

‘Go ahead,’ said Kate.

‘How many of them do you want?’ said Mary, thinking of her vast collection back at The Old School House. After all – there was no way they’d all fit into Nana’s! ‘I mean, how many am I allowed to put into the show? I’ve got so many to choose from.’

Kate sat and thought about it for a moment. ‘Maybe... say... around fifty of your favourites?’ she said at last. ‘It would be wonderful to have a good range on show, and Lionel’s pieces aren’t massive. The space over at Nana’s is surprisingly large now that all the freezers are gone.’

‘I’m sure I can manage to whittle it down to fifty,’ said Mary, already wondering where on earth she was going to

start. She would have to go through her entire collection to make her choices – there was no way she could just discount the pieces she had stashed away just because it would be easier.

To anyone else, the task ahead would probably sound like an easy one, but somehow Mary had a feeling that this part of the process might prove to be the most difficult bit she'd had to face so far.

CHAPTER 9



Two days later, The Old School House looked like someone had raided a shrine set up in honour of Lionel Barclay... and in a way, Mary guessed that wasn't too far from the truth.

Mary straightened up from the kitchen table - where she had a dozen pencil preparatory sketches spread out - and irritably tucked some flyaway strands of hair behind her ears. She was very glad that her house was so secluded... she'd hate anyone to catch a glimpse of her less-than-composed state right now. As for the house? Well, that was another matter entirely.

To begin with, Mary had done her best to confine the job of sorting through her collection to the attic. At least that way she could shut the doors on the job in hand whenever she wanted to, and descent the stairs into the relative sanity of the rest of the house. It had been a grand idea, but in reality, it had lasted all of two hours.

Mary had soon become irritated – not least because she was beavering away so far from the easy reach of her kettle and beloved teapot. There was also the fact that she was becoming increasingly annoyed with herself for treating this collection – which had brought her so much joy over the years – as some kind of sordid secret.

A seismic shift had begun to take place – she had no doubt about that. Whether it would result in something good or bad, Mary still had no clue. But, while she waited to find out, she

decided that it was time to throw open the doors and drag her collection downstairs into the light... and closer to the teapot.

Mary had been right about one thing, though. It was proving incredibly difficult to pick her favourite paintings for the exhibition. The most obvious thing to do would be to choose ones from amongst the pieces that were already on display in the attic. After all, they were the most familiar to her given that she visited them several times a day. There was the added bonus that she already knew the effect they had on her, so there wouldn't be too many emotional surprises in store.

The thing was – Mary wasn't one to do things half-heartedly and it had only taken ten minutes for her to decide that she needed to unpack every single piece of work of Lionel's she owned so that she could be sure to make the right choices.

It was proving to be a mammoth task, and it had taken her an entire day simply dragging box after box of framed paintings from their hidey-holes all over the house. She'd even had to scabble around underneath her bed to slide a couple of larger pieces out from their resting place amongst the dust bunnies she was horrified to find under there.

Mary had always had a lingering sense of sadness that her collection had become too large to have all of the pieces on display at once – but now that she had them balanced on every available shelf, nook and cranny to help make her decision, she realised that she'd need to buy an entire mansion in order to fit them all on the walls... and there were still most of the sketches and rarer watercolours still to unpack!

That was the thing when you had such a connection to the artist – most of the pieces that had been stashed away for years had just as much meaning as those she had currently on display. Many of them had been hung on the walls for a decade or more before Mary had decided to put them away and chosen others to take their place. Seeing them all around her now – she made a pact with herself to do that far more regularly from now on.

Mary reached back into the box she was currently sorting through and took the last parcel from the bottom. Peeling back the layers of tissue paper, she lifted the thick piece of cardboard that was in place to protect several tiny pencil sketches that lay nestled inside.

Mary smiled. As incredible as Lionel's oil paintings were, these quick pencil sketches had a charm all of their own – and they always made her feel one step closer to him too. She could almost see his hand still moving across the paper as he swiftly captured a scene. She remembered how she'd watched him draw, amazed at the alchemy that seemed to be taking place on the page in front of him.

Yes... maybe she should include a couple of these for Kate's exhibition. There was a gorgeous little sketch of the King's Nose that would work well – and she could always borrow a frame from one of the other pieces she wasn't going to choose.

Next in the pile was a little portrait. Goodness – it was Florence Dowding! This must have been drawn before Frank had bought Nana's. Florence was the original owner – and there was no mistaking her. Just a few lines were enough for Lionel's talented pencil to capture her whole character. She stood with her arms crossed, her hair a complete bird's nest, and her signature limp cigarette dangled from the corner of her mouth. Perhaps *not* one for the exhibition... and besides, Mary somehow doubted many people would remember her now, other than the older residents like Rose Blanchford. In fact, maybe that was a good reason to include it. After all, it was something a little bit different and it would add a nice touch of Nana's history to the exhibition!

Mary popped it on her “firm yes” pile... which was still decidedly thin on the ground. Bother – this job really was taking far more time and energy than she'd expected.

Turning back to the pile of sketches, she flipped through several quick studies of seagulls until she reached the last one. Her legs promptly gave out from under her, and she crashed down onto the hard kitchen chair behind her with a gasp.

On the table in front of her sat a little sketch of a line of children sitting on the pebbles of North Beach, each of them with an ice cream clutched in their mitts.

Mary swallowed hard then bit her lip in a desperate attempt to stop it from wobbling. She remembered Lionel drawing this one. That had been the day they'd first talked about their future family and the children they longed to have together – the children they had never had.

Reaching for her hanky, Mary swiftly turned the sketch over and placed it back in the bottom of the box. That one was definitely not going anywhere near the exhibition. She couldn't bear anyone else to see it... in fact, she wasn't sure that *she* ever wanted to see it again.

Mary got determinedly back to her feet, and without a backwards glance, she grabbed her coat from the hook on the back of the door and swiftly made her way out of the kitchen. It was time for a break – she needed some fresh air before she decided to throw in the towel and called Kate to tell her that she'd changed her mind.



The evening breeze down on her little beach was like a balm to Mary's frayed nerves. She pulled her coat tightly around herself, thrusting her hands deep into her pockets and took in a long, deep breath of the salty, spring-scented air.

For a moment, she truly wished that she hadn't agreed to do this for Kate. Of course, she'd known the onslaught of memories would be difficult to navigate at times, but that sketch of the children had just been too much. It was yet another reminder of the life she could have had – filled with love and family and Lionel.

Mary was more than used to the dull ache of loss following her through her days, but to have it thrust in her face like that had felt like being stabbed in the heart. Of course, it didn't help that she could still remember exactly how she felt on that day – so full of love and hope and excitement for the future.

Look how it had all worked out – an empty life full of echoes of the past.

Letting out a long sigh, Mary let her eyes rest on the water as the gentle waves soothed the ache in her heart.

‘You’re wrong,’ she whispered.

Her life hadn’t been empty at all. Different? Yes. But still, there had been the joy of simple friendship with people like Ethel. She’d been surrounded by children at the school, and watching her old pupils grow into exceptional adults had been the pride and joy of her life. Just look at Ben and Kate! Of course, she didn’t take credit for how well they’d turned out – that was all their own doing – but she was proud to have been a small part of their wonderful stories.

Mary turned to stare back towards The Old School House – just the very top of its roof and chimneypots were visible over the treetops. Yes – her home had brought her joy too. She had so much to be grateful for. Her life had been very different to how she had hoped all those years ago – but it had been far from empty.

Taking solace from these comforting thoughts, Mary stood up a little straighter, doing her best to shrug off the lingering grief for the life that had never happened. She needed to get on with the job at hand... either that, or she needed to admit to herself that it was all too much for her to handle. Then she could either let Kate know that she’d changed her mind or ask her young friend to make the selections for her.

Well – one of those choices was easy -there was no way she was going to pull out and leave Kate in the lurch now. Mary didn’t want to be smug – far from it – but she was convinced that she owned some of Lionel’s very best work, and it would be a crime for them not to be included in the exhibition.

But... perhaps she *should* ask if Kate would be willing to choose the pieces for her?

