

BELLA
OSBORNE

An
Invitation
to Seashell
Bay

PART 2
Tied Up In Knots



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SEASHELL BAY

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Bella Osborne

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Dedication

For Trevor and Brenda Nutt – thank you for everything.

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PART TWO

Chapter Eleven

The last people Nancy wanted to see when she was lying prostrate on a changing room floor, wrapped in a broken curtain and in a great deal of pain was her ex-boyfriend and his overbearing mother. Especially as they were both standing over her chatting to her as if everything was completely normal.

‘We were talking about you only the other day, weren’t we, Mum?’ said Chris.

‘We were. Now where was that?’ replied his mother. Nancy tried to turn over but when she put out her right hand she yelped. The way the older woman was standing Nancy could now see up her dress so she averted her eyes.

‘We were having coffee,’ he said. ‘Was it the Marks and Spencer’s café?’

The older woman clicked her fingers. ‘Garden centre.’

Alice crouched down and leaned into Nancy’s ear so only she could hear her. ‘Did you really go out with this dullard?’

Nancy tipped her head to one side. This was not the conversation she wanted to have when she was lying on the floor helpless with a direct view of someone’s surprisingly lacy underwear. ‘Thank you, Alice,’ she said in a very deliberate voice. ‘I do need some help. I think I may have broken something.’

‘You have!’ said the assistant. ‘The fitting room curtain!’

‘Yeah. Sorry about that.’ With some help from Alice, Nancy got to her feet. She handed the curtain to the assistant, who did a lot of tutting. Nancy was now very aware that she was only wearing a bra on her top half and a pair of trousers partially covering one leg. ‘I’m just going to get some clothes on.’ She

hung on to Alice and like a lone person in a three-legged race she hobbled into another cubicle and Alice pulled the curtain across.

‘Um, Nancy,’ came Chris’s voice. ‘I know you’re busy right now, but did you want to catch up sometime. Maybe go for dinner?’

‘No thank you. Nice to see you and your mum. Bye,’ said Nancy through the curtain. They waited a minute. Nancy pointed at the curtain. ‘Have they gone?’ she whispered to Alice.

‘No,’ said Chris from the other side. ‘Mum’s just trying on a dress. This isn’t usually a shop she’d come in, but she saw the one with flowers on in the window and—’

Nancy held up her hands in exasperation. ‘Okay then. Bye.’ She and Alice had a rushed mimed conversation where neither of them knew what the other was saying. ‘Please help me out of these and back into my clothes,’ she asked.

‘Um, sorry, Nancy, were you talking to me?’ asked Chris.

‘No!’ chorused Nancy and Alice together.

‘Right. Got it. Bye then,’ he said. ‘Call me if you change your mind about dinner.’

Alice helped Nancy change back into her own clothes, taking care with her right arm. Her hand and wrist were now extremely swollen. ‘Oh dear,’ said Alice as they both inspected the lump.

‘It’s not good is it?’

‘No. Hospital?’ asked Alice.

Nancy didn’t want to admit it, but she was pretty sure she needed medical attention. ‘Yeah, I think so.’

They exited the cubicle and Alice bundled up all the clothes and handed them to the assistant. ‘Any good?’ she asked.

‘Well let’s see?’ said Nancy. ‘This green thing makes me look like a giant Brussels sprout; the sequin-covered top has

left me with marks like I've wrestled a tiger; and the super-duper-uber-skinny jeans tried to kill me.'

The assistant blinked a few times. 'Did you want to try another size?'

Nancy was very grateful that Alice went with her to the hospital and tried to keep her spirits up in the waiting area with free-flowing coffee from the overpriced machine and anecdotes from the playground. Triage was quick and painful as the smiling nurse prodded all around Nancy's wrist making a note of each time she flinched. But she did give her a temporary sling to help keep it elevated and something for the pain. About an hour later Nancy was called to X-ray which was a brief intermission. After another hour Nancy's arm was still the same level of swollen but not as painful now the painkillers the triage nurse had given her had kicked in. After all the waiting things seemed to speed up as Nancy was called through by a doctor who declared she had broken her wrist in two places. 'You've done a proper job,' he said cheerfully.

'Great. Do I get a prize?' The doctor frowned at her. 'What happens next?' she asked, although she was pretty sure she could work it out.

'Temporary plaster tonight and then back here to fracture clinic tomorrow where they—'

'No, no, no. I'm really sorry but I can't come back tomorrow I've this big work thing and before you say they'll cope without me it's my business, so I have to be there and—'

'Okay, let me just check who's in the plaster room.'

'Thank you,' said Nancy, attempting to put her hands together as if praying but a sharp pain stopped her.

'No promises,' he said. 'This way.' She followed him through the hospital and he left her on a plastic chair in a corridor next to a young man who had both feet in surgical boots and his arm in full plaster set at an angle.

'You all right?' he asked when her staring had become too much.

'I'm sorry. It's just you look like you've been in the wars.'

‘Stubbed my toe,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘I’m joking,’ he said with a smile. ‘Got knocked off my bike. Cast is smelling so they think I’ve got an infection in there.’ Nancy couldn’t help her instinct to recoil. ‘How about you?’ He nodded at her sling.

Nancy wished she’d spent her two hours in A and E coming up with a better response to this question than ‘I got stuck in a pair of jeans and fell over in front of my ex-boyfriend’. She gave a little shudder at the thought. ‘I fell. Silly really, just fell over.’

He nodded. ‘A fall can cause more damage than you’d think.’

Nancy wrinkled her nose at his turn of phrase. Old people had falls not someone of her age. ‘It wasn’t a *fall*. I just fell.’

He gave her the sort of look you give the person who is talking to themselves on the tube. ‘O-kay.’

She was about to argue her case further when he was called into the plaster room and hobbled off. Shortly afterwards her doctor popped his head around the door. ‘You’re in luck – my colleague is going to manipulate it for you tonight.’ He beamed a smile and she returned it.

‘Thank you.’

A lovely nurse showed her to a cubicle and pulled the curtain around. Nancy had a flashback and winced. The nurse chatted to her. ‘Doctor will be here in a minute. Then I’ll put on the plaster – it’s not actually plaster anymore, it’s made of fiberglass so it’s much lighter. While it’s still soft he’ll manipulate it so it’s in the best position to heal. I’ve got the gas and air ready.’

Nancy chuckled, the nurse wasn’t smiling. ‘That was a joke, right?’

‘Just take really deep breaths,’ said the nurse. ‘We’ve only got orange is that okay?’

Nancy had had enough coffee so orange squash would be just the ticket. 'Sure. Thank you.' The nurse disappeared and Nancy eyed the large black gas canister next to her. Didn't they use gas and air when you were in labour?

'Nancy Barraclough?' asked a jolly-looking doctor who then checked her date of birth and which hand was being put in plaster. She was tempted to say "the one the size of a marrow" but she thought better of it.

The nurse returned and put some stretchy stocking material on Nancy's puffy wrist and all the way up to her elbow and then wrapped it in cotton wool. 'Start taking some deep breaths,' she said, handing Nancy the gas and air tube with a mouthpiece on the end. Nancy did as she was told. Nothing happened to start with and then it felt like her head turned to marshmallow. The nurse had something in her hand that looked like a wet orange bandage which she speedily wrapped up and down Nancy's arm while Nancy breathed through the tube and became even more spaced out. The nurse stepped aside and the jolly doctor took hold of her arm and with a lot of force he bent her wrist over. The pain was so intense she wanted to batter him with the gas cylinder.

'Breathe deeper,' instructed the nurse as Nancy sucked as hard as she could, sounding like Darth Vader having an asthma attack. Was this meant to stop it hurting? Because it didn't bloody work. Nancy closed her eyes as the doctor squeezed the plaster and pain radiated up her arm. Her head was swimming and her wrist was throbbing.

'All done,' he said in a sing-song voice. Nancy wanted to lamp him one. She was still sucking hard on the gas and air and, while it didn't stop the pain, it did make her care less about it. The curtains started to sway and so did the nurse and doctor and Nancy started to giggle. Eventually the nurse was able to prise the tube away from Nancy and after a few fresh breaths her head was back to normal. There was another X-ray after which the jolly doctor declared he was very happy and she'd get an appointment through the post for four weeks' time.

‘Four weeks? I’ve got to wear this traffic cone for four weeks?’ Nancy held up her bright orange arm, finally realising that the nurse hadn’t been offering her an orange squash.

‘Minimum. They’ll take that one off at four weeks but depending on how it’s going you might need another one. Here’s a leaflet about cast care. Take painkillers if it hurts and come straight back if it feels tight or you lose feeling in your fingers.’

It was hard not to be alarmed by that statement. ‘It’s tight now,’ she said.

‘That’s fine,’ he said. ‘It’s because it’s still swollen, as long as it doesn’t get any tighter,’ he added with a grin broader than the Joker’s. She liked to see people enjoying their work but couldn’t help feeling he was relishing the pain of others a little too much. Nancy looked at her poor arm – encased in bright orange and bent over like a hook, it didn’t look fine at all.

Chapter Twelve

Alice made coffee and toast for a sullen-looking Nancy. They had been at the hospital for hours the previous night and while Nancy had tried to put a brave face on, Alice could tell she was gutted about injuring herself. Nancy had two goes at trying to cover her mouth as she yawned. ‘Did you get any sleep last night?’ asked Alice.

‘I think I dozed off a couple of times but as soon as I moved this woke me up.’ Nancy stabbed a finger at her plastered arm.

‘I know you’re going to say you’re busy but should you be going into work today?’ asked Alice.

‘I’ll be fine. Claudia is all over this pitch, she was going to drive us there anyway and she’s bringing the samples. I just need to manage my laptop bag and talk. I can do that.’ She glanced down at her pyjamas. ‘Once I’ve had a shower and got dressed.’

‘I’m going to shower now. Before I do is there anything you need?’ asked Alice.

‘I’m fine,’ said Nancy, waving her good arm.

Forty minutes later the two of them were puzzling over how Nancy was meant to have a shower when her leaflet said in capital letters that her cast MUST NOT get wet. ‘Google says you need a special cover off the internet,’ said Alice.

‘Unless they do delivery in the next five minutes that’s not going to work,’ said Nancy.

Alice held up a finger to indicate she had found more information. ‘Or wrap a towel around it and keep it away from the water flow.’

‘Right. I’ll try that,’ said Nancy, picking up a towel and trying to wind it around her cast. Every time she tried it slipped off. ‘Bloody thing.’

‘Here,’ said Alice, gently holding one end in place, and wrapping it around Nancy’s arm. ‘If you can hold it with the other hand that might work.’

Nancy did as she suggested. They both looked at the shower and back at Nancy holding the towel-covered cast. ‘How exactly am I meant to wash myself with no hands?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I don’t have time for this. Any of this,’ said Nancy, irritation tinging her words. ‘I just need to get undressed and have a rinse. I’ll tie my hair up instead of washing it. It’ll be fine.’

‘Okay, shout if you need me,’ said Alice, exiting the bathroom.

Nancy’s phone started to ring. ‘Can you answer that please,’ called Nancy.

‘Hello, Claudia, Nancy is in the shower,’ said Alice, picking up on the caller ID.

‘Hi, Alice. Please can you tell Nancy that I’m really sorry but I’m not going to make it to the publishers for the presentation today. I’ve been up all night alternating between throwing up and the world falling out of my bum so I can’t be more than three feet from a toilet. Nancy can pick the samples up from my place anytime assuming I’m not in the loo and ... Sorry, Alice, I need to go again.’ The line went dead.

Alice got ready for work and came back to stand outside the bathroom door. The shower was off. Alice tapped on the door. ‘You okay?’ she asked.

There was a loud huff from inside. ‘I didn’t get the cast wet but I couldn’t wash properly or shave and trying to dry yourself with one arm is bloody impossible. Otherwise yes, all okay. Who was on the phone?’

‘It was Claudia – she’s really sorry but she’s sick.’