No – actually, that wouldn’t do at all. For one thing, Mary was no coward. It would be a difficult job – but she had a

feeling that the worst part of the job was now behind her. All she needed to keep in mind was that even though certain paintings made her feel like she was being stabbed in the chest whenever she caught a glimpse of them, no one else would have an inkling of their significance. Perhaps not even Lionel.

Mary began to stride back towards the house, determined to finish the job before her newfound determination deserted her once more. As she made her way back along the tree-lined path, Mary's thoughts remained with Lionel.

As much as Mary had delighted in every single painting and drawing she'd managed to acquire over the years – she still struggled to understand how Lionel could bear to part with them all. He'd sold them without even knowing their destination. They couldn't have meant very much to him, could they?

Then again, from Ethel's hints over the years, Mary knew there had been times Lionel had struggled financially. Perhaps he'd had little choice but to part with his work – even the pieces that were dear to him.

Lionel's paintings were what he relied on for a living and that was partly why she'd been happy to buy so many of them. It hadn't been the main reason though – she had to admit that had been far more selfish. Mary had simply wanted to be surrounded by his work. She knew most people would probably have wanted the complete opposite - keen to distance themselves from their mistake. Not her, though. If she couldn't have the man himself, she needed his thoughts and feelings on canvas and paper to wrap her in their embrace. She wanted to remember what it was like to be so much in love. In fact, the only part of the whole affair she wanted to forget was the moment she'd thrown it all away.

Well... this wouldn't do at all. Wallowing in the past wasn't going to help her get the job done. She still had a lot of sorting out to do before she'd manage to whittle her selection down to a reasonable number. It was time to get back to work – and this time she'd simply have to do her best to swim against the tide of history that kept trying to drag her under.

CHAPTER 10



Mary leaned back against the kitchen sink and blew out an exhausted breath. She'd finally done it! Her choices were made at long last.

Turning and grabbing a clean glass from the draining board, Mary quickly filled it with icy cold water from the tap and gulped it down greedily before filling it straight back up again and taking another, slightly more leisurely sip as she stared out at her garden in the early morning light.

Blimey – it was official... she was getting far too old for this kind of nonsense! She had spent all of yesterday afternoon making her final selections. Then, before the doubts could start creeping in, she'd spent most of the night making sure every single item was framed to perfection before packing them safely in boxes ready to take to the gallery. She'd finally fallen into bed around five in the morning.

Mary gingerly bounced on the balls of her feet. Yup – she could feel every single muscle in her old legs complaining. She was definitely going to regret going at it hammer and tongs when she'd had the chance to seize up! She hadn't done so much exercise in years. It had been a mad night of dashing up and down the stairs endlessly, hauling boxes out of cupboards and moving framed paintings from room to room.

Mary had certainly congratulated herself many times during the process for the foresight of asking Ben to build her a proper wooden staircase up to the attic, complete with a handrail! That flimsy loft ladder she used to have would have made the whole thing a lot more difficult... if not impossible.

The only wobble in her resolve to get the job done came at around midnight when she paused to make herself a snack. By then, she was already exhausted, and she still had a lot of work to do. For a brief moment, she'd considered throwing her hands in the air, going to bed and leaving the rest up to Kate. It didn't last long. The minute Mary finished her omelette and drained her tea mug, she'd found her second wind. There was no way that she was going to give up on a job this close to finishing it!

As it turned out – she hadn't been quite as near to finishing the job as she had hoped... but it was amazing how far a bit of optimism would carry you when you were exhausted and running on fumes.

Thankfully, Mary had plenty of packing materials and boxes hanging around in dusty cupboards, so she'd worked steadily, packing everything away snugly. Yes, she might have had to commandeer the old vacuum cleaner box and the one that her new toaster had come in for the last few paintings – but that wasn't much of a sacrifice. It was just lucky that most of Lionel's paintings were relatively small.

Somewhere around two in the morning, Mary had run out of newspaper, so the last few boxes had frames that had been wrapped in tea towels and then padded out with old scarves and mittens for good measure. After all – these paintings were precious, and she couldn't be too careful.

Letting out an enormous yawn, Mary turned to stare at the mountain of boxes that were now piled on top of – and all around – her kitchen table. Suddenly, she was acutely aware that she had another problem on her hands. How on earth was she going to get this lot over to Nana's?!

The prospect of trying to fit it all into her little car robbed Mary of her remaining crumbs of energy, and she sank down into the nearest kitchen chair.

She made a quick calculation in her head. With all the boxes piled up around her - all different shapes and sizes – she reckoned that it would probably take half a dozen trips or more in her little car - to ferry them to the pop-up gallery. Of course,

every single one of those trips into town would open her up to discovery and questioning by the perennially nosy locals.

At this rate, it wasn't going to be quite the undercover operation she had in mind. Still, she had to get it done somehow and she was fairly good at packing things into tight spaces. Mary hauled herself to her feet. The sooner she made a start on this, the sooner she could go back upstairs for a lie-down.

Half an hour later, having managed to fit just three of the two dozen boxes into her minuscule boot, Mary finally admitted defeat.

If she was going to do this, there was no way she could do it in her car. The problem was – who could she call on for help? She was so tired by this point that she knew she didn't have an ounce of energy left to field off any curious questions. She was likely just to snap – or even worse – burst into tears!

Then it came to her. Of *course!* There was one person she could call. Ben!



Bundled up in a coat, Mary strode back and forth across the patch of gravel outside The Old School House as she waited for Ben to arrive. She knew that the sensible thing would be to go back indoors and have a little rest – but she didn't dare sit back down. She had a feeling the moment she did, she'd fall asleep... or at the very least, seize right up!

As predicted, Ben had been very sweet on the phone. Mary hadn't actually told him exactly what she wanted his help with. For some reason, she'd bumbled around the subject, mentioning the front door latch and a couple of other odd jobs that needed doing. Luckily, Ben had seemed to pick up that she wasn't quite being her normal self, so rather than offering to come over the following week, he'd asked her if she'd like him to come straight over. It had almost been as much as Mary could do to stop herself from weeping with gratitude.

Pricking up her ears, Mary strained to see if she could detect the sound of an engine making its way down the drive. There was something... but...

Oh, bother!

Mary dashed around the front of the house, her eyes trained on the sea. Sure enough, she spotted a little boat approaching the stone quay.

Why on earth had she automatically assumed that Ben would turn up with the bus when he'd said he'd be right over? Not for one moment had she expected him to turn up in his boat!

Goodness, this day really wasn't off to a very good start. She hoped that it wasn't an omen for how the rest of the morning was going to turn out!

Mary hurried along the path towards the little harbour and arrived just in time to watch Ben draw up to the edge of the quay. She quickly forced a smile on her face and waved him in.

'Morning, Miss!' said Ben, giving her a smile as he hopped from the boat and onto the stone steps. Mary winced, but Ben, as ever, was as sure-footed as a gazelle.

'Morning, Benjamin,' she replied, watching him tie the little boat securely to the edge.

'Uh oh,' laughed Ben. '*Benjamin?* Am I in trouble?'

'No, no,' said Mary lightly. 'Thanks for coming so quickly – I just thought you might be coming by road... on the bus?'

Ben had turned up on the bus before. At the time she'd marvelled at his daring – navigating the winding private path in the huge old thing – but as ever, Ben had been as cool as a cucumber as he'd swung it easily onto her gravel car park and proceeded to unload the gear he'd brought with him for doing up the attic.

'Dad's on the bus today,' he said, shaking his head. 'I'm rostered in for tomorrow though - I can always come back then if you like?'

‘Well,’ said Mary slowly, ‘see what you think when I tell you the real reason I’ve dragged you all the way over here.’

Ben raised his eyebrows.

‘Come on,’ she sighed. ‘It’s easier if I just show you.’

Mary led him back to the house without saying another word. She simply ushered him into the kitchen and pointed at the mountain of boxes.

Ben stared at them and then looked at her in confusion.

‘Are you moving?’ he said.

Mary let out a surprised laugh. ‘No... not moving.’

‘Then what...?’ Ben trailed off.

Mary wasn’t really sure where to start.

‘For the exhibition,’ she said.

‘What, Lionel’s one?’ said Ben in surprise.

Mary nodded. ‘I had a word with Kate about it.’

‘These are your paintings?’ said Ben as the penny started to drop. ‘You’re actually going to let her borrow them?’