‘Oh come on!’ said Nancy, with feeling. ‘Sorry, Alice, that was aimed at the universe, not you.’ Nancy opened the door a fraction. ‘Can I have my phone? I’ll call Shona.’ Alice went to hand it over, but Nancy was holding a towel in front of her with her only working hand. ‘FFS,’ she said.

‘How about I call her on speakerphone and hold it for you?’ suggested Alice.

‘Brilliant. Yes please.’

Alice dialled the number and Shona’s phone was answered. ‘Hi, Shona, it’s Nancy.’

‘Sorry, Nancy. It’s Shona’s mum. How spooky. I was just about to give you a call. Shona’s having a bad fibromyalgia day, so she won’t be in.’ Nancy looked at Alice and she pulled what she hoped was a sympathetic face. This was not going well.

‘Not to worry. I hope she’s over this bout soon. Thanks then, bye,’ said Nancy and Alice ended the call.

‘Who should I try now?’ asked Alice, checking the time. She needed to leave in a few minutes.

‘There’s only Filip and I need him to keep everything else at Having A Ball running. That’s no mean feat on his own.’

‘Claudia said you need to get the samples from her house.’

‘How,’ said Nancy, starting to look flustered. ‘I can’t drive. Or can I?’ Nancy tried to check the leaflet but the thing kept folding itself back up. If she couldn’t control a leaflet Alice dreaded to think what would happen if she was trying to control a car.

Alice quietly took the leaflet from her and scanned the information. ‘No driving until you are out of plaster and able to perform all required manoeuvres safely.’ Nancy muttered something incoherent that ended in ‘bugger it’. Alice was starting to think that maybe she should learn to drive, she would certainly have been a bit more help to Nancy right now if she could. Unfortunately, every time she’d booked herself in for lessons she’d had to cancel them. ‘Is there anything else I can do?’

Nancy chewed the inside of her mouth. ‘You’ve been brilliant. Thank you, Alice. You might have to cook dinner tonight or we could have that takeaway.’

‘Sorry, Nancy, I’m going straight from work on the train to my parents’. It’s the start of half-term and I promised them I’d go home for all the school holidays and this time there’s the thing I need to do so—’

Nancy waved away her explanation. ‘Of course. My mistake, I’d forgotten it was school holidays. You have a fabulous time.’ Alice pulled a face. ‘Well as good as you can.’

‘How are you going to cope?’ asked Alice, who was feeling guilty about leaving her already.

‘Me? Don’t you worry. I’ll be completely fine,’ said Nancy confidently, lifting up her plastered arm and knocking everything off the bathroom shelf in one go.

* * *

Nancy heard the front door close as Alice left for work. She sat down on the edge of the bath, wobbled and clutched the edge of the bath with her good hand. This was an unmitigated disaster. The one side of her hair that she’d not managed to keep out of the shower dripped into her face. *Start small*, she thought. She’d read a management book that advocated tackling the little things and building up to the bigger ones. She’d tie her hair up and then get dressed. She let go of the bath and picked up her hair bobble. But it was no good, her right hand was no use at all. She couldn’t even tie up her own hair. She scrolled through her mobile contacts list. Her mum and dad were away on holiday for another week. Any local friends would already be on their way to work. It wasn’t ideal but there really was only one person she could call.

Nancy sighed deeply as she called Freddy’s number. As she had expected it went to voicemail. ‘Hi you’ve reached Freddy. Please leave a message. Ciao.’ Chow? Nancy curled her lip at the phone until it went beep and she remembered she needed to leave a message.

‘Hi, Freddy, it’s Nancy ...’ *Where to start*, she thought. ‘I had an accident, Claudia and Shona are off sick and it’s the pitch to the publishers today. If there was any way you could see past the um ...’ She was desperately trying to think of another way to phrase, ‘You being an arse’ as she felt that probably wasn’t going to help her cause. ‘Past our disagreement I would be grateful. If you can help, please call me back. And by that I mean urgently, like now. Please.’ She ended the call. She wondered how long she should wait before calling the publisher to rearrange. Nancy wanted to avoid that if she could. She lived in fear of someone beating her to the prize, and of her being the one who missed out. But this time she felt she had little choice.

Nancy wrestled herself into her pants, but her bra was a whole other level of challenge. She decided if she went with a dark blouse and kept her jacket on nobody would know she wasn’t wearing one. Nancy decided to send a text to Freddy as well in case he didn’t bother listening to his messages. She crafted something oh so slowly stabbing the keys with one finger which made her feel like her Nanna. After she finished, she reread it. She wasn’t going to beg. After she’d edited it a few times it sounded just the right side of pleading.

The meeting wasn’t until half twelve in Cambridge so she still had time. Perhaps she could go it alone and get a taxi to Claudia’s to collect the samples and then onto the nearest train station. She’d give Freddy half an hour before she moved to plan B.

Nancy was exhausted by the time she’d tugged her clothes on. Her blouse cuffs were unbuttoned as they were impossible to do up with one hand and were now scrunched up her arms in her suit jacket making it look like she had muscles The Rock would be envious of.

She’d lost forty minutes to getting dressed and there was no response from Freddy, so she decided the taxi was her best option. As she picked up her phone it started to ring – it was Freddy.

She took a moment to quell her excitement before answering – she didn’t want him knowing how desperate she

was for his help. ‘Hi, Freddy, thanks for calling me back.’

‘You said you had an accident. How bad is it?’ She was heartened by the concern in his voice. ‘My wrist is broken in two places.’

‘Anything else?’

‘No but it’s a pain.’

‘Literally and figuratively.’

‘Yeah. Anyway, the thing is I need to get to Cambridge via Claudia’s in the next four hours. Can you help me?’ She waved her arm in frustration and then wished she hadn’t. His long pause was infuriating but she pushed her lips together, so she didn’t say anything to piss him off and make her lose her best option of getting to the publisher today.

‘As I’m a man of integrity, of course I can help. Ping me your address and ... oh heavens I bet you live near the warehouse in deepest darkest Essex don’t you?’

‘The warehouse and offices are in Dagenham, which is London. But, yeah, I live in Basildon.’

‘Then I’ll be a couple of hours.’ She could tell he was yawning as he spoke.

‘Two hours? Are you coming by roller-skates or donkey?’

‘It’s going to easily take me an hour and half to get to yours plus I need to—’

‘Fine. As quick as you can. Thank you,’ she said.

‘It’s my pleasure, now should we—’

‘Can we chat on the way to Cambridge?’

Freddy snorted a laugh. ‘Message received. I’ll be as quick as humanly possible.’

‘Thank you.’ Freddy ended the call and Nancy felt she’d swapped one pile of stress for another. A day with Freddy Astley-Davenport was always going to be a challenge.

Chapter Thirteen

The last day of school before half-term holidays always had a heady, slightly wild air of abandon to it where everyone was over-excited and acting up and that was just the teaching staff. Alice had spent a lot of her own time researching the class surnames but had hit a brick wall with two of the names.

‘We can’t do it as a class exercise if you’ve not researched two of them.’ Mrs Robinson looked personally affronted.

‘I did look them up it’s just that there isn’t any information anywhere about what they mean. But I thought perhaps those children could make up what they thought their name meant.’ Alice’s shoulders were so high they were nearly touching her ears.

Mrs Robinson became distracted by the headteacher looming around the corner. ‘Fine,’ she said, taking the folder from Alice and walking in step with the head. ‘Can I just update you on something new I’m doing with my class ...’ Mrs Robinson and the head disappeared into the staff room and Alice finally relaxed her shoulders.

Alice got the classroom set up for the session and drew a big colourful shield on the whiteboard for her own name as an example. Underneath her coat of arms, which featured birds, flowers and a suit of armour helmet with an elephant climbing out of the top, she put the origins of the name.

The children all came into class in the usual cacophony as bags, lunches and layers were abandoned in the corner within reaching distance of the neatly labelled pegs. Mrs Robinson came in which caused a flurry of children to race to their allotted seats. ‘Today we are going to talk about our last names and where they come from, over to you, Miss Pelling.’ And with that Alice was in charge of the class and the lesson. Alice

gave a quick overview because with small children it was always best to keep it brief as they had the attention span of an easily distracted fly. ‘And this is my name, my shield and where it came from. A long time ago my last name came from a place called Peelings or the people of Pydel ...’ There were a few giggles, Mrs Robinson’s eyes had made it to the board. ‘Miss Pelling, can I have a word outside?’

Alice hated that, it always felt like she was in trouble, and, to be fair, it generally did mean there was something Mrs Robinson was unhappy about. Once outside the classroom Alice shut the door behind her. ‘Everything okay?’

‘You can’t say piddle in front of a Year One class.’

‘I wasn’t sure if it was pronounced piddle, pie-dell or pee-dell if I’m honest.’

‘Let’s go with pie, shall we?’ Mrs Robinson didn’t wait for a response before marching back into the class. Hush descended.

Alice continued as she handed out the slips of research to each pupil, which had lots of pictures and just a few words that she and Mrs Robinson would help them with. ‘I’ve got information for everyone about their last name apart from two of you, but I thought it might be fun for those two to make up what their names meant.’

‘Which students are impacted?’ asked Mrs Robinson.

Impacted? Crumbs, it wasn’t like she was banishing them to another kingdom. ‘Delilah Villin and Kayden Wynker.’

‘Miss, Miss,’ said William with his hand stretched into the air. ‘I know what Wynker means.’ Mrs Robinson’s eyebrows lifted and stayed there.

Eventually the class settled into their task and soon shields were being liberally doused in paint, and shapes cut out from the scraps box. Two boys had overdone the black paint, which was a regular thing, so Alice cut them out some new shields with the teacher scissors. Bonnie and Delilah had a tussle nearby over some red card, but Alice was able to calm the situation by giving them both a small amount of glitter. Glitter

was usually a last resort but seeing as it was the last day Alice used it as an easy fix.

Mrs Robinson was busy in the cupboard, which Alice now realised was code for taking a break to look at her phone and most likely stuff her face with the treacle tart she'd deposited there earlier. Alice was momentarily distracted by Kayden making fart noises on his arm but a shriek from Bonnie had her full attention. Alice raced over to Bonnie, who was at the stage in crying where her face was red and she was sucking in air to her full lung capacity in preparation for a full-on bawl. Alice speedily scanned her for any obvious signs of harm – nothing. Then she spotted the giggling face of Delilah next to her. She was covered in glitter, holding a pair of teacher scissors in one hand and a clump of Bonnie's hair in the other.

* * *

Nancy spent an hour and a half trying to put her hair in a ponytail. The simplest of things had become a Mensa challenge now she only had one fully working arm. The last version of the ponytail wasn't actually the best but she was seriously fed up so it would have to do.

She had given Carrie one-armed cuddles and she was now asleep in her basket where she'd happily stay until Nancy got home. Nancy was waiting by the door with her laptop bag in the crook of her good arm and with her phone in her hand. It was like waiting to go out as a kid, that clamouring need for time to go quicker so she could leave the house. She used the time to call Filip, update him on what had happened to everyone and check he was okay to hold the fort. In true Filip style he was unfazed by being a one-man band for the day and wished her all the best for the presentation. A piece of hair flopped into her face as bits from her ponytail escaped – she'd not tied it tight enough.

At last there was a knock on her door. Nancy was right ready only now she had to put her phone down before she could open the door. There was a second knock. Did people not have any patience anymore? She turned the key which was really tricky because it felt like she was doing everything back to front using her other hand. She opened the door to Freddy's

back. He turned around and she was momentarily wowed. His hair was neat, he was wearing designer sunglasses and an expensive suit.

‘Uber for Barraclough?’

‘Great, a comedian, that’s going to make things better.’ Nancy tried to blow the strand of escaped hair out of her face.

Freddy lifted up his sunglasses. ‘How did the accident happen?’

‘Long story that we don’t have time for.’ She tried to shoo him off her doorstep.

‘What are you wearing under that jacket?’ He was eyeing her bulging upper arms.

‘It was very difficult to get dressed and I’ve rammed the plaster into this jacket so hard I’m not sure if it’ll ever come out again and even the simplest task is torture.’ She pointed to her head, the effort of which made her wince.