‘Yes,’ said Mary. ‘That’s the decision I came to in the end.’

‘Wow, that’s brave,’ said Ben.

Mary shot him a look and then smiled. There wasn’t a bad bone in Ben’s body. If he said something, he meant it.

‘Thank you,’ she muttered. ‘I need to get these over to Nana’s. The only problem is – my car is tiny, and these boxes are-’

‘Large?’ said Ben, finishing her sentence.

‘Yes,’ sighed Mary.

‘Well, I can see why you were hoping for the bus,’ said Ben, ‘but I think we can do it another way.’

‘What way?’ said Mary. She wasn’t sure she liked the sound of that.

‘It’s easy,’ he said with a shrug. ‘I can just load them all into the boat. There’s plenty of room – you’ll fit too!’

‘Oh no, you don’t,’ said Mary, backing away automatically.

‘Why not?’ said Ben. ‘It’s the perfect solution if you really want to do this today. Yes, the bus might have been a bit easier - but it would also be way more obvious when we reach the other end. People would definitely spot it and ask questions. If we go in the boat, we can just slip quietly up onto North Beach, unload and take the boxes up to Nana’s. That way, you’ll probably avoid alerting most of the town!’

Mary thought about this for a moment. Ben had a very good point. Plus, her kitchen was absolutely packed with boxes and having to wait another day when she couldn’t even get to her toaster would be a right royal pain in the posterior.

‘But what if we have an accident? What if the boat capsizes?’ she said. ‘All my paintings would be lost.’

‘Give over,’ said Ben, laughing. ‘The water’s like a millpond out there today. Plus, when have you ever seen me capsizes a boat? You’ve known me since I was two years old!’

Mary raised her eyebrows and stared at him. Most unfortunately for them both, she had a very sharp memory and there had been a number of times Ben had arrived at school soaked from head to toe.

‘Hey, you can’t hold that against me,’ said Ben with a smile. ‘I never actually capsized the boat – I just fell off the edge. Anyway, I was young then and a bit wild. I’m all grown up now!’ he paused and winked at her. ‘I promise it will be fine,’ he added more gently when he saw that she was biting her lip.

Ten minutes later, after some more gentle cajoling from Ben, the pair of them were busy carrying the boxes down the path towards the quay. As soon as they had them all stacked up on the stone wall, Ben hopped down onto the boat and began stashing them, one by one, into the hull while Mary watched him from the shore trying to catch her breath.

‘Right,’ said Ben, leaping out of the boat again and coming to stand beside her. ‘That’s all of them. Are you ready to hop on board?’

Mary shook her head, then nodded, then shook her head again, making Ben laugh. She wasn’t really sure she fancied a boat trip right now.

‘Well,’ said Ben gently, ‘you’ve got your coat, hat and handbag, and you locked the door after our last trip...’

‘I’ve got to make sure Stanley doesn’t break and enter while I’m not in!’ said Mary.

‘Right,’ laughed Ben. ‘Is there anything else you need from the house before we leave though? I can always nip back for you...?’

‘Oh – I see,’ said Mary. Ben thought that was the reason she wasn’t ready to get on the boat. ‘No – thank you, Ben. I’ve got everything I need.’

‘Right then,’ said Ben rubbing his hands excitedly and then handing her a life jacket. ‘You do that up and then we’re ready to go.’

Mary put the life jacket over her head on autopilot, feeling a bit like their roles had just been reversed – she was the little kid and he had turned into the responsible adult.

‘That’s it,’ he said. ‘Nice tight bow at the side.’

With that, he hopped back down onto the boat and held out his hand for her to take.

When Mary hesitated again, Ben smiled. ‘You’ve got to come with me to make sure your babies arrive safely, right?’

Mary nodded. Part of her still wanted to drive into town and meet Ben at the other end but she couldn’t face waiting for him on North Beach, not knowing if her paintings were safe.

Yes, Ben was right. She had to get on the boat with her paintings.

Mary grabbed Ben’s hand and quickly hopped over the gap, doing her best not to look down into the swirling water

below them.

CHAPTER 11



It was some time before Mary started to relax. To begin with, she perched on the bench of the little boat, eyeballing each precious box of paintings in turn. Eventually, she let her alert posture ease a little and allowed herself to look outside the confines of the boat for the first time.

She had to admit, it was quite exhilarating, feeling the breeze against her tired face as she watched the blue-green waves. Ben had been right - it was a flat, calm day and he was clearly taking the trip at a leisurely pace for her benefit. Mary had seen the way he usually dashed around in this boat – that was partly why she had been so nervous about bringing her collection on board.

‘You doing okay over there?’ he asked, as she watched him for a moment.

Mary nodded. ‘Thanks for not bombing around like you usually do!’

‘Of course,’ laughed Ben. ‘I’ve got important cargo today.’

Mary returned his smile and went back to gazing dreamily out to sea. She had to admit – now that she’d calmed down a little and become used to the idea of being on a boat, she was actually quite enjoying it. More than enjoying it in fact – this was just lovely.

Suddenly, Mary couldn’t think why she’d never thought to buy a boat of her very own. After all, she had the quay – surely that was the perfect place to moor one! For some reason, the idea had never even occurred to her. Maybe she

should do something about it. She was sure Ben would teach her everything she needed to know. It would be such fun to have a little sailboat that she could take out on a summer's day.

But suddenly, Mary's little daydream bubble popped. You really needed someone to sail *with*, didn't you? Someone you could excitedly point things out to. Someone to spot dolphins with. There would be no fun in it if there was no one to share her slightly soggy sandwiches with and cuddle up to when the sea breeze got a little bit too cold.

Mary wrapped her arms around her, feeling suddenly chilled. She could feel her eyes prickling and she stared very determinedly away from Ben. She was thinking about Lionel again. Then, of course, that naturally brought her back to the fact that she was sitting surrounded by a boat full of his paintings – and where they were heading. Suddenly, she wasn't enjoying the trip quite so much.

'Nearly there!' said Ben cheerfully.

Mary's head snapped up and she stared around only to find the end of North Beach sliding into view.

Mary had forgotten how much faster the trip to Seabury was by boat than by road. It seemed like they'd only left the Old School House mere seconds ago. Now they were nearly there, a little shiver ran down her spine. What if they bumped into Lionel himself? What on earth would she *say*?!

For a moment, she was sorely tempted to beg Ben to turn the boat around and head straight back home. But this had been her decision - it was entirely her choice to do this – and besides, Ben was already manoeuvring the boat towards the pebbles of North Beach.

Right then. Time to dig deep for every ounce of courage she could muster!

The minute they were in the shallow water, Ben hopped right over the edge of the boat and dragged it as far up the beach as he could manage.

‘There we go,’ he said triumphantly, holding out his hand so that he could steady her, ‘at least that will give you a dry landing!’

‘Thank you, Ben,’ she said, gratefully taking it and clambering over the side with as much grace as she could muster... which really wasn’t very much, as it turned out.

As grateful as she was that they’d reached dry land safely, Mary felt a familiar flutter of nerves at being back in Seabury again. The slightly panicky sensation wasn’t helped when she spotted someone watching them from the top of the beach.

‘Wait a minute,’ she said, peering a little harder at the approaching figure, ‘is that Kate?’

‘Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you,’ said Ben. ‘I hope you don’t mind, but while you were tying your life jacket, I sent her a quick message to let her know we’d be on our way and to meet us on the beach.’

Mary nodded, her eyes still on Kate. She frowned. Something wasn’t right.

‘I thought it was a good idea,’ said Ben, taking in her frown with a look of concern. ‘I thought you might have had enough of lugging boxes around, so I thought I’d better call in the cavalry.’

‘Thank you, Ben,’ said Mary quickly, shooting him a smile. She didn’t want him to think she was being ungrateful after he’d been so kind. And he was right, she didn’t think she’d be able to manage much more lifting after the night she’d had ‘That was very thoughtful of you.’

Unfortunately, Mary’s alarm bells were still ringing. The closer Kate came, the easier it was to see the frown on her usually smiling face and the fact that she had her arms tightly crossed over her chest.

Hoping that she was mistaken and that perhaps Kate was just a bit chilly after waiting on the beach for them to arrive, Mary gave her an enthusiastic wave. Kate’s response was decidedly subdued. Mary swallowed. There was clearly something very wrong.

Maybe Kate was just worried about the fact the paintings were piled up in the boat... or perhaps she was wondering why on earth Mary had turned up with a vacuum cleaner and a toaster.

‘Kate... what’s the matter?’ called Mary as soon as her young friend came close enough to hear her over the waves.

Kate shook her head slightly and hurried the rest of the way towards them.

‘Mrs Scott...’ she said in a low voice, breathing slightly faster than normal. ‘Mary, I mean. Sorry.’ She paused and cleared her throat. ‘Lionel knows.’

‘Oh,’ said Mary, feeling decidedly funny all of a sudden. She took a step backwards slightly and then stumbled slightly. Ben quickly reached out, placing his hand against the small of her back and steadying her on the rocks.

Kate hurried forwards and took her hands.

‘Are you okay?’ she said, looking horrified.

‘Fine...’ said Mary.

To her own ears, she sounded like she needed a good dose of smelling salts. This was getting ridiculous. She was Mrs Mary Scott! She gave herself a quick shake and took her hands back from Kate.

‘Yes – I’m fine,’ she said, giving Kate a firm smile and sounding brisk once again. ‘Thank you both – I just lost my footing on the pebbles for a moment.’

‘You know,’ said Ben, glancing at the sky with a worried expression, ‘I’ve got a feeling it might rain on us if we don’t get a wiggle on.’

‘Oh heavens!’ said Kate.

‘Well – there’s nothing for it then – we need to get those paintings off that boat and up to Nana’s pronto!’ said Mary. She was pleased to hear that her voice was perfectly steady and she sounded far more like her usual self again. It was a bit of a miracle really, considering all she wanted to do was ask Kate a million questions about how Lionel had found out her

secret before his paintings had even managed to arrive at the gallery!

Mary helped Kate and Ben to unload the boat as swiftly as possible. They worked in relative silence – carrying the boxes further up the beach so that they were well out of reach of the tide.

Ben was just adding the final one to their new pile when the first drops of rain started to fall.

‘Oh good lord!’ said Mary. ‘We’ll never get them all the way up to Nana’s before this becomes a downpour.’

‘Not to worry,’ said Kate, pointing back up the beach towards the sea wall, ‘the cavalry are on their way.’

Mary peered in surprise at the small army that was making its way down onto the beach.

‘When Ben told me you were coming, I nipped into New York Froth. I’ve taken the liberty of half-inching Mike’s staff for ten minutes.

‘But how did they know...?’ Mary started.

‘I had young Robbie on lookout duty at the door,’ said Kate.

Ben grinned at her. ‘Good thinking. Erm... would either of you mind if I head off as you’ve got that lot on their way to help? I’m on a bit of a tight schedule, I need to take the boat back and pick up the fish van in time for my rounds. I’d love to stay and help, but...’

‘You should have told me!’ said Mary, horrified to think he’d been running around after her when he should have been heading to work. ‘Thank you for everything – you’ve been so kind.’

‘I enjoyed it,’ said Ben. ‘I love a little bit of Seabury adventure.’

‘Enough of that, you get off to your customers,’ said Mary making shoeing motions at him. ‘I’m sorry I took up so much of your time!’

Ben shrugged. Good naturedly.

‘Here – I’ll give you a hand,’ said Kate, moving forward to help Ben shove his boat back out into the water.

With a swift wave, Ben jumped back into the boat. ‘I’ll be round to fix that latch soon,’ he yelled.

Mary made another ushering motion at him, and he laughed. She knew what he was like, though -he would stand here saying goodbye for the next half an hour if they weren’t careful.

With a final grin in her direction, he turned and then the boat took off like a scalded rat. Mary said a little prayer of thanks that he hadn’t gone that fast when she had been on board!

Kate trudged back up from the water’s edge, her gaze flicking between Mary and the half-a-dozen young servers and kitchen staff who were fast approaching. Mary could tell she was caught between wanting to tell her about what had happened with Lionel and getting the boxes on their way up to Nana’s before the spitting rain decided to take its job a bit more seriously.

‘It can wait,’ Mary muttered to her in a low voice. ‘You can tell me about what happened when we get inside and this little lot have gone back to work.’

Kate opened her mouth, clearly surprised that Mary had known exactly what she was thinking, but then nodded without saying another word as Robbie and his little gang came closer.

‘Are you sure Mike won’t mind about this?’ asked Mary in a low voice.

‘What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him,’ said Kate, shooting her a cheeky wink. ‘Besides, this lot could probably do with some exercise. After all, they don’t have to take turns doing rounds on Trixie like my lot do.’

As Kate stepped forwards and started issuing instructions to the newcomers, Mary glanced down at the pile of boxes next to her. Thank heavens they had some help! She was

desperate to get this lot up to Nana's – and not just because of the weather. She could only imagine how strange they must look – she only hoped no one would spot them!

A moment later and the workers were cheerfully loading up with their first batch of boxes before heading off up the beach with them at a rate of knots.

‘Should we help them by moving the boxes a little closer to the steps?’ said Mary as Kate moved back towards her.

Kate shook her head. ‘Absolutely not. I don't see why you should have to carry these boxes a single step further.’

Mary heaved a sigh of relief. She would have helped if she'd needed to - but after two solid days of packing and carrying everything down the stairs, then helping Ben to load and unload the boat – she had to admit she was exhausted.

‘In that case’, she said, slumping down onto the pebbles and making herself as comfortable as possible. ‘I will just sit here and play foreman for a while.’

CHAPTER 12



Mary thought it was quite amazing how quickly the pile of boxes went down when they were being shifted by a group of fit young things. She had to admit, she rather envied them as they jogged over the pebbles.

‘Come on, Mary,’ said Kate, ‘I think we can leave Robbie here to manage things at this end now. It’s time for us to head up to Nana’s before we both get drenched.’

Mary grabbed Kate’s outstretched hand, glad of her extra strength. Getting up from the pebbles was quite a job when you were as tired as she was!

‘Don’t you take your eyes off those boxes, young man,’ said Mary, meeting Robbie’s eyes with a stern look.

Robbie grinned at her and saluted. ‘You’ve got it, Mrs S!’

Honestly – the cheek of these young people... but she couldn’t help but smile at him gratefully.

‘Thanks, Robbie,’ said Kate. ‘Don’t leave anything unattended will you?’

‘I’ll guard them with my life!’ said Robbie, striking a dramatic pose and thumping his chest.

‘Honestly,’ sighed Kate, ‘young people!’

Mary let out a hoot of laughter at that. ‘Ah – he’s growing on me.’

Mary was glad to be leaving the beach. She didn’t think she could have sat side-by-side with Kate much longer without

demanding what had happened with Lionel. At least this way they would be able to have the discussion indoors where they would be far less likely to be overheard. They'd just have to wait for the youngsters to finish bringing the boxes up to Nana's and then she'd know...

'I hope you like what I've done with the place,' said Kate, interrupting Mary's thoughts as she pushed her way into Nana's and stepped around the small box mountain in the middle of the room.

Mary looked around with interest. 'I'm impressed!' she said.

Kate had made a lot of progress and the space was really beginning to look like a gallery. The vast freezers were long-gone, the heavy counters had been stripped out and Kate had given the place several coats of white paint.

Some of Lionel's paintings already hung from the walls and Mary wandered between them, admiring the unfamiliar pieces as the staff of New York Froth continued to bring her precious boxes in one by one.

It wasn't long before Robbie appeared and placed a box right on the top of the pile.

'Are you sure that's all of them, Robbie?' said Kate.

'Absolutely, it'd be pretty hard to miss a cardboard box sitting on the beach,' he said with a grin, 'even for us *young people!*'

'Cheeky bugger!' muttered Kate.

'Too right!' countered Robbie. 'Anyway, we'd better be heading back to work before the big boss man discovers you've been encouraging us all to skive!'

'Thanks, Robbie,' said Kate, 'and can you thank the others for me too? I'll pop over and do it myself once we're done here.'

'Thanks for helping,' said Mary quickly. 'Don't worry, I'll be sure to return the favour somehow - to all of you.'

‘It’s my pleasure, Mrs S,’ laughed Robbie, giving her a thumbs up before dashing back outside.