He scanned her up and down. ‘Hair by Grayson Perry?’

‘Hilarious. If you want your five stars, Mr Uber driver, you’d better take this.’ She lifted her good arm where the laptop bag was hanging.

Freddy unhooked it from her arm. ‘Seriously, are you okay apart from the wrist?’

‘Fine. I’m completely fine. But we need to go.’ She waved him down the path.

Freddy’s Maserati was parked outside. While he put her bag in the boot she went to get in the passenger side but had to put her phone away first to free up her good hand, by which time Freddy had opened the car door. ‘If I’d known you were after the full chauffeur experience I’d have worn my hat.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, and she got inside.

‘M’lady,’ said Freddy, closing the door, striding around to the other side and getting in. Nancy felt his eyes on her as she struggled with the seatbelt. ‘Here,’ he said, leaning across her, taking the belt and swiftly plugging it in.

‘Thank y—’

‘If you’re going to thank me every time I do something for you it’s going to be a long day.’

‘I think it might be anyway.’ Freddy tilted his head in question. ‘You know after everything.’

‘Lucky for you I don’t hold grudges.’ He started the engine with a roar and they took off.

First stop was Romford to collect the samples from Claudia, who opened the door, dumped a wheelie case outside, and shut it again. ‘Sorry. Gotta go again.’ Poor thing was still suffering. Freddy retrieved the case, put it in the boot and after Nancy had had five failed attempts, he helped her put her seatbelt back on. She didn’t like it. She felt like a child again where everyone had to do even the simplest task for her. She hated being helpless, it went against everything she was.

She keyed in the sat nav details for the publisher in Cambridge and tried to relax. The seats were very comfortable and Freddy was a confident driver. He was calm and not the boy racer she’d expected him to be. ‘ETA one hour twenty-eight minutes, so tell me all about this accident.’

‘There’s nothing to tell. I tripped and broke my wrist. That’s it, end of story.’

‘Falls can be tricky if you land badly,’ said Freddy.

What was it with everyone calling it a fall? ‘It wasn’t a bloody fall. I *fell*, that’s different.’

‘Okay,’ said Freddy, not sounding convinced. ‘Did people laugh?’

‘Goodness no, they didn’t laugh.’ At least she’d been saved that humiliation.

‘If you fall and people laugh, then you’re young. If you fall and people look concerned that’s when you know you’re old.’

‘Maybe we should focus on the presentation instead,’ suggested Nancy.

‘Sure. What would you like me to cover?’

‘Nothing. I’d like you to pass round the samples and put them away at the end. That’s all.’

‘Like a magician’s assistant? That’s a bit insulting. I was at the meeting, I could go through a couple of slides so it’s not just you going on and ...’ He seemed to sense her giving him daggers. ‘Different presenters might make it more engaging.’

‘We’ll see,’ said Nancy, turning up the air con. She was starting to overheat.

Freddy talked off and on most of the way there. Various signs they passed triggered amusing anecdotes, but it did make the journey go quite quickly. The publisher’s offices were out of town so there was parking right outside and they were immediately sympathetic when Nancy explained both her issues and Claudia’s.

The meeting room was all glass and had been heated up by the sun to the perfect temperature for growing tomatoes. Nancy excused herself and Freddy met her in the corridor where she was trying to get her jacket off but all she’d managed was to pull it off both shoulders so now it was restricting movement and more like a straitjacket. ‘Let me help,’ said Freddy. She didn’t have a lot of choice. He took hold of the jacket and Nancy tried to escape. ‘Stop moving,’ he said. ‘Let’s slip your good arm out and then ...’ He tried to get the jacket off her cast, but it was stuck fast. They both tugged in all directions but it was no good. ‘I’ll see if they have any scissors,’ said Nancy.

‘No need,’ said Freddy, producing a penknife from his pocket and deftly slicing the sleeve of her jacket. ‘There you go.’

‘Bloody hell, Freddy! I was joking! This cost ...’ A glance at his expensive suit told her the price of hers would not support her argument. ‘A lot. It cost a lot and more importantly it’s my favourite.’

‘Ah, apologies but I think having it cut off you was inevitable,’ he said, putting the knife away.

‘Boy Scout?’ she asked with a nod at the knife.

‘My cousin’s Amsterdam stag night,’ he said. He pointed at her crumpled shirt sleeves. ‘What happened?’

‘I’ll just roll them up,’ she said, folding her ruined jacket over her arm before they both went back into the meeting room.

After the jacket disaster things improved. A number of the publishing team joined them and they all introduced themselves. The female members of staff were instantly taken with Freddy. ‘I’m Nancy Barraclough, owner and CEO of Having A Ball. And this is Freddy—’

‘Astley-Davenport,’ added Freddy. ‘I’m her temporary PA.’ Everyone laughed.

‘No, he really is my PA.’ Disbelieving faces looked at her. How annoying. ‘Anyway, shall we go through what we discussed on the phone in a bit more detail?’ Nancy knew the presentation inside and out and was passionate about her business. Freddy passed around the right samples at the right time and pitched in with some additional facts he’d picked up on his induction day about their inclusivity and sustainability policies which had heads nodding. At the end Nancy sat down and Freddy gave her a discreet nod that said she’d done well. She didn’t need his approval, but it was nice to get some acknowledgement all the same. She’d been the boss for so long she’d forgotten what it was like to get the occasional bit of positive feedback.

The publishing team were enthusiastic. Apparently, they weren’t used to being presented to, but they liked that Nancy had thought about the market for the book. They talked about what they could and couldn’t do and that they felt it was quite niche but would make a good gifting book either around Christmas or Mother’s Day. It was all very positive, and they pledged to be in touch after they had taken the book to their acquisitions meeting, which from what Nancy could make out was where the ultimate decision would be made. It was all good but what she needed now was something concrete. Her little company was a carefully balanced card tower and she wasn’t sure how long she could keep going before everything collapsed.

Nancy was packing away while Freddy chatted and laughed with the marketing assistant who kept flicking her hair. Nancy rolled her eyes as she rammed her laptop back in its bag and gathered up the samples. 'Time to go, Freddy,' she called, picking up the laptop bag with her good hand and automatically grabbing the wheelie case with the other. The pain shot up her arm making her let go of the case instantly. No heavy lifting the leaflet had said, and she now realised why. Freddy grabbed the case and steadied Nancy.

'I'll take it from here, Dwayne Johnson. Let's get you home,' he said.

Chapter Fourteen

Alice wasn't looking forward to speaking to Dom but given Bonnie was distraught about Delilah giving her a random haircut she felt she needed to make him aware. It was also her fault because she'd left the teacher scissors unattended, as Mrs Robinson was very quick to point out when she finally emerged from the cupboard brushing pastry crumbs from her lips.

Alice didn't like that she had to make the call from the office with the admin staff listening in, although the nice lady was there and she kept giving her encouraging smiles. The phone was answered just as Alice thought it was going to voicemail.

'Hello?'

'Mr Fisher, it's Miss Pelling from—'

'Alice, hi.' His tone changed instantly. His voice had a deep timbre but all she could think about were his lips and how close they would be to his phone right now. Not helpful. She gave herself a shake.

'I'm calling about Bonnie. There's been an incident and—'

'Is she okay?'

'She's fine. Apart from she's a bit upset because another pupil has cut off a small piece of her hair.' Dom snorted with laughter which Alice felt was both reassuring and a little insensitive. 'We will be making the other pupil's parents aware.' Alice was not looking forward to that call either.

'Okay. What did you want me to do?'

'It was more of an awareness call. You might want to book her in for a hair appointment.' Alice was feeling brave. 'But I

think she would really appreciate you being on time to pick her up after school today.'

'Ah, sure. I can do that. Can you give her a hug from me?'

'No, sorry we're not allowed to, but I'll tell her that you sent her a virtual one to keep her going until she sees you.'

'Thanks, Alice. That's kind. And how are you?'

'Busy. If there's nothing else, Mr Fisher.'

'Um no.'

'Thank you, goodbye.' She hastily ended the call.

The call to Delilah's parents was short. They didn't seem bothered about what their child had done or that she had had access to scissors, which was a huge relief to Alice who knew she had a few forms she'd have to fill in. As the teacher scissors had round ends, they weren't exactly a lethal weapon, but they were clearly sharp enough to cut hair so in the wrong hands could have done something worse. It was a big lesson for Alice.

Mrs Robinson was quick to hand a red-faced and sniffly Bonnie over to Alice so she could concentrate on teaching. Alice took Bonnie out of the classroom and managed to console her with a carton of fruit juice and a promise that her daddy had an extra big hug for her at pick-up. 'And it's the holidays. So no school on Monday,' said Alice, trying to distract Bonnie who kept tugging on the short clump of hair at the side of her head.

Bonnie lifted her chin. 'We're going to the seaside.'

'That'll be fun.'

'I've got a new costume with mermaids on it.'

'Lovely. You'll be a super-fast swimmer in that then,' said Alice.

Bonnie shook her head firmly. 'I'm scared of the waves.'

'I like jumping over waves, maybe try that with your dad.' Alice had a brief picture of Dom in swim shorts which she had to shake away.

Bonnie leaned into Alice and whispered. ‘I think Daddy is scared of the waves too.’

Alice doubted that but the image of him running up the beach screaming like Hamsi was definitely helping to quell the disappointment of him not being available.

Bonnie leaned against Alice. ‘I’d like to jump waves with you,’ she said. Alice would have liked that too. She knew she wasn’t meant to have favourites, but she had quickly become attached to Bonnie. Moments like this were hard because all Alice wanted to do was give the little girl a hug, but for child protection reasons she wasn’t allowed to.

‘We’d better get back to class,’ said Alice.

Bonnie hopped off the chair and gripped Alice’s hand tightly. ‘I don’t want to be next to Delilah. We’re not friends anymore. She’s mean.’

‘You can sit with me.’

‘Good because I like you more.’ Bonnie grinned up at her while giving her chopped hair another tug.

Alice managed to persuade Mrs Robinson to let Bonnie take the class toy home for the holidays along with its accompanying diary that had to be filled in. Alice thought it was a lovely idea and really enjoyed looking at the diary when it came back on a Monday. She couldn’t understand why all the parents, without exception, groaned when their child came running out clutching it. The toy was a snow leopard which had been a good opportunity to explain to them about endangered animals, making it both educational and fun.

Mrs Robinson was explaining in detail her foolproof approach to matching children to parents at pick-up time and Alice was trying to pay attention as small children bounced around like greyhounds waiting for the trap to open. Mrs Robinson matched a boy with an untucked shirt to a man who was a carbon copy only slightly taller. She was scanning the few remaining adults when Dom jogged up to the door.

‘Made it,’ he said, looking very pleased with himself and slightly out of breath.

‘If you could wait just a second, Mr Fisher,’ said Alice, wanting to look professional in front of Mrs Robinson. ‘And I’ll explain about the incident.’

‘Oh yeah, the scalping,’ said Dom and a mum next to him gasped.

With a nod from Mrs Robinson, Bonnie ran to her father and he crouched down to intercept her with a bear hug. Alice was pleased he was there for his daughter.

‘Mr Fisher,’ began Alice, stepping outside.

‘Please call me Dom.’

‘I think it’s best if we keep things professional. Don’t you?’

He looked wrong-footed. ‘Er, up to you.’

‘I’m sorry about the incident earlier today,’ began Alice.

‘Oh yeah. Let’s see?’ he asked Bonnie. She stuck out her lip and pointed to the side of her head.

‘Woah,’ he said but as Bonnie’s lip wobbled he carried on. ‘That’s cool. Nobody else has a haircut like that. I like it.’ He grinned at his daughter.

‘I don’t,’ said Bonnie.

‘You can have my baseball cap,’ he said.

‘Cool,’ said Bonnie and instantly perked up.

‘Problem solved. No need to apologise,’ said Dom. ‘And thanks for taking care of her. Not just today but all this term.’

‘It’s my job,’ said Alice.

‘But you do it very well. So thanks.’

‘You’re welcome,’ said Alice, feeling her resolve start to crumble and she had to concentrate not to stare at those lips. That smile.