‘That boy is a bit like a very cheeky whirlwind,’ laughed Kate.

‘I’ve decided I like him,’ said Mary. ‘He reminds me a little bit of Ben when he was younger.’

‘Hmm... I think young Robbie has far more of a flair for the dramatics than Ben ever had,’ said Kate, turning the key in the door now that they were alone. ‘Right – why don’t we go through to the back room – it’s a bit more private in there than standing here talking in front of these windows!’

Mary nodded and followed Kate through to the back room, looking around with interest. This had been painted too – this exhibition really was going to be a whopper!

‘Okay,’ sighed Kate, turning to face Mary. ‘Are you ready?’

Mary swallowed nervously and nodded, even though she wasn’t entirely sure she was ready to hear what Kate had to say.

‘Well, it’s like this,’ said Kate. ‘Lionel came in earlier to see how everything was getting on in here and to ask me how many bottles of wine he’d need to bring.’

‘Right,’ said Mary, trying not to sound impatient.

‘Then he started asking me about who I’d approached to see if they had any work-’

‘And you told him I did?’ said Mary in surprise.

‘Heavens no,’ said Kate quickly. ‘He actually suggested I should ask you and I just nodded along vaguely.’

Mary stared at Kate feeling more than a little bit confused. ‘So... how does he know about all my paintings?’

‘Paintings?’ said Kate, a look of confusion crossing her face now too. ‘He doesn’t know about your paintings. Oh heavens... you thought...?!’

‘Kate!’ said Mary. ‘Please – tell me what you meant when you said, “Lionel knows.”’

She was surprised to hear her voice sounding so calm and collected. Inside, Mary felt like her entire world was teetering on a knife edge again.

‘Okay,’ said Kate, taking a deep breath. ‘He knows about Veronica.’

‘Her?’ said Mary in surprise.

Kate nodded. ‘Yes. He knows she was the reason you turned him down in the first place – and the reason you broke things off entirely afterwards.’

‘Oh... my...’ said Mary. ‘But how...?’

‘We were talking about wine... and the hotel... and then her name came up,’ said Kate. ‘Then Lionel said he didn’t want to talk about her because she’d been the reason he’d lost you!’

‘He actually said my name?’ said Mary faintly.

‘No,’ said Kate. ‘Not completely... he started to and then cut himself off. But of course – I knew it was you because you told me about it the other day.’

‘Did he say anything else?’ said Mary, her hand blindly seeking the wall for support. Kate looked at her in concern, but Mary waved her away. ‘I’m fine. What else did he say, Kate?’

‘We were talking about all the ridiculous ways she’d tried to drive him out of the hotel. According to Lionel, she threw the whole thing at him during a huge argument - how she’d ruined your relationship on purpose, and that she would do it again without hesitation if it meant that he would pack his bags and leave Seabury.’

‘That woman!’ gasped Mary. ‘And Lionel’s known for years...?’

Kate frowned and nodded. ‘It sounds like it, yes.’

Mary didn’t know what to say. This was so much worse than Lionel finding out about the fact she’d been collecting his

paintings all these years.

‘Can I get you a glass of water?’ said Kate.

Mary shook her head – her thoughts were whirling out of control. If Lionel had known all this time, why hadn’t he said anything to her? But then... if only she’d spoken to him about all this sooner, none of this would have happened. If she hadn’t locked herself away back then she could have had an entirely different life. It was all such a mess!

Mary jerked in shock and stared at Kate in surprise as she reached out and touched her hand

‘Are you okay?’ she said, concern etched across her face.

Mary shook her head and then nodded, and then shook her head again.

‘I don’t know. Why didn’t I say yes when I had the chance?’ said Mary, her voice coming out in a hoarse sob.

Kate squeeze her hand, clearly not knowing what to say.

‘We could have talked it all through. We could have made it work. It was such a beautiful proposal, Kate. He went down on one knee and everything.’

With that, Mary dissolved into tears.

Before she knew what was happening, Kate had pulled her into a tight hug.

‘I’m so sorry,’ whispered Kate. ‘I’m so sorry. If I’d known any of this, I promise you I wouldn’t have organised the exhibition. I had no idea how much it would hurt you.’

Mary pulled away from her and reached in her pocket for her hanky.

‘It’s not your fault, Kate,’ she said, pulling herself together. ‘None of this is your fault.’

Mary dabbed at her eyes and willed herself to calm down. Poor Kate – she shouldn’t have to deal with all this.

‘It was all a very long time ago,’ said Mary with a little sniff, ‘and I think it’s best left alone. Nothing good can come

of churning it all up again now.'

'But surely... ' Kate paused, but then ploughed on, 'surely you want to talk to Lionel – now that you know that he knows?'

'No,' said Mary. 'No. I don't want to talk about it ever again. It's too late.'

Kate just nodded, looking sad.

Mary blinked hard. She'd just have to put on a brave face and get on with her life. She'd done it before – in fact, it's what she had been doing for many long years. This was just the way it was, and she would be foolish to think she could have it any other way.

'Right,' she said, somehow managing to muster a calm voice, 'about those boxes... there may be a few more than fifty pieces! I did my best, but it seems that I have far more favourites than I anticipated!'

'It's wonderful that they're here, thank you so much,' said Kate in a quiet voice, leading the way back out into the main room.

Mary shrugged. 'It's my pleasure,' she said, watching as Kate went to open one of the boxes.

'If you don't mind,' she said quickly, 'I would like to leave before you unpack them.'

Kate dropped her hand quickly as if the box had just burned her.

'It's okay,' said Mary gently, 'I've just had a very long morning... what with the boat trip. I think I had better get a taxi to take me home so that I can have a little rest.'

'I'll give you a lift if you'd like?' said Kate.

Mary shook her head with a smile. 'Thank you dear, but I'm fine with a taxi.'

'Okay, well if you're sure... ' said Kate, still watching her with concern.

‘I am,’ said Mary firmly. She needed to be alone. She needed to think.

‘I’ll see you here on the opening night, then!’ said Kate.

Mary smiled and nodded, even though she knew for certain that she would not be attending. It would take a bit more bravery than she could muster right now. That said, it wasn’t for a few days... perhaps by then she would feel better about being in the same room as Lionel Barclay again.

Right now, though, all she needed to think about was getting home. With a quick, gruff goodbye, Mary turned her back and marched out of Nana’s before Kate noticed that her tears were beginning to fall again.

CHAPTER 13



Mary hung back, watching the front of Nana's intently. Light spilled from the old ice cream parlour windows, settling in pools and illuminating the pavement outside.

She'd been here for a good long time already – long enough to watch the sun sink behind the horizon, but she'd taken little pleasure in the sunset salmons and oranges that had washed over the sea. She was simply too nervous... and she still wasn't sure what she was going to do.

It was the opening night of Lionel's exhibition, and though she'd been adamant that she wouldn't set foot in Seabury until the whole wretched thing was over, as the afternoon had worn on she'd become increasingly restless.

Perhaps she'd just pick out an outfit... just in case she changed her mind...

Perhaps she'd do her hair the way Lionel used to like it... just to see if she still could...

Perhaps she'd take a little trip into the town after all – just to catch a glimpse of her paintings through the window...

It was with a big ball of anxiety pressing against her chest that Mary had watched and waited for the first guests to arrive. She knew it shouldn't mean anything to her... but there was always the small chance that no one would turn up at all. She quickly found she couldn't bear the thought. More than anything, she wanted the night to be a success – for Kate's sake if nothing else.

However, it wasn't long before the first guests arrived – smiling and chattering gaily as they pushed their way through the door to be greeted by a beaming Kate.

Mary soon realised that there had been no reason to worry. She really should have known better – this was Seabury and there was free wine on offer. That in itself was usually enough to bring most of the town out of their living rooms. But... it wasn't just the locals who were appearing in a steady stream and making their way into the gallery.

Mary knew she was pretty out of touch with goings on in the town these days – but she was sure she would still recognise the vast majority of the locals – and these were faces she'd never seen before... all here to view Lionel's work.

The thought gave her a little thrill of excitement... and a tiny spike of jealousy too. She couldn't help it – she owned so much of his work that she felt quite protective over it – as though it was a part of her.

Something in that thought galvanized her into action at long last. Mary hadn't actually seen Lionel arrive yet, so perhaps if she acted quickly she could nip in, have a quick look around, and then escape before anyone was even aware she'd been there.

'Right-o!' she muttered to herself. 'Here goes nothing.'

Mary strode forward before the surge of determination deserted her again. She suddenly knew that she needed to do this – and if she bowed out now, it would just be another thing to add to the major regrets of her life. And that list was plenty long enough already!

Pushing against the heavy door, she moved purposefully inside. It was stiflingly warm after standing in the cool seaside air for so long. Mary quickly shrugged off her jacket and folded it neatly over the crook of her elbow.

The space looked incredible – the gleaming white walls and twinkling spotlights showed Lionel's vibrant paintings off to perfection.

Blimey, it was busy in here! Even though Mary had watched every single one of these visitors arrive, she was still amazed at how packed it was! Mary eased her way between the various strangers who stood with their eyes transfixed on the work that covered the walls.

Finding a slightly less crowded spot, Mary came to a standstill and gazed around. Lionel's paintings surrounded her, and her heart was pattering in a strange mix of delight and horror.

Of course, she knew some of these pieces intimately as they were from her own collection – but she was surprised at how strange it felt to see them in a new context. It was a bit like seeing an old friend with a dramatic new haircut... familiar and yet very different at the same time.

There was one thing Mary needed to do before she could relax a little and have a proper look around. Edging her way towards the small, unobtrusive card that was pinned to the wall next to one of her own paintings, Mary peered at it.

“Private Collection”

Mary let out a sigh of relief. Kate had been as good as her word. Right! It was time to have a proper look around and then she could go home safe in the knowledge that she wasn't a *complete* coward.

Mary began to move from painting to painting, looking with interest at the paintings that belonged to other people. Before long, she was enjoying trying to guess which local owned each painting before checking the card to see if she was right.

There were pieces lent by Kate, Charlie, and even Ethel owned a few.

As Mary moved further back into the space, she found a little alcove crammed with paintings of seagulls. This was an easy guess – all of them belonged to Doris from the post office. Mary smiled and rolled her eyes. Doris always had loved seagulls.

‘Glass of wine?’

A male voice just behind her made Mary jump, and she turned to find a smiling Robbie bearing a tray of full glasses – half red and half white.

‘Um...’ said Mary, hesitating for a moment before taking a glass of white with a grateful smile.

She didn’t drink very often, but the glass would give her something to do with her hands if nothing else. It would provide her with a bit of a shield between herself and all these other people.

‘Thank you,’ she said, giving Robbie a nod. ‘By the way, young man, I wanted to thank you again for helping us with all those boxes the other day.’

Robbie grinned at her. ‘I didn’t mind!’ he said with a shrug. ‘It was nice to get out of the café for ten minutes if I’m honest.’

‘Well – I appreciate it,’ she said.

Robbie looked mildly surprised but shrugged again before ambling away with the tray of drinks, throwing a casual “No worries” over his shoulder.

Mary continued to wander between the paintings, carrying her glass of wine. She had no intention of drinking it – though she knew that Lionel himself had provided the wine. According to Kate, he’d brought it over from a vineyard in Upper Bamton. The stuff had an excellent reputation, but Mary was far too anxious to drink anything.

Coming to halt in front of a series of seascapes from West Beach, Mary tried to focus on stopping her hands from trembling. Thinking about Lionel choosing the wine had just reminded her that she might bump into him at any moment.

She glanced down at her quivering glass... she was so tempted to take a sip... a little bit of Dutch courage might do her good! But no - she needed to keep her wits about her. Now was definitely not the moment to get tipsy.

Taking a deep breath, Mary glanced around the room... just to assure herself that the man himself wasn’t about to descend on her. No – she was safe. There was no sign of

Lionel. The gallery was even more packed with people than it had been when she'd arrived - but no one was taking the least bit of interest in her. Good!

Mary gave herself a little shake for being so silly. She wasn't a prisoner here, and she could leave whenever she wanted to. In this crush, it wasn't like she'd be missed... even though it would take some effort to wade through the crowd back towards the door!

Goodness, this wine really did smell good! The glass was cold and frosted, with tiny little beads of condensation dribbling down its shiny sides. It was too tempting - one little sip wouldn't hurt, would it? Mary lifted the glass and closed her eyes briefly.

Fruity, dry and delicious!

With her bravery buoyed a little, Mary decided to head towards the back room where the old kitchen used to be so that she could see which paintings Kate had decided to hang in the slightly more intimate space.

It took a bit of doing to get there, but when she reached it, Mary breathed a sigh of relief. It was a little bit calmer in here than it was out in the main room. Mary glanced around at the walls with interest – and came to a juddering halt.

Suddenly, she was rooted to the spot in... horror? Well, maybe that wasn't quite the right word! What she was feeling was... indescribable and... unexpected. Her chest squeezed and her hands instantly became clammy.

On the wall directly in front of her was a large portrait. It was completely different from every other piece in the exhibition.

Surrounded by seascapes, this portrait stuck out a mile. It was a beautifully framed oil painting of a young woman. Her youthful face had been captured mid-laugh. Her eyes – locked on the artist - were twinkling with life, humour and love.

Mary quickly did her best to swallow down the thick wedge of emotion that was suddenly trying to strangle her. She blinked hard. She *mustn't* cry in public!

It was proving difficult - because Mary was looking at herself as she had been all those years ago – back when a life full of love had awaited her.

But no... this must be a mistake! Lionel had never painted her. It had always been about the view – the sea, the sky, the cliffs, the birds – but never her!

‘I painted it from memory.’

Mary froze. Had she imagined that deep voice coming from behind her? No. Suddenly, she was aware of the warm body standing at her shoulder.

Squeezing her glass a little bit too tightly, Mary felt it beginning to slip and she quickly steadied it with her other hand. She didn’t dare turn around.

‘I hope you like it,’ said Lionel. ‘I’ve been meaning to give it to you - but you’ve been a bit hard to get hold of.’

Mary flinched at the gentle jibe. So – Lionel knew she’d been deliberately avoiding him since Pebble Street’s grand opening, then.

She wished her hands would stop trembling... or that there was somewhere convenient to place her glass before she spilt wine all over the floor!

Slowly, carefully, she turned around.

Lionel was right there, smiling down at her with the same look he’d given her when he’d proposed all those years ago.

‘The painting is beautiful,’ she said, her voice shaking slightly.

‘You’re beautiful,’ he said simply.

Mary shook her head and took a step backwards, willing herself to keep hold of the present rather than slipping into their shared history.

She didn’t know what to say, but luckily Lionel filled the silence.

‘I wanted to say thank you for letting Kate borrow your collection. I truly had no idea you had so many of them!’

Mary felt her eyes grow wide. So – her secret was out at long last.

‘Kate told you?’ she whispered.

Lionel shook his head.

‘Then... how did you know?!’

Lionel simply turned and pointed his finger at the painting that hung on the wall directly opposite the portrait.

Mary followed his gaze.

Of course!

It was the view from Lionel’s bedroom window that he’d gifted her all those years ago. She’d debated long and hard as to whether she should include it in her selection. In the end, she simply hadn’t been able to leave it out... after all, it meant more to her than all the others combined.

‘*Private Collection,*’ said Lionel. ‘I put two and two together. Of course... there was a chance you might have sold it to someone else over the years but-’

‘No,’ said Mary, shaking her head. ‘No chance.’

Mary stared at the ground, unable to hold his gaze.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said, the words tumbling out before she could stop them. ‘About everything. I should have told you... about Veronica... but I couldn’t.’

Veronica’s name seemed to hang in the air between them for a long moment.

Mary quickly glanced up at Lionel and then stared miserably back at the floor. So – this was it, then.

‘How about another glass of wine?’ said Lionel in an abrupt attempt at changing the subject.

Mary looked at the glass in her hand in surprise. When had she finished that?!

‘No - thank you,’ she said hurriedly. Suddenly she was firmly back in the present... and she needed to get out of

there! 'I really must get going. Congratulations on the exhibition.'

Mary ducked around him and, doing her best not to take in the look of surprised disappointment on his face, she began to force her way through the crowd back towards the door. It was time to go home.