‘Right, then. We’d best be off,’ said Dom.

‘Yes,’ said Alice, coming out of her brief trance. ‘Bye.’ Dom turned to go and Bonnie waved at Alice over his

shoulder. ‘Hang on!’ called Alice, remembering something. ‘It’s Bonnie’s turn to have the snow leopard.’

‘Bum,’ said Dom with a groan.

* * *

Nancy had tried to put a brave face on about her throbbing arm but without her asking, Freddy had found a pharmacy nearby and come back with the strongest pain killers they could sell over the counter.

‘Here, take two of these,’ said Freddy, handing her the packet.

‘Thanks,’ she said. She read the back of the packaging. ‘To be taken with food. I’ll have them as soon as I get in,’ said Nancy.

‘We can stop for a meal if you want to, there must be some decent country pubs if we take a bit of a detour.’

Usually, Nancy would have been keen to eat out. She was a big fan of pub grub and an even bigger one of not having to cook but it had felt like the longest day and now she was tired and her arm was hurting. ‘Actually, if it’s okay with you I just want to get home.’

‘Of course.’

There was a lull in conversation and while Freddy concentrated on the road Nancy watched the world go by out of the window and tried to ignore the throbbing pain in her wrist. She thought about the publishers meeting. Despite her shredded suit jacket things couldn’t have gone any better. The hope was that, assuming the book got published, those who bought it would then use Having A Ball for all their yarn and crafting needs as the examples would be using their products. Nancy was already conjuring up a gift box that would include the book, selected yarn and essential tools. It was a good plan, only Nancy hadn’t banked on there being hurdles like acquisitions meetings or the long lead time to get published.

‘You’ve gone very quiet,’ said Freddy. ‘Is it your wrist?’

‘It’s still giving me gip, but I’ll have some food when I get in and take the tablets.’ She held up the packet. ‘Thanks for getting these.’

‘I pride myself on purchasing the perfect gift.’ He shot her a cheeky smile and it was hard not to mirror him.

‘You know what? It’s a shame I fired you because you did okay today,’ said Nancy, a little surprised by her own words but they were true. Freddy had been articulate, helpful even, and the fact that he’d charmed some of the publishing staff was a bonus.

‘I resigned,’ he said.

Nancy wobbled her head. ‘The jury’s out on that one but take the compliment. You did all right.’

‘High praise indeed.’

‘As my old nan would say, I speak as I find,’ said Nancy.

‘I don’t suppose you’d consider putting that to paper and—’

‘Nope,’ said Nancy and she got her phone out to show that the conversation was over.

Nancy was so pleased to see her own front door again. She let herself in and Carrie sauntered over to greet her. Nancy couldn’t work out how to pick her up one-handed so crouched down to give her a fuss.

Freddy brought the things from the boot, put them in the hall and stared at Carrie. ‘You have a cat.’

‘So it would appear. Any comments you’d like to make about me being single with a cat?’

‘Not at all.’

‘Are you not a cat person?’ she asked as Carrie snaked around his legs expertly leaving a trail of white fur on his dark trousers.

‘More a dog person really.’

Nancy waited for Freddy to leave but he stood there expectantly. She supposed the least she could do was offer him

a cuppa. ‘Did you want a coffee or are you after a tip?’ she asked.

‘I just want to see you take those tablets. If they don’t work, I can drop you at the hospital.’

‘It’s not that bad. I don’t think I’ve damaged it, just aggravated it.’

‘Still.’

‘Freddy, that’s kind of you but I’m just going to peel a few spuds and—’

‘How are you going to do that with one hand?’

‘Easy ...’ Nancy got out her peeler which made her realise her problem. She couldn’t hold either a potato or peeler in her bad hand. ‘I’ll have a pizza. I’ve got frozen ones. It’s fine.’

‘I don’t think it is fine. I think you’re going to struggle on your own.’

‘I don’t have a lot of choice about that because Alice is away at her parents for a week and my mum and dad are on the holiday of a lifetime. But I’m a strong independent woman so I can manage on my own thanks.’

Freddy pulled up a chair. ‘Actually, I will have that coffee, please.’ He was watching her closely like he was waiting to catch her out and she didn’t like it. Mainly because she had a sinking feeling that he was right. It was likely that she was going to find things difficult on her own. Despite that she was determined to show Freddy he was wrong. She picked up the kettle and went to fill it. She couldn’t hold it and fill it at the same time, so she had to put it in the sink.

‘Mind the bottom isn’t wet because water and electricity ...’

Nancy got out a tea towel and put the kettle on it to dry it off before putting it on the stand and switching it on, feeling like she’d cleared the first hurdle.

While it was boiling, she got out the mugs one at a time. She picked up the coffee jar. How was she meant to unscrew a lid? She stuck it under her armpit and gave it a turn with her good hand. Possibly a bit too fierce as the lid came off and the

jar spewed coffee all over the worktop, floor and Nancy. ‘I’ll sort that out in a minute,’ she said, spooning some off the worktop and putting it into the mugs. She got a carton of milk from the fridge. A new one posed even more of an issue than the coffee jar. The kettle boiled and she was still trying to undo the carton. ‘Did you want milk?’

‘Please,’ said Freddy. She stared at him, willing him to smirk, but he didn’t, he actually looked quite concerned. She didn’t need his pity. She could cope.

‘I think we’ll have it black.’

‘Okay. You need to have something to eat so you can take your painkillers.’

‘Right.’ She was tired and grumpy but she tried not to show it as she got a pizza from the freezer. Opening a box one-handed was virtually impossible. She slammed it on the worktop in frustration. She picked it up and slung it back in the freezer.

‘I fancy a takeaway.’

Carrie pawed at Nancy’s ankles.

‘You can’t give the cat takeaway,’ said Freddy, sipping his coffee.

And the award for stating the bleeding obvious goes to Freddy Astley-Davenport, she thought as she grimaced at him. Nancy got out a small tin tray of cat food. She tried to grip the tab and open the foil top, but it was impossible and made her arm throb a bit more. Nancy could see Freddy was still watching her, which was annoying. Carrie mewed at her to speed up. At this rate she’d be sharing a Dairylea triangle with Carrie for dinner, assuming she could open one. Nancy got out a knife and began stabbing around the edges of the cat food tin.

‘Okay, please stop,’ said Freddy, standing up and taking the knife. ‘Nancy, I hate to be the one to tell you, because I fear for my safety, but you need to be looked after.’ She went to protest but he held up his hands. ‘It’s miserable being in pain but it’ll be worse if you do even more damage.’ He put the

knife down and with ease removed the foil top on the cat food. Carrie switched allegiance quickly and sat adoringly at his feet – *turncoat*. ‘There must be someone you could stay with for a few days?’

Nancy shook her head. ‘There’s not. It’s just bad timing, everyone is away.’ Claudia may have been a long shot but even she was out of action. ‘I’ll just have to manage.’ She hated the crack in her voice. She was feeling a bit emotional. She swallowed hard and straightened her shoulders – she didn’t want Freddy to see her upset.

‘I don’t think you should stay here on your own.’

‘I’ve no choice.’

Freddy drew in a long breath. ‘I know we’re not the best of friends, but you could come home with me ...’ Nancy started shaking her head. ‘Hear me out. At least then someone can cook you proper meals, and make sure you don’t do yourself any further injury. There’s plenty of space so as an added bonus you won’t see much of me.’ He smiled at her. ‘What do you say?’

She was tired, in pain and at the end of her tether. Would a few nights in Belgravia be so bad? ‘I don’t know.’

‘I’ll make you a sandwich now, you can have your tablets and then you can decide. No pressure but I’d be a lot happier if you’d come back to mine. Purely on a platonic basis obviously.’ He put the food down for the cat and Carrie turned her back on him and got stuck in.

‘Obviously,’ said Nancy, warming to Freddy. This was really kind of him. Then she remembered something. ‘I can’t leave because of Carrie.’ She felt quite disappointed at the thought. Perhaps she had been coming around to the idea of someone looking after her, even if it was Freddy Astley-Davenport.

‘I guess there’s room for a fluffy moggy,’ he said, stroking Carrie’s back. She scowled at the interruption and possibly also at being called a moggy.

‘Really?’

‘If it means you’ll swallow some pride and come too?’

She was struggling to think of a reason not to. ‘Just for a couple of days. Once I’m able to use this arm I’ll leave. Agreed?’

‘Whatever is going to make you feel better.’ He smiled kindly at her as he got out the things to make a sandwich. She’d had worse offers.

‘Okay. I’ll get my things together.’

Within half an hour, Freddy had fed her, tidied up, helped her pack a case and stood over her while she took her tablets. He’d bundled a rather cross Carrie into her cat carrier and loaded up the car. Nancy got in the passenger seat and instantly started to relax. Maybe it was the extra strong painkillers or perhaps it was the thought of a few days of being waited on in a posh pad in Belgravia but whatever it was, it was making her sleepy.

Chapter Fifteen

Nancy snorted herself awake and blinked. She was still in Freddy's car but now it was dark. A million thoughts swamped her sleepy brain. How long had they been driving? A quick glance at the digital display told her almost five hours. A second thought struck her – *Shit, I've been kidnapped!*

'Ahh Sleeping Beauty awakens,' said Freddy.

'Where the hell are you taking me?' she asked, quickly checking the side of her mouth for any dribble.

'Home. Like we agreed.'

Nancy peered out of the windscreen into the darkness, all she could make out were fields, hedges and lots of trees. 'This is not London.'

'Gold star. That A level in Geography has done you proud.'

Nancy twisted in her seat. She was not feeling good about this. How much did she really know about Freddy Astley-Davenport? She suddenly realised her vulnerability and she didn't like it. 'Freddy, I'm serious. Where are we? Why didn't you take me to yours like you promised?'

'We are about ten miles from Langham Hall, which is my home. And is exactly what I promised. I thought you'd realised it wasn't on Hampstead Heath.'

Nancy felt a little foolish. 'Of course, but I assumed you were taking me back to your place in Belgravia.'

Freddy laughed long and far too hard. Eventually he got it down to a snigger. 'You're hilarious.' He glanced across at her. 'Oh my word. You're actually serious. You thought *I* was going to look after you?'

'Yes, because that's what you said.' She was quite confused.

‘No. I suggested that you come home with me because you needed *someone* to cook you proper meals and look after you so you didn’t do yourself any further injury. Which is why I am bringing you to Langham because we have an excellent cook and a variety of other staff.’

‘Oh.’ She couldn’t think of anything else to say.

They went the last few miles in silence until Freddy slowed the car by a high wall, turned into a driveway and stopped in front of tall black gates. He buzzed down his window and spoke to an intercom box. ‘Hi, it’s me.’ There was no reply other than the gates slowly opening.

They continued down a long treelined drive and over a cattle grid before they drew up to the house. As they came to a standstill, floodlights switched on, illuminating the front of the large building. It was stunning. A beautiful light grey stone structure with a portico which Freddy crawled the car forward into. A man in a suit strode out and opened Nancy’s door for her.

‘Good evening, miss, I’m Simpkins, welcome to Langham Hall.’ He offered Nancy a hand and helped her from the car.

‘Good evening, my lord,’ he said, nodding formally as Freddy emerged from the driver’s side.

‘You can dispense with the usual welcome, Paul, she’s ...’ Freddy squinted at Nancy over the bonnet as if trying to work something out. ‘Nancy. Nancy Barraclough.’

‘I run Having A Ball,’ said Nancy, offering Paul a hand which he shook. ‘Pleased to meet you,’ she added, wanting to get things right. Her dad always said it showed manners to shake hands.

‘Likewise,’ said Paul.

‘Is Percy about?’ asked Freddy, scanning the area furtively.

‘No, he’s turned in for the night.’

‘Great. We’ll take drinks in the snug, please, Paul,’ said Freddy. ‘This way,’ he added to Nancy, shutting the car door and turning to go inside.

‘But my bags are in the boot. And there’s Carrie.’ The cat was glaring at her from the cat carrier on the back seat.

‘I’ll bring through any luggage, Miss Barraclough.’

‘Please could you pass me my cat? And it’s Nancy.’

‘Of course. My apologies, Nancy,’ said Paul, swiftly removing the carrier from the back of the car. Carrie glared out in protest at being shut in the carrier for the long journey.

‘I’m sorry,’ whispered Nancy to the cat. ‘I didn’t know we were going to ...’ She turned to Paul who was opening the boot. ‘Excuse me, what county are we in?’

‘Devon,’ said Paul.

‘Devon?!’ Nancy couldn’t hide her surprise.

‘Are you coming?’ called Freddy, who was holding open one half of the oversized front door.

Despite her long nap in the car Nancy was tired and wanted to go to bed. She followed Freddy inside. It was like stepping into one of the stately homes she’d been to on school trips many moons ago. She had to concentrate to stop her jaw dropping and her mouth falling open. She was standing in a vast open hallway, surrounded by giant portraits, a large round table big enough for Arthur and plenty of his knights. There was even a suit of armour standing guard at the bottom of a sweeping staircase. This was beyond impressive.

‘It’s really lovely, Freddy,’ said Nancy. ‘I mean it’s obscenely frigging huge and everything, but it’s lovely.’

Freddy smiled. ‘I’ll do a formal tour tomorrow. For now, let’s get you settled in.’

‘Frederick?’ came a high-class female voice from above. Nancy craned her neck to see a woman in a long shiny dressing gown peering over the galleried landing.

‘Good evening, Mother,’ called Freddy as he carried on walking away.

Nancy was rooted to the spot as the two women surveyed each other. *Remember your manners*, came her dad’s voice in

her head. ‘Pleased to meet you,’ called up Nancy. ‘I’m Nancy Barraclough—’

‘Goodness me! Nancy, how lovely to meet you. Give me two minutes to get dressed.’ Lady Astley-Davenport’s aristocratic voice was what Nancy’s mum would have called cut-glass and fancy.

‘No, don’t do that,’ said Nancy. ‘I can see you’re all ready for bed.’

‘Nancy!’ called Freddy, impatience loaded into her name.

‘Keep your hair on, I’ll be there in a minute,’ Nancy hollered down the hallway. Then immediately cringed at the echoey sound of her London accent as it was repelled by the posh walls.

Freddy’s mother chuckled as she came down the stairs. When she reached the bottom, she caught Nancy off-guard with her hearty embrace. ‘Oh, um, hello, Lady Astley-Davenport. Pleased to meet you,’ Nancy repeated for good measure.

‘Please call me Louisa. The pleasure is entirely ours. We can’t thank you enough for taking on Frederick. I’m afraid my husband is already asleep. He’s on a lot of medication. But he’ll be overjoyed to meet you tomorrow. I assume you’re not dashing off somewhere?’

Nancy was processing all the information in between what was being said. Clearly they didn’t know Freddy was no longer working for her and they weren’t expecting her to be staying any longer than overnight. This was awkward. Nancy was forming her words as Paul came in carrying her bag and pulling her wheelie case. Louisa’s eyes widened at the sight.

Nancy felt she needed to explain. ‘Ah, you see, there may have been a misunderstanding—’

‘Nothing of the sort,’ said Freddy, striding back into the entrance hall. ‘Nancy is my guest, she’ll be staying here until her arm has fully recovered. I trust that’s acceptable under your new regime of rules, Mother.’

Nancy felt awkward. ‘Just for the weekend and only if it’s not too much trouble. I’ve been struggling a bit with this.’ She pulled back the sleeve of her coat to reveal the bright orange plaster.

‘Oh my dear, you poor thing. Of course, we’d love to have you stay,’ said Louisa.

‘Shall I take Miss Barraclough’s bags to your room?’ Paul asked Freddy.

‘No!’ chorused everyone together. Paul pulled his chin into his chest at the force of the response.

‘Queen Sophia’s room, please, Paul, and then cocoa in the snug if you’d be so kind,’ said Louisa, guiding Nancy down the hallway.

‘Of course,’ he said, adjusting his grip on the bags and heading for the stairs like he was about to tackle the Eiger.

The snug was not as its name would suggest. It was a large room, roughly the size of Nancy’s whole house, where dying embers of an earlier fire glowed in a cavernous fireplace. Louisa ushered Nancy over to one of three elegant dark red velvet settees. ‘You sit yourself next to the fire. Have you eaten? Would you like me to see if cook has put any leftovers in the fridge? She did a marvellous venison bourguignon for supper—’

‘Mother, please stop fussing,’ said Freddy, who was pacing up and down.

‘Just a hot drink will be lovely and then I’m going to crash ... I mean retire to bed, if that’s okay?’ Why did everything she said sound so common? She knew she had a bit of an accent but for some reason in this setting she sounded pure *EastEnders*.

Louisa sat down opposite, adjusted her dressing gown and clasped her hands together in her lap. ‘Now tell me all about what it is that you do.’ She fixed Nancy with interested eyes.

* * *

It was late when Alice got out of the taxi at her parents' bungalow. The seaside village was 90 per cent bungalows and 10 per cent retirement flats. Or at least that was how Alice saw it. She felt so much bigger than this small place. She was making her own way in the world. She lived and worked in London, that was her home now, although there was a sense of cosy familiarity about being back. The bungalow looked exactly the same. Nothing here had changed. Before she'd even stepped out of the taxi both her parents were out of the front door followed by their elderly Jack Russell terrier, Cindy. They met her on the pavement and her mum wrapped her in a hug so tight there wasn't room to breathe in comfortably. Cindy made a wheezy sort of noise which in her youth would have been a welcome bark.

'Darling, let me look at you,' said her mum, tears welling in her eyes. 'Are you well? You're thin. Are you eating?' Usually these sort of comments jarred with Alice. She felt they were a veiled criticism that she couldn't look after herself. But there had been a shift. She was living proof that she could manage on her own.

'Hi, Mum, yes I'm eating and I'm fine.'

'Hello, Alice, love,' said her dad, giving her a squeeze. 'How many bags?'

'Just the case in the boot, I've got the rest.' She held up a holdall and her handbag.

'I'll take that,' said her mum, grabbing the larger bag. 'I'll get the kettle on and then I need to hear all about it.'

'I speak to you virtually every night, Mum. There's nothing else to tell,' said Alice with a snort.

'It's not the same on the phone.' Her mum linked her spare arm through Alice's. 'It's so nice to have you back home.'

'It's only for a week.'

'I know. Now I wasn't sure if you would have eaten so I've done your favourite.'

'Shepherd's pie?' Alice's stomach rumbled at the thought of it. Despite what the week had in store maybe there were some

benefits to coming home.

Chapter Sixteen

Nancy didn't have the best night's sleep. She'd been hoping for a Saturday morning lie-in, but her wrist had other ideas. The bed was comfortable, but she couldn't seem to find the right spot for her arm. She tried it in pretty much every conceivable position but it either overheated and became itchy inside the cast or it ached. Carrie was restless too and had walked over Nancy's head a number of times in the night. Nancy did manage to drop off to sleep for a short while with the cast resting on her other shoulder but awoke with a start when the rough surface of the cast felt like it was removing a layer of skin.

She got dressed and went in search of coffee. She walked around for a bit but didn't like to open any doors in case someone saw her and thought she was nosing around the place. As she neared the end of a dark corridor, she heard the low rumble of a growl, making her turn around. She was heading back to her room when she heard footsteps and Paul appeared. He was dressed in a suit and tie. 'Hiya, Paul, I was looking for a kettle to make a coffee.'

'Good morning, Nancy. I must apologise. Freddy said not to disturb you. If I'd known you needed—'

'It's fine. This woke me up.' She held up her arm as evidence.

'Ahh, I see. Would you like to go back to bed and I'll bring you up your coffee. How do you take it?'

'I'm up now. Maybe I could sit in the kitchen?'

Paul looked momentarily startled. 'How about the East Terrace? It's a delightful sun trap at this time of day.'

'Okay. That sounds nice.'

‘How do you take your coffee?’

‘Instant’s fine.’

Paul seemed mildly horrified at the thought of instant coffee. ‘I think we can stretch to an americano.’

‘If you’re going out for posh coffee, I’ll have a skinny mocha, ta.’

‘Of course. Let me show you to the terrace.’

She followed Paul through the maze of corridors until they walked into a huge, virtually empty room. The ceiling was more decorated than the walls. Nancy stopped walking and gazed around her. ‘Wowsers,’ she said, taking in the intricate cornicing and scenes of angels and cherubs.

‘Forgive me I should have offered you the tour,’ said Paul. ‘This is the ballroom, reconfigured and decorated in a Regency style by the 7th Earl in 1819. He was an acquaintance of the then Prince George, later King George the Fourth, who stayed at the house for a—’

Nancy tried to stifle the yawn, but it was impossible. She’d had so little sleep. ‘Sorry,’ she said through the end of the yawn. ‘I *was* listening. Honest.’

Paul smiled. ‘I’d best hurry up with that coffee. The terrace is through there.’ He pointed towards the tall French windows.

‘Thanks.’ Paul nodded and left the room. Nancy opened the doors and stepped outside. She wasn’t sure what she’d been expecting when Paul had said terrace, maybe a bit of patio or decking – this looked like an outdoor restaurant. Five large round tables with umbrellas were spaced across the raised stone platform the end of which looked out over stunning gardens. Nancy walked to the stone balustrade and took in the view: manicured lawn, flowerbeds teeming with colour, avenues of trees and a folly in the distance. She let out a sigh. This place was amazing. There was a rustle below her and she peered over to see someone who looked like they were the gardener.

‘Hiya,’ she said to the man stooping over a giant ceramic pot.

He straightened himself, pulled off his gardening gloves and eyed her suspiciously. ‘Good morning,’ he said, his voice far posher than she’d been expecting. ‘Can I help you?’

‘I’m just admiring the view. I’m not really into gardens and that but this is truly beautiful.’

His features softened at her words. ‘Thank you. That’s kind of you. Is someone taking care of you?’ He pronounced his words very carefully.

‘Paul’s gone to get me a coffee, thanks.’

‘Excellent. I must get on, lovely to meet you,’ he said, returning to the pot.

Realisation dawned on Nancy. She’d seen this in books and films. Gardeners didn’t have posh voices like that. This was obviously Freddy’s dad, Lord Whatsit, doing a spot of gardening. She was thrilled not to have walked into the trap.

‘Lovely to meet you too, *Lord Astley-Davenport*.’ She arched an eyebrow and the man frowned back at her. ‘Or should I call you Percy?’

His frown deepened. ‘I’m sorry, miss. I think there’s some confusion.’

‘Shall I leave your coffee here?’ asked Paul, appearing with a laden tray.

Clearly Lord Astley-Davenport didn’t like being rumbled. ‘Yeah, okay. Nice to meet you anyway.’ She gave him a wave and went to get her coffee. ‘Thanks, Paul, this looks fab.’

Paul unloaded a large mug, pastries, fresh fruit salad and yogurt. ‘I hope it wasn’t presumptuous of me to go for a mug over a cup and saucer.’

‘Mug works for me, Paul. You’ve got me nailed.’

‘Thank you. What would you like for breakfast?’ he asked.

‘Just a croissant, ta.’ She pointed to the plate of pastries.

‘This was just to go with your coffee, I’m making breakfast now.’

‘I’m not big on breakfast so this is ace.’

‘If you need anything else, ring this.’ He placed a hand bell on the table.

Nancy giggled. ‘You’re not serious?’

‘Absolutely. The kitchen is quite a way away but I’m like Pavlov’s dog and can hear a bell from the other side of the house.’

‘Hang on, there is something. What’s the deal with Percy doing the gardening?’

Paul’s eyebrows puckered. ‘I’m not sure I follow.’

‘Goodness me, you’re up early,’ said Freddy, marching through the double doors in vest top and joggers. She pulled her eyes away from his muscly arms to focus on his bed-ruffled hair. Instinctively she tried to calm down her own bushy mane but for some reason it had gone extra frizzy.