CHAPTER 14



An annoying voice in the back of Mary's mind was telling her that perhaps she'd had a little bit too much wine to be driving. She wasn't about to listen to it right now though. The Old School House was calling to her, and there was no way she was going to subject herself to a nosy, chatty taxi driver this evening!

Besides... she doubted that she was over the limit... technically speaking.

Mary quickly touched the brake, slowing down as the tight corner looming ahead of her closed in. She might know this road better than the back of her hand – but better to be safe than sorry. She had no desire to end up in a hedge – and she was still quivering like a leaf.

Mary took the corner a little more quickly than she normally would and promptly vowed to pay more attention to the road for the rest of the journey. She had been so lost in her thoughts that she had no clue how she'd already managed to come this far!

One thing was certain, though - she was very glad that this evening was over and done with... even if it had been a total disaster. In all her worries and plans and preparations, she'd never once imagined that Lionel would have appeared right behind her armed with the knowledge of not just one, but both secrets that had shaped her life for so long.

'And what about that painting?!' she gasped.

That was the thing that was irritating her most of all. What did it mean? She'd never seen a painting of herself before, especially not one painted by someone she was in love with.

No. Not in love with. Was in love with. In the past!

It was all so long ago now. Her chance with Lionel had long since passed.

But then... she'd said the portrait was beautiful, and he'd quickly replied "no, you are beautiful."

What did that mean?!

The girl in the painting was long gone. She'd disappeared decades ago, buried under the weight of grief and disappointment of her own making.

Mary sighed in exasperation and thumped the steering wheel. It was the only part of their brief conversation she could remember clearly, and she had a feeling it would haunt her to her dying day.

It was proving hard to hold a thought in her head for more than a few moments. She kept wracking her brain, trying to recall every word Lionel had said to her - but most of the evening was already lost in a blur.

She really shouldn't have had that wine!

Mary gave her head a shake as though she was being bothered by a mosquito. She knew it was useless though - you couldn't shake off the past quite so easily!

Mary suddenly realised that she was flying along at breakneck speed again and quickly hit the brakes. The sooner she got home, the better - but it really would be a good idea to do so without breaking any more speed limits or crashing into a hedge in the process!

At long last, Mary came to the end of her long, winding driveway and pulled the little car safely to a stop on the patch of gravel. She breathed out a long sigh of relief - glad to be home in one piece.

The way she was feeling right now, Mary decided that she never wanted to leave The Old School House again. She

certainly wouldn't be going back to Seabury!

Getting unsteadily to her feet, Mary headed for the haven of her home, only pausing to curse briefly when she noticed that the front door had blown open again. Ah well – Ben would be over in the next few days to fix it for her – then she really would be able to shut out the rest of the world!

Mary had just stepped into the darkened hallway when the phone sprang to life, making her let out a shriek like a startled banshee.

Quickly pulling herself together, Mary hurried over and lifted the receiver.

'Where are you?' came the demanding voice at the other end of the line.

'Ethel?' she said in surprise.

'Of course it's me,' huffed her friend.

Mary rolled her eyes again, she should have known!

'I've just come from the exhibition,' said Ethel. 'Everyone told me that you were here and then – all of a sudden – you just left. I was hoping to see you.'

'I'm sorry,' said Mary. 'I only popped in for a few minutes, but it was so busy that I ended up needing some air. When I got outside I just decided to come home. It was all a little bit too much for me, as I expected.'

Mary winced slightly. It was the truth... but not the *whole* truth.

'Shame!' said Ethel, sounding disappointed, 'I'd have liked to look around with you at my side – I thought you'd make an excellent guide! Did you at least get a chance to talk to Lionel before you left?'

'Briefly,' said Mary.

'Well, as long as you two had the chance to clear the air, that's all that matters,' said Ethel.

Mary had to stop herself from letting out a snort. *Clear the air?! She should be so lucky!* If anything, things had just

become even more complicated and confusing... and that was saying something.

‘You *did* manage to do that, didn’t you?’ said Ethel.

‘Sort of,’ said Mary.

If she was being completely honest, she wasn’t exactly sure what the pair of them had ended up saying to each other. It was already a hazy blur of nerves and longing and... agony. She realised with a jolt that she *definitely* shouldn’t have driven herself home.

‘Well, that’s good then,’ said Ethel, blithely unaware of how uncomfortable Mary was feeling. ‘At least things can get back to normal now.’

This time, Mary laughed out loud. Sometimes she wished life really was as simple as Ethel’s take on things.

‘You know,’ said Mary. ‘I’m not sure what normal *is* any more. It’s been too many years.’

‘At least that secret of yours is out in the open,’ said Ethel decidedly. ‘At least to the one person who matters. That’s got to be a good thing!’

‘Maybe,’ said Mary, her voice uncertain.

‘I’m assuming he took it okay?’ said Ethel

‘It could certainly have been a lot worse,’ said Mary. She didn’t want to tell Ethel that it *had* been a lot worse. All her worry about Lionel finding out that she’d been collecting his work for years had promptly paled to insignificance compared to him knowing about Veronica’s hand in their unhappiness.

What must he think of her, believing Veronica’s lies? The course of both their lives had been altered by her ridiculous mistake all those years ago.

‘Everyone loves your portrait, you know?’ said Ethel, clearly thinking she was being tactful by changing the subject. ‘It’s the star of the show.’

‘Oh,’ said Mary, not really knowing what to say to that. ‘People don’t actually know that it’s me though, do they?’

‘Of course they do!’ laughed Ethel. ‘It might have been a little while ago, but you haven’t changed a bit!’

Mary huffed slightly at that. It was incredibly flattering – but also a downright lie.

‘Lionel was just telling me how he painted it a few months ago. When Kate told him about the exhibition he said that he decided he had to do it,’ said Ethel excitedly. ‘Apparently, he was afraid it wouldn’t even be dry in time.’

‘Dry?’ echoed Mary in confusion.

‘Don’t ask me – I don’t know anything about paints and art and all that! Something about oils taking forever to dry according to Charlie, but you’ll have to ask him about it. It kind of went over my head.’

Mary stared around the darkened hallway, trying to wrap her head around what Ethel had just told her.

‘Hello?’ said Ethel. ‘Mary? Have I lost you?’

‘No – sorry!’ said Mary, realising she’d gone quiet. ‘So... let me get this straight... Lionel told you he painted that portrait recently?’

‘Yes! Didn’t he tell you?’ said Ethel excitedly. ‘Silly man. He painted it just for you... *I* think he was trying to tell you something.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Mary faintly, noticing her heart was doing that strange, fluttering thing again.

‘Well,’ said Ethel slowly. ‘It’s not like you gave him much of a chance to talk to you over the years, was it? I think he was trying to tell you something in the way Lionel knows best... with his paintbrush.’

CHAPTER 15



Mary straightened her back and brushed a gardening glove across her forehead as she turned her face up to the sunshine.

It really was a beautiful day so, rather than haunting the rooms of The Old School House with her constant pacing as she had done every day since her fateful final trip to Seabury, Mary had decided to get out into her garden.

It might only be March, but she couldn't help but think it was looking treacherously cheerful out here. Daffodils nodded at her whichever way she turned, and the primroses that edged the paving stones added their bright, sunshine colours – daring her to crack a smile.

Mary breathed deeply, wishing she could take comfort from such a lovely day. The air was scented with spring. She usually loved this time of year – it was so full of hope and new beginnings.

‘Who are you kidding?’ she laughed bitterly, stooping back down so that she could yank at a clump of couch grass that had managed to get rather a firm hold in amongst the primroses.

She knew exactly what she was doing out here – and it had nothing to do with the joys of spring. She was simply trying to distract herself.

It had been a week since the exhibition - and Mary hadn't ventured out once. Ben would be over in the next few days to fix the front door at long last, and she was fully intending to ask him to teach her how to place an online order with the

nearest large supermarket. She would have her food delivered from now on. Mary had been playing at being a hermit for years – it was high time she made it official!

She would make a few exceptions of course... after all – she'd still need her constant supply of homemade cakes and some willing volunteers to help her eat them all. She couldn't do without Ben's visits... or Ethel's. Hattie and Kate would be acceptable visitors too. Stanley would be on the list of course – because frankly, she had very little choice in the matter when he decided to swim over to see her. Other than that – she was done with the world!