‘Didn’t sleep well.’ She waved the cast. ‘It’s like sleeping with a cheese grater.’

He laughed. ‘Paul’s taking care of you, exactly as I said he would.’ He patted Paul on the shoulder as he passed. ‘I’ll be about an hour.’

‘Hang on, what am I meant to do?’

Freddy shrugged. ‘Go for a swim?’ She waved her cast at him. ‘Ah, a walk then. Take care on the cliffs. And watch out for Percy!’ he called as he ran down the steps and jogged away. He was already too far away for her to shout a reply. This was weird. What exactly was up with Percy? She was starting to think there was something very wrong with his father. Freddy had said he was going to inherit early due to his father’s health issues, and she was wondering exactly what they were. She tucked into her croissant and admired the view. She wasn’t a gardener, but she did love the intricacy of the vast gardens in front of her. The symmetry was almost as impressive as the colours. Paul returned to check she was okay.

‘Paul, what’s wrong with Percy?’ she asked.

Paul frowned and took a moment. ‘I think his issues are age related. He’s quite old but still has certain urges. Things have got worse of late.’

‘But what is actually wrong with him?’

Paul seemed to ponder the question. ‘He’s prone to unprovoked aggressive outbursts.’

Nancy knew her eyes were widening. He’d seemed quite sweet when he’d been pottering about the big flowerpot and chatting to her earlier. ‘I’m not being rude, but should he be here? You know, for his sake if nobody else’s. Maybe he needs specialist care?’ She tried to phrase it as kindly as she could, but she was definitely going to lock her bedroom door tonight.

Paul bobbed his head. ‘Probably, but Lady Louisa is rather sentimental and while Percy does fly into a rage at the slightest thing and crap on the garden furniture, this is still his home.’ He saw Nancy’s shocked expression. ‘Please don’t worry. He’s harmless really. Most of the time he just potters about the gardens eating ants. I’d best get on.’ He pointed inside. Nancy didn’t know what to say so she just nodded. These people were seriously weird.

After breakfast Paul showed her how the shower in the bathroom nearest to her room worked. Paul did a wonderful job of taping a plastic bag over her arm and pledged to have her a proper shower cover by the next morning. She couldn’t open the shampoo bottle, so rinsed her hair as best she could with one arm. It was a nice day so she decided she would let it dry naturally, mainly because towel-drying was impossible and a hairdryer would make her look like a mad scientist.

There was a tap on her bedroom door. ‘Nancy, it’s Paul. I have a suggestion about your cat.’ Nancy picked up Carrie and opened the door. ‘I wondered if she might like the orangery.’

‘She doesn’t eat fruit,’ said Nancy.

‘They don’t grow pineapples in it anymore. It’s more of a conservatory now but it gets the sun and she’d be fine there if you wanted to explore the gardens.’

Nancy wasn't sure what he was offering but he seemed keen and so far, he'd been very helpful. 'Okay,' she said.

Nancy picked up Carrie's harness and lead and followed Paul downstairs, where people were cleaning. They walked through the house and then into a room full of coats, boots and gun cabinets. Nancy tried to put on Carrie's harness but it was tricky. She looked at Paul. 'Could you give me a hand?'

'Of course.' Paul helped clip on the harness while Carrie swished her tail impatiently. As soon as it was on, she began walking. 'It's unusual for a cat to be comfortable on a lead,' said Paul.

'She's had it from a kitten. Carrie's a ragdoll so she's worth a bit. She's also got no common sense when it comes to roads, so I can't risk her roaming in London. But she's happy to wear this for a walk around my back garden.' They set off again with Carrie in the lead, out into a courtyard. Nancy was lost already. On the other side of the courtyard were stables where a young woman called 'Good morning' to them both. 'Do you ride, miss?' she asked.

'Sorry. Broken arm,' said Nancy. It felt easier than sharing that she fell off a donkey on Great Yarmouth beach aged five and hadn't been on anything with four legs since. The woman gave her a commiserative grimace which Nancy copied. 'Such a shame.'

On the other side of the stables were paddocks and more green space than Hyde Park. Carrie got distracted by a butterfly and then had an urgent need to wash her bum which delayed the trip a little. Nancy wondered how far away the conservatory was. Weren't they usually attached to a house? 'Sorry, Paul, I expect you need to get to work.' He seemed to be a jack of all trades.

'It's fine,' he said.

'So, Paul, I hope this isn't a rude question but what's your job title?'

'I'm the butler,' said Paul.

‘Of course you are,’ said Nancy. Butler. Who on earth had a butler in the twenty-first century? The Astley-Davenports, that was who. Her anti rich people prejudice was awakened and then she remembered how kind they were being and shoved it back in its virtual box.

‘Being a butler isn’t as formal as it was years ago. It’s more about making sure the family’s needs are met.’

‘Sort of like running the house?’

‘No, the housekeeper does that.’

‘Blimey, how the other half live,’ said Nancy. ‘Sorry, I don’t mean to sound ungrateful. It’s just a world away from what I’m used to.’

‘They’re really nice people,’ said Paul. ‘If you can see past the money and the title.’ She wasn’t sure if Paul was scolding her but before she could respond he was pointing. ‘The orangery is behind those trees.’

Nancy had seen conservatories before, but this was not the same thing. It was a long, symmetrical, single-storey building in the same grey stone as the house with vast windows along one side. Paul let them in through a door at the side. It was warm and scattered with pots and troughs overflowing with plants of varying sizes. There were sun loungers and rattan sofas and over in the corner were water and food bowls. ‘I took the liberty of cooking her some chicken,’ he said. Carrie made straight for the dishes.

‘She’ll love you forever,’ said Nancy. ‘This is vast.’ She walked up to the windows and looked out. The view was over a lake with the house beyond. ‘I see why it’s all the way over here.’

‘It catches the sun for the greatest part of the day. The 4th Earl of Langham, who built it, didn’t get on with his wife so he used to come here to paint the plants.’

‘An early example of a man cave,’ she said.

‘Indeed,’ said Paul with a smile. ‘Do you think Carrie will be happy here?’

Nancy was about to answer but Carrie was already digging a hole in one of the troughs and standing to attention ready to make a deposit.

Paul directed Nancy to a footpath which he said saw a nice circular walk of the prettiest corner of the estate. Corner? She wondered how many acres it was. She followed a high wall from the orangery until she came to a door. Like in all the best horror movies, she opened it. She was astonished to find she was looking out to sea. She'd not seen that coming at all. She looked around her for more clues that she was at the seaside. In her defence she only knew she was in Devon because she'd asked Paul, otherwise she could have been anywhere. And Devon was a pretty big county, so Nancy felt it was fair enough that she'd not noticed the sea had been on her doorstep. At least that explained what had happened to her hair. She followed the path and was rewarded by a stunning view over a small cove. The wind was whipping across the top of the cliffs. She could see why Freddy had warned her as there was quite a drop. Nancy kept away from the edge and followed the path in the hope of finding a way down to the water.

The path narrowed and wound its way in a zigzag fashion down to a rickety-looking set of wooden steps. The last thing she needed was to fall through some rotten timber – perhaps she'd watched too many Indiana Jones films? She took hold of the rail and placed a foot on the first step, it seemed quite solid. She gave a stomp and it held. Nancy put her weight on the step and it seemed fine so she slowly made her way a bit further down. Only having one arm in use did make her feel more vulnerable which she didn't like but it wasn't going to stop her exploring this delightful place.

Nancy made it to the sand and stood for a moment breathing in the salty air. She felt like she was the first person to discover the place, which she obviously wasn't, but she did wonder how long it had been since anyone had ventured down there. To her left were virtually sheer cliffs with a jumble of jagged rocks to her right and in front of her a couple of large boulders worked smooth by the sea. All around her feet were tiny seashells. Behind her on a natural ledge was a small

tumbledown shack that looked like it was leaning against the cliff face and had definitely seen better days. Underneath the steps there was also what looked like the entrance to a cave. The kid inside her felt like she'd stepped into an adventure novel and Nancy went off to explore. There was a rock pool at the entrance to the cavern and the water rippled as its occupants darted for shelter. Nancy shone her phone into the dark. It didn't go back very far at all, but her imagination could still conjure up smugglers and pirates who may have used it as a store.

She put her phone away, took off her shoes and left them on the rock ledge before making her way across the damp sand to the sea. It was warm in the shallows as the sea gently lapped over her toes. It transported Nancy back to her holidays by the seaside as a child. There hadn't been that many so each one was a treasured memory. It had been a big event for them to take a trip to a caravan for a few days and the highlight of that had been the beach and the penny arcades – she still couldn't resist a go on a 2p coin pusher. She couldn't help but think how different Freddy's childhood must have been to her own. Not that she'd not had a good one, it had been the best. She'd had two parents who were happily married, doting on her throughout her formative years, who had saved hard to give her the things they had missed out on like holidays to the seaside.

Time seemed to evaporate in the tiny bay as Nancy paddled, collected seashells, leaned against the big boulder and watched the sea ebb and flow. It was like the breath of the world inhaling and exhaling and she found it incredibly calming. When her stomach rumbled, she decided to face the climb back up the steps. She went to retrieve her shoes and couldn't resist a bit of a nose at the old shack. There were no windows only large shutters that appeared to be made out of driftwood as they were different shades and mismatched. It was an odd little place and Nancy wondered why it was there. Maybe it had been used for storing deckchairs? She certainly wouldn't have wanted to lug one down with her. She'd ask Paul about it later but as there was nobody about, she figured it wouldn't hurt to have a little peep inside. She gently tried the door – it

opened. Her heart thumped a little harder. She opened it a crack and then a little wider so she could let in some light. Nancy was surprised by what she saw. There were rugs on the floor, a rustic table and wooden seat against a stone wall to her right and on the other side a bench covered in blankets. She inched inside.

The blankets moved and a grey-haired old man reared up. 'Argh!' screamed Nancy and she slammed the door.

Chapter Seventeen

Alice had surprised herself by how much she enjoyed Friday night with her parents. It was the first Friday she'd not been out clubbing for weeks. They had chatted over a home-cooked shepherd's pie followed by her mother's famous trifle, then they'd all curled up on the sofa to watch some series her parents had been watching. She had no clue what was going on, but it didn't matter. It had been just like old times, the good ones and she'd liked the comfort and familiarity. Unfortunately, Saturday was somewhat different.

Alice had been woken by her mother hoovering outside her bedroom door far earlier than was necessary. During the weekends at Nancy's Alice lay in until lunchtime but that wasn't possible here. Her parents were in their own routine. Alice spent a moment taking in her old room. It was still painted lemon yellow, a colour she had chosen some ten years ago when it had last been decorated. The pink and yellow striped curtains had been made by her mum and she still loathed them but had never had the nerve to say so. The small table in the corner had been her desk where she'd done her homework every night and studied for her exams. Thankfully there were no posters on the walls but the attendance and merit certificates her parents had framed were still embarrassingly on display. It was like a museum of her early life.

Alice dragged herself out of bed and opened the door. 'Did I wake you, love?' asked her mum, switching off the hoover.

Alice rubbed her eyes. 'Yeah, but it's okay.'

'I bet you slept well being back in your bed. You can't beat your own bed for a proper night's sleep.'

'It was okay. But I also sleep fine at Na—'

‘What are your plans for today?’ asked her mum, cutting her off. While they had been keen to hear about how she was getting on in her job they had not been that interested in anything else about her life in London. But it was probably best they didn’t know about some of it, especially not Whizzer or Dom. The thought of the latter made her sigh.

‘Err, no plans at all for this week. Apart from Friday.’ But Alice was trying not to think about Friday.

Her mother looked astonished. ‘Will you not be catching up with some friends? Sammy and Oscar are both home from university.’ Her parents had hopes of her settling down with a nice young man, ideally someone they already knew who lived locally.

‘Nope. I’ve not heard from either of them since they went off on their gap year tour of Asia together.’

‘I understand Florence is working at Tesco while she waits to hear about jobs. She’s on the milking round,’ said her mother with a significant nod of her head.

‘Milk round,’ corrected Alice with a yawn. ‘It’s nothing special, Mum. It just means she’s applying for jobs at the end of her degree course. Lots of businesses focus on recruiting this time of year that’s all.’

‘She’s considering consultancy, and her mother told me there’s lots of high-profile companies interested in her.’

‘Yeah, well Florence’s mum would say that wouldn’t she? She’s always bigged her up,’ said Alice.

‘That’s not a nice thing to say about your friend, Alice.’ Her mum looked shocked.

Alice puffed out a breath. ‘I’ve not been friends with Florence since she stole my penguin bar at Year Six camp.’

Alice’s mother laughed. ‘Oh you kids. Well, give her my love when you see her.’ And she switched the vacuum cleaner back on. Alice marvelled at her mother’s ability to engage in a conversation yet not really listen to what the other person was saying.

Downstairs was no different. Her father was muttering into the newspaper until she entered the kitchen. ‘Good afternoon, Alice,’ he quipped. It was hard to raise a smile to the same old joke.

‘Morning,’ she said, giving the dog a head rub. Cindy briefly lifted her white-whiskered chin.

‘Your mum got your favourite cereal in,’ said her dad, pointing into the cupboard as she opened it.

‘Coco Pops?’ They really did think she was still seven. While she was mildly affronted by the cereal, she had to admit chocolate for breakfast was never a bad thing, so she filled up a bowl and joined her father at the table. He updated her on the woeful efforts of the local football team that she’d never been interested in, and she had a scroll through her phone. There was nothing much of interest until she did a little mild stalking of Dom on Instagram – he’d been fairly easy to find, she only had to search through a few pages of Dominic Fishers until she found him.

What was she hoping to see? She scrolled through all his pictures a number of times and there were only ever shots of him, Bonnie or both of them plus a few of Bonnie’s artwork. There were no women in the pictures but then he’d only been posting for a couple of months.

Alice clicked on his latest picture, being careful not to double click and inadvertently like the post. The last thing she wanted was for him to know she was secretly keeping an eye on his movements. Dom had added a selfie of him and Bonnie eating ice creams for breakfast. She instantly felt better about her Coco Pops. Bonnie was grinning and had ice cream on her nose and Dom was laughing. The picture made her smile. Something in the background caught her eye and she zoomed in. She recognised the sign behind them, she’d been to Butterfly Café a million times because it was the next seaside town to where her parents lived. Which meant Dom was less than two miles away right now.

* * *

Nancy was properly startled by the old man and fled from the old shack. She was halfway up the rickety steps before she realised she'd left her shoes behind but there was no way she was going back for them. He'd really given her a fright. What on earth was he doing in there? When she reached the cliff top she was out of breath and her heart was racing. She still wanted to run but there was a twinge of fear in the back of her mind just in case she fell and did more damage to her arm, so she speed-walked as best she could on bare feet. She ended up taking to the grass which was a bad idea – there must have been quite a lot of rabbits about somewhere because their droppings were sticking to her feet – *yuck!*

Langham Hall came into sight and Nancy started to feel calmer. She kept checking behind her, but it was very unlikely the old man was following her. She suddenly felt bad. She'd probably given him just as big a shock and the poor man was probably desperate and homeless. She was still walking at a pace when she let herself through the door in the wall, closing it behind her. When she turned around, she realised it was clearly her day for surprises. She was momentarily startled by a peacock which was right in front of her with his stunningly beautiful tail on full fanned-out display. The rich blues and greens of the feathers iridescent and glinting in the sunshine.

'Aren't you a beauty,' she said to him, trying to pull her phone from her back pocket with her good hand.

The peacock tilted his head to the sky in response and made a noise like a cross between a scream and a fire alarm that felt like it was piercing her eardrums. Nancy shoved one finger in her ear but her bad arm wouldn't bend so she couldn't do the other. She skirted around the deafening bird. This seemed to upset him further and in between screams he lunged at Nancy.

'Whoa!' she said, leaping out of the way.

She daren't take her eyes off him for fear of him pecking her – he had a very pointy beak which was bound to hurt if he hit his target. Each time she leapt backwards he screeched and sprang another attack, beak first, after her.

'Hey!' she shouted, quickly glancing around for some help.

As if on cue Freddy came striding over clapping his hands. He was wearing smart trousers and a plain T-shirt – not your typical knight in shining armour but at least he was coming to her rescue. The feeling was short-lived as the peacock turned on him. ‘Run!’ shouted Freddy, dancing around. ‘I’ll hold him off as long as I can.’ The bird pecked his ankle. ‘Ow! Quick, go!’

Nancy didn’t need telling twice. She turned and ran as fast as she dared to. The nearest place was the orangery. She darted around the side and while she was struggling with the door someone jostled her to one side. ‘Argh!’ she yelled.

‘Sorry,’ said Freddy, quickly opening the door and almost shoving her inside. He pulled it closed just in time to stop the peacock following them in. The bird tilted his head up and screeched his annoyance.

It took a moment for Nancy and Freddy to compose themselves. The interruption had got Carrie’s attention and she trotted over to see what the fuss was about. The peacock was now strutting up and down outside the large glass windows shimmering his tail and shrieking. Carrie mirrored the peacock and paced along the safe side of the glass.

‘What the hell is wrong with him?’ asked Nancy when she’d got her breath back.

‘I thought you’d been warned about Percy?’

Nancy’s head spun around to have another look at the peacock. ‘That’s Percy? I thought ...’ Freddy was looking at her quizzically. ‘Doesn’t matter. So *that’s* Percy.’ She pointed at the shaking tail feathers as they stalked past the window. Things started to make a lot more sense. ‘He’s the one who craps on the garden furniture and not your ... um not anyone else.’

‘I hope no one else is doing it,’ said Freddy with a smile. ‘Sorry he attacked you. I’d like to say he’s harmless but he’s really not. Percy’s a nasty little sod.’ He rubbed his ankle as he spoke. ‘He didn’t used to be like this. At one time we had six of them including some hens, but they all got old and died. Percy is still hanging on and he’s so ancient we think he’s got

dementia. The vet thinks he has unsatisfied sexual urges. You could say he's a lover and a fighter. It's that or he's uber stressed by feeling he has to protect this big place all on his own. Which is something I can relate to.'

'Poor thing,' said Nancy. 'Percy. Not you. But thanks for coming to my rescue,' she added, feeling a bit lame.

'You're welcome.' They smiled at the same time but neither seemed to know what to say next and it became a little uncomfortable.

'I collected some shells.' She pulled them from her pocket.

'You found Seashell Bay then.'

'Good name. Does what it says on the tin?' said Nancy, jiggling her pretty shell collection.

The sound of angry beak on glass grabbed their attention. They turned away from each other to watch Percy and Carrie march in unison on their respective sides of the window. 'Um, what do we do now?' asked Nancy.

'Send for back-up,' said Freddy, getting out his phone.

Paul soon arrived with some grapes and a pineapple which managed to lure Percy a safe distance away. 'We're safe to go,' said Freddy.

'Please can you give me a hand with this?' asked Nancy as she tried unsuccessfully to put on Carrie's harness.

Freddy chuckled. 'Could you not just carry ... um Carrie?'

'If she freaks out she will reduce my arms to shreds and escape to goodness knows where. And anyway, it's extendable,' said Nancy, holding up the handle end.

Freddy said no more as he fastened up Carrie while she kept her eyes firmly fixed on the peacock. 'You might want to carry her past Percy.'

'Oh Carrie won't go for him.'

'I was thinking more about him being the aggressor.'

‘Good call,’ said Nancy, lifting Carrie awkwardly with one arm.

Paul gave them a thumbs up and they slunk out of the orangery and back towards the house giving Percy a wide berth. Once they were nearing the formal gardens Nancy put Carrie on the ground and she trotted along happily. She stopped a few times to sniff places before bounding on ahead.

‘She’s better behaved on a lead than our dog,’ said Freddy. The words were barely out of his mouth before a large black Labrador bounded across the gardens towards them.

Carrie’s lead was fully extended. Nancy tried to reel her in like a fish. ‘Carrie!’ she yelled, sensing imminent danger. But it was too late.

Chapter Eighteen

Nancy wanted to close her eyes for fear of what she was about to witness. She couldn't run fast enough to stop the dog getting to Carrie. She let out a feeble squeak as the animals met.

'Otto. Sit!' commanded Freddy.

The dog's bum hit the grass immediately, making Carrie jump. 'Blimey, that's a good party trick,' said Nancy, hurrying over. The dog's tail was swishing so hard it was spraying gravel across the path. A little belatedly Carrie puffed herself up and hissed at Otto. She'd only ever seen dogs at the vet's before where she was always safely in her carrier. Nancy picked up her wide-eyed kitty. 'That was a close one.'

'Sorry,' said Freddy, petting Otto. 'Home,' he instructed with a wave of his arms and the dog ran off as fast as he had approached. Nancy was staring gobsmacked at his obedience. 'Gun dog,' he explained.

Carrie appeared unfazed by her encounter with a dog about five times the size of her, so Nancy put her down and after having a good sniff at where the Labrador had been, she trotted on happily, but this time Nancy had her on a much shorter lead. They strolled through the beautifully manicured gardens where the floral scents filled Nancy with the smell of summer.

'I was coming to find you when everything kicked off with Percy,' said Freddy.

Nancy felt a squiggle of something in her middle. What was that all about? 'Why's that?' She tried to sound uninterested, but she'd not nailed it.

‘My parents are having a welcome dinner tonight, it’s a thing they like to do for guests.’

‘For me?’ She couldn’t help but feel flattered. ‘Hang on, you’ve not told them that I’ve sacked you?’

He held up his hands in defence. ‘I am going to tell them that I resigned but now is not the right time.’

‘When will be the right time, Freddy?’

‘As soon as I’ve sorted an alternative.’

Nancy faltered. She’d not really considered that he would be looking for an alternative for his fake work experience. ‘It’s a lovely invitation, so please thank your parents, but I can’t go to dinner with a lord and lady when I’ve not washed my hair for days.’

‘I did think of that,’ he said, looking pleased with himself.

‘Thanks, so you’ve noticed the state of it too. That doesn’t really help, Freddy.’ She tried to smooth it down, but she was holding the lead in one hand and the other one was tricky to operate.

‘I’ve booked Mother’s hairdresser to come over and sort it out. If I’ve done the wrong thing, it’s easily cancelled.’ He checked his watch. ‘Although she’s probably on her way.’

‘That’s actually really thoughtful of you.’ She gave him a nudge with her good elbow.

He nudged her back. ‘You’re welcome.’

Having her hair done would definitely make her feel less grotty but there was another issue about being invited to a spur-of-the-moment dinner with the aristocracy. ‘Trouble is I’ve got nothing suitable to wear for a meal with nobility.’

Freddy grinned. ‘It’s informal. They might have titles but they’re probably no different to your parents.’

‘Oh yeah, you can’t move in my parents’ gaff for suits of armour and polo ponies.’ Nancy thought about her mum breaking into song while she was pushing the trolley around

Aldi. And her dad saying pull my finger just before he'd let a trump go.

'Please try to see past the house,' said Freddy. 'You've met Mother. She's very taken with you.'

Nancy had to admit from the brief encounter with Lady Louisa the previous evening she had seemed genuinely nice. Obviously posh but she'd been interested in Nancy and sympathetic about her injured arm. And they had been really relaxed about her staying in their fabulous home and being waited on by their staff so maybe she didn't need to worry. 'Okay, I'll come. Please tell them that I'd be honoured to accept their kind invitation.'

'Great. They'll be thrilled. I promise you'll have a fun time.' Images of a *Bridgerton*-style ball flashed through her mind.

Lady Louisa's hairdresser was absolutely lovely and came fully equipped. She had set up in a bathroom and it was like a mini salon with a mobile hair washing basin attached to the sink taps and a tilting chair. It was so nice to have her hair washed properly. After a professional blow dry Nancy felt ready for almost anything. She spent a while getting ready. She was changing her top for the umpteenth time when there was a tap on her door.

'Hang on. I'm not decent.'