Mary rolled her eyes at her own dramatics. She could just imagine what her old mum would make of it all. Still, she was adamant that she'd never venture anywhere near Seabury again. She simply couldn't risk bumping into Lionel after that rather dazed, mad dash she'd made for the exit on the night of the exhibition.

As she gathered her little pile of weeds together on the path and swept them briskly into a waiting trug, Mary couldn't help but wonder how it was all going over at the pop-up gallery. Not because of Lionel, of course... it was just that Kate had put so much work into making it happen. Perhaps she should call the lighthouse later and find out... it would only be polite!

Right... it was time to take this lot around to her compost heap and then maybe she should pop the kettle on. She had a rather handsome-looking carrot cake that Hattie had left for her on her doorstep the previous day which she was rather keen to taste-test. Maybe she'd treat herself to a cup of coffee to go with it. The stuff had the tendency to make her rather excitable and chatty, but as there was no one around to be bothered by her antics, she didn't need to worry about that!

Halfway across the old playground, Mary stopped in her tracks and pricked up her ears. That was odd... she was sure she could hear the sound of an engine in the distance.

Mary turned towards the drive. Perhaps Ben was on his way sooner than expected. He *had* mentioned that he would

sort out the door latch as soon as he had a moment to spare.

As the sound grew louder, she realised that it was actually coming from the opposite direction.

Of course! It was the familiar puttering of a boat engine. Ben must be out on the water somewhere. Perhaps Stanley had gone off to play with his seal friends again and Ben was on emergency Bernese rescue again.

Standing stock still, Mary listened hard - half expecting the sound to fade as the little boat disappeared around the headland in pursuit of the fluffy troublemaker. Sure enough, everything went quiet.

Well, that was a bit of a shame.

Mary had just realised that after a week alone, she was in the mood for visitors. Perhaps she wasn't quite as suited to life as a hermit as she'd thought!

Right... she'd just empty this little lot on the compost heap, and then she'd get that kettle on. Company or no company, at least she had cake.

Mary was just making her way back towards the front door when she heard the engine starting up again.

What on earth was going on?

Perhaps it was just the wind on the water playing havoc with how the sound was travelling this morning... but Mary suddenly felt uneasy. She quickly decided to take a walk down to the quay – just to make sure that Ben was okay. If he was in shouting distance, perhaps she could lure him in for a coffee and a slice of cake while she was at it!

Crossing back over the old playground, Mary let herself through the little gate and took the tree-lined path at a slight jog. She didn't know what she'd do if Ben was in any kind of difficulty out on the water – but she could at least call someone for help.

As she came to the water's edge, she came to an abrupt stop, panting a little as she did her best to catch her breath.

Well... that was a relief. There was Ben's little boat, not too far away. It was the right way up and heading smoothly in her direction.

Mary's relief was short-lived. Ben wasn't alone – he had two passengers on board. The first one – a dripping-wet Stanley – let out a delighted bark the minute he spotted her on the shore, and did his best to dive off the edge of the boat so that he could swim over to her. But it wasn't Stanley's appearance that had just wiped the smile from Mary's face.

'Lionel!' breathed Mary, as she watched him tackle the big dog before he managed to jump into the water.

No... perhaps she was mistaken... maybe it wasn't him? With the glare from the water and the fact that whoever it was was now busy wrestling with a very excited dog, she couldn't be sure. After a whole week of thinking of little else, maybe she was just wishing it was him.

Ben – still laughing at the antics of his shipmates – spotted Mary watching them from the top of the steps and gave her a cheerful wave.

Mary tried to wave back, but all she managed was a tiny twitch.

The man in the suit finally managed to get Stanley under control, and sat up straight, panting a little as he mopped his face with a spotted handkerchief.

It was him! What was Lionel doing here?!

Did she have time to turn tail and dash back to the house? No – that would be ridiculous.

Crikey – she must look a state after a morning of weeding in the sunshine. Mary went to pat her hair into place, only to discover that she was still wearing her gardening gloves. She hastily stripped them off and thrust them into her pocket as she watched Ben draw the little boat up alongside the stone steps.

Catching Lionel's eye as the little boat bumped to a halt, Mary suddenly wondered why she was worried about what she looked like. Lionel was wearing a suit and tie, but after his tussle with Stanley, he was more than a little bedraggled. He

looked faintly comical, sitting there with one hand tightly wound around the big dog's collar in an attempt to stop him from jumping ship.

Moving over to them, Ben took charge of Stanley so that Lionel could get to his feet.

'Thank you for the lift,' said Lionel.

'My pleasure,' said Ben, grinning at him. 'Right – up you go. *Not* you!' he added as Stanley attempted a gleeful bound towards the steps.

'Permission to come ashore,' said Lionel, his face turned up towards Mary, his voice formal and faintly amused.

'Permission granted,' said Mary, keeping her voice equally as formal. After all – what other choice did she have? Precisely zero!

Lionel made a leap for the stairs, but he only just made it. It was far from elegant, but he simply straightened up, gave Ben a quick salute and then turned to Mary with a smile.

They stared at each other in silence for several long seconds.

'Come on, Stanley lad,' Ben's voice drifted up the steps, breaking the silence. 'It's time to get you home to your mum. Let's leave these two lovebirds to it.'

Mary felt a hot blush spread across her cheeks and she dropped her gaze to the ground. She listened to Ben's engine gear up again and then watched out of the corner of her eye as he executed a graceful curve in the water before heading back out to sea.

Mary swallowed nervously. She was suddenly alone with Lionel on the stone quay. She just about managed to resist the temptation to demand what he was doing there. After all, it was bound to come out in her headmistress's voice, and she didn't want to sound unwelcoming.

Lionel didn't seem to know what to say either and the silence between them was starting to get mildly ridiculous.

‘It’s about that proposal,’ Lionel blurted all of sudden. He sounded decidedly less composed than he usual. Mary instantly softened.

‘Oh yes,’ she said, wondering at how calm she sounded, considering the fact that her heart was hammering against her ribcage.

‘I was thinking,’ said Lionel, straightening his tie, ‘would you mind if I try it again?’

Mary blinked.

Maybe she really *was* dreaming. Perhaps she’d nodded off over her morning coffee in a sunny corner of the garden. Or maybe she’d had a funny turn while weeding... and now she was in heaven?

No. Lionel was definitely standing in front of her, watching her closely with his Adam’s apple bobbing in the most adorable fashion.

‘Okay,’ said Mary simply, trying to focus on breathing.

‘But perhaps we could have a slightly different outcome to last time?’ said Lionel.

Mary smiled at that. ‘Okay,’ she said again, not daring to hope that all the lonely years might be about to come to an end.

‘You mean... you might give me a slightly different answer this time?’ said Lionel, as if double checking.

‘I might,’ said Mary.

‘Okay,’ said Lionel, breaking into a beaming smile. ‘I just wondered.’

Mary blinked at him.

Was that it?

She’d been waiting for this moment for so long – never daring to believe that it could ever happen. It was almost more than she could do to hold back any longer. She wanted to run into his arms and pretend the years they’d lost had never even happened. But she didn’t dare.

If this went wrong... if she messed this up again... it would be the end of her.

‘Would you?’ said Lionel. He was clearly suddenly tongue-tied as he started to struggle down onto one knee. ‘Would you?’ he said again.

Mary hurried forward and tugged him back to his feet.

‘Yes,’ she said quickly. Now was not the time to be proper and patient. They had an awful lot of catching up to do and she wanted to start right now. Besides, there was no telling how long it might take for him to get up again if he’d managed to kneel down.

Lionel grinned down at her, wrapping his arms around her.

Mary found that she didn’t care that his suit was a little bit damp, or that his tie was slightly askew. She barely noticed that the chestnut hair was now silver either. All that mattered was that she was in Lionel’s arms and he was kissing her.

The cake and coffee could wait. This kiss was years... decades in the making.

Somehow, all her prayers had been answered. Ethel had a second chance with the love of her life, and there was no way she was going to let it slip away again. Not ever.

THE END

I hope you’ve enjoyed your time in Seabury Mary and Lionel!
Head back to town for Lou’s story in

[Laughter and Happy Ever After in Seabury.](#)

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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!

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