'It's okay, I'm not coming in,' said Freddy. 'Just to say I'm going to give them a hand so come down whenever you're ready. You can give Carrie the run of the house because Otto will be with us all evening.'

'Where will we be then?'

'Seashell Bay. See you down there,' he said.

Nancy frowned at the closed door while she processed what he'd said. She had a flashback of the angry old man and she gasped. 'Wait! There's something you need to know there's this ... Freddy, are you still there?' But there was no reply. Perhaps it was best she didn't tell him. She couldn't be sure

they wouldn't turf the poor old bloke out of the little shack and she didn't want that on her conscience.

Nancy covered her boobs with her plaster cast, dashed to the door and checked the corridor – no sign of him. 'Freddy!' she called. Nothing. She was about to dash after him but had second thoughts. She tugged on the top she felt made it least obvious that she wasn't wearing a bra – because putting on a bra with one hand was impossible. She went to leave but realised she had no shoes on. As she'd left them in Seashell Bay and she'd not packed for a stay in a stately home she only had one other option.

Nancy tried Freddy's mobile but it went straight to voicemail. She called out as she made her way through the house. The place was empty. Was she meant to lock up when she left? If she was, she had no idea where the keys were. She shut the doors behind her with a satisfying thud but it still didn't seem right to leave the place unlocked. She wouldn't even leave her little Ikea-filled terrace without locking it up first let alone this one that was full of priceless treasures.

Nancy hurriedly made her way across the lawns, through the door in the wall and out to the cliff path. It didn't seem as far this time. The sight of the sea would always feel special to Nancy, she wondered if you ever tired of it. As she neared the steps down to Seashell Bay, she could see there were a number of people on the tiny beach. *Safety in numbers*, she thought. If the old man kicked off there were enough people to restrain him. Everything seemed calm so perhaps he'd gone back to sleep. A horrid thought popped into her head. Perhaps the shock of her creeping up on him had killed him? She hastened towards the steps. From the top she could see they were having a barbecue. At the sight of the large black barbecue Nancy instantly relaxed. Not quite the grand ball and dinner she'd imagined – in fact much better.

She made her way down the steps and Freddy came to greet her at the bottom. He held out a hand to help her down onto the sand. 'Hairdresser did okay then?'

'Thanks for arranging that, I feel so much better.'

‘You look stunning.’ His eyes slid down to her feet. A grin spread across his face at the sight of her footwear. ‘I like your slippers,’ he said.

‘They’re furry sliders.’ She tried to sound convincing. She’d been distracted from her mission to warn him about the crazy homeless guy living in the shack. ‘Anyway, I need to warn you ab—’

‘Nancy, good evening,’ said Lady Louisa, greeting her with a hug. ‘I love your giraffe slippers. How fun! Come and meet everyone.’

Nancy could see Freddy’s shoulders were vibrating with laughter, so she gave him a shove as they passed, partly because he was laughing at her favourite slippers but also to get his attention. ‘I need to tell you something,’ she said, but Lady Louisa was already leading her to the barbecue and introducing her to people.

‘Oscar, I would like you to meet Nancy.’ The man was expertly turning sausages, but then if he was the chef that wasn’t difficult.

‘Hiya, Oscar,’ said Nancy with a smile. The man was giving her an odd look.

Lady Louisa continued. ‘Nancy, this is my husband, Oscar.’

‘Crap, you’re Lord Langham. I’m so sorry. Pleased to meet you, sir, your lordship.’ She did a half curtsy and belatedly offered her left hand for him to shake. She didn’t know if that was the done thing, but she was sure as hell that saying crap to a lord wasn’t.

‘It’s either Earl Langham or Lord Astley-Davenport,’ he said.

Nancy wanted a very large wave to wash her away. ‘I’m really sorry I’m not used to—’

A grin spread across Oscar’s face. ‘I’m joking. Don’t be sorry, it’s a bloody mouthful whichever one you pick. Call me Oscar.’ He shook her hand that she was still holding out. ‘Now are you a sausage or burger kind of gal?’ He opened the barbecue with a flourish.

‘Definitely sausage.’

‘Wonderful.’ He clapped his hands together and proceeded to go through the various varieties he had cooking. Nancy glanced at Freddy and he gave her a reassuring thumbs up. Maybe these people were okay after all.

‘You already know Paul,’ said Louisa as Paul offered her a glass of champagne.

‘Hi, Paul, thanks.’ She wasn’t sure how wise it was to have these very expensive-looking champagne flutes on the beach, so she gripped it tightly. Louisa rattled off a number of names and job titles, most of which Nancy wasn’t going to remember.

‘This is Allsop our head gardener.’

‘Hello again,’ said Nancy, feeling her cheeks flush. ‘Sorry about this morning. I got a bit confused about who Percy was.’

‘Oh dear, have you met our avian terrorist?’ asked Allsop, his voice even more upper crust than Lady Louisa’s.

‘Got herself cornered by the herb garden wall,’ butted in Freddy. ‘We had to dive in the orangery to escape.’ Everyone laughed including Nancy although it hadn’t been funny at the time. One of the younger gardeners tapped Freddy on the shoulder and he jogged off to join in a game of frisbee.

Louisa touched Nancy’s arm which was when she realised she was staring after Freddy. ‘You must think we’re crackers making Frederick work for you. I do hope he’s explained everything.’ Louisa searched Nancy’s features.

‘He said that his inheritance depended on it.’

‘I feared he’d make us sound like awful controlling parents —’

‘Which we are,’ butted in Oscar. ‘But for good bally reason.’

‘Please don’t get worked up, Oscar.’ Louisa rubbed his arm. ‘Frederick’s not really embraced his duty as we’d hoped he might.’

‘Don’t get me wrong, we love the boy immensely but managing something like this ...’ Oscar swept a hand up towards the house. ‘Is no mean feat and our Freddy likes wine, women and partying far too much.’

‘Oscar.’ Louisa scowled at her husband. ‘He just needs a little steering back onto the right course and that’s what we hoped a proper job would do for him. So, thank you.’ She took Nancy’s good hand in both of hers and gave it a squeeze.

Nancy was uncomfortable, Freddy obviously hadn’t had a chance to update them about losing the job. But then again, how awkward would it be to stay in their home and accept their hospitality if they knew she had fired their son? She wasn’t a snake, but she also didn’t lie to people. ‘Actually, I should explain that Freddy—’

‘I thought my ears were burning,’ said Freddy, appearing at Nancy’s side. ‘Watch out or Mother will have the family photo album out.’

‘I’m not that bad,’ said Louisa with a chuckle. She leaned into Nancy. ‘Maybe tomorrow evening. There’s the cutest pictures of him sitting by the pool wearing just his armbands.’

‘And that’s why I have to rescue people.’ Freddy guided Nancy away.

When they were out of earshot, she turned to face him. ‘You need to tell them that I sacked you.’

‘I will but—’

‘Freddy, it’s lying. You have to come clean.’

‘In my defence they also haven’t asked.’ Nancy gave him a look. ‘Okay possibly you’re right.’ She raised her eyebrows. He held his hands up. ‘Stop the interrogation. Yes, you’re right. But I wanted to talk to you about everything first.’

‘Fire away.’ Nancy went to fold her arms and was frustrated that she couldn’t. She hadn’t realised how much she gestured with her hands until she broke her wrist and no longer could manage simple manoeuvres.

Freddy twisted his lips. 'Not here. Tonight is not about work, it's for relaxing and hoping we don't get food poisoning from Father's cooking. Let's discuss it tomorrow. Is that all right with you?' He put his hands together as if in prayer.

'Tomorrow but then you have to tell them or I will. Got it?'

'Absolutely, Boss.' She arched an eyebrow. 'Sorry, Nancy. Now if Father offers to put his homemade sauce on your food you need to know that it's eighty per cent malt whisky.'

'What's the other twenty per cent?'

'Secret ingredients,' said Freddy. 'Which means it's different every time, but it doesn't matter because you can only ever taste the Scotch.'

While Nancy tucked into her fancy hot dog she tried to see if her shoes were still where she'd left them. She could do with swapping out her giraffes. She caught sight of a movement by the shack and the events of earlier flooded back.

'Freddy, I tried to tell you earlier. There's a tramp living in that shed.' She pointed up the beach. On cue the old man shuffled out and stared across the sand. Oscar started to laugh and everyone joined in. Louisa's lips were pulled together. 'What?' said Nancy to Freddy. Why was it funny? Did rich people find poor people entertaining?

Freddy jogged over to the old man and helped him down on to the sand. 'Grandpa, I'd like you to meet Nancy,' said Freddy with a huge grin.

Grandpa? Nancy was confused. If the old lord was still alive didn't that mean he owned the manor, not Oscar. Or was that why they were keeping him shut in a shed? 'Hello,' she said.

The old man squinted at her. 'You came poking around here earlier. Gave me a fright you did.'

'Yeah. Sorry about that.'

Louisa appeared. 'Dad, this is Nancy, the young woman who has employed Frederick.'

Ahh, thought Nancy, that makes more sense if he's Louisa's dad. 'Hiya,' said Nancy.

‘Hello, Nancy. Nice to meet you properly.’

‘Yeah, you too. What should I call you?’

‘Everyone calls me Grandpa,’ he said with a warm smile.

‘Come and sit down and I’ll get you something to eat,’ said Freddy, guiding his grandfather to a seat.

Nancy intercepted Freddy. ‘Why does he live in there?’ she asked.

Freddy snorted but quickly composed himself. ‘He doesn’t live in the beach hut. He just likes Seashell Bay. He and Granny spent many happy hours in the bay when they visited. I think he feels closer to her when he’s here. We’ve tried stopping him coming down because he’s a bit unsteady, but it doesn’t work so the compromise is that someone brings him down for a few hours most days. Did you really think he was a tramp?’ Freddy’s expression said he was judging her.

‘No, of course not,’ said Nancy, unsure what else to say.

* * *

Alice tried to chill out, but it was almost impossible. If it wasn’t her parents fussing over her it was thoughts of Dom being on holiday a couple of miles up the road. She tried to block him from her mind, she really did, but it wasn’t that simple. She found she was thinking about his Instagram photos which was definitely unhealthy. What had she been hoping for? An Insta-worthy photo of him and his partner as the perfect little family? She wondered if that would help. If it would stop her fantasising about him. Maybe what she needed was to see them all together. To see him with his wife or girlfriend or whatever relationship he was in with Bonnie’s mum. Perhaps that would help her to close the door on that little episode.

Alice wasn’t the sort of woman who would pursue someone who was already in a relationship. She had good morals and believed strongly in the girl code. Although right now it was being tested. There was something about Dom. Their kiss had been an accident, but it had had such an impact on her. She’d always thought friends were exaggerating when they said they

felt a connection – she'd assumed it was them feeling horny. She knew what that felt like. But however strongly Alice felt, nothing could come of it because Dom was in a relationship.

'Alice, love,' called her mother. Alice had managed to grab ten minutes to herself in her bedroom before her mum had tracked her down. She loved them dearly and it was kind of sweet that they wanted to spend time with her, but it was also quite intense. 'Your dad has got out the Monopoly and we know how you love a game. Shall we set it up?'

'Okay. I'll be down in five minutes.'

Alice sighed heavily and flopped back on her bed. At least Monopoly would take her mind off Dom. She'd never felt like this about a man before, not even when she'd split up with boyfriends. She'd found it easy to move on. This thing with Dom was different but she knew she needed to put a stop to it for her own sake. Maybe what she needed was a glimpse at Dom playing happy families to help reset her moral compass. She checked his Instagram again – no new posts. If Dom wasn't going to provide the pictures maybe she needed to go and seek them out in real life for herself?

Chapter Nineteen

Nancy was surprised at how much she enjoyed the evening. It had been nothing like she'd imagined. She'd made some assumptions, some of those she was prepared to admit were based on the few episodes of *Downton Abbey* that her mum had made her sit through. None of the people she'd met at Langham Hall were anything like the characters on the telly. She watched Oscar trying to force the last of his chilli jam sausages onto Freddy while Allsop refereed a game of football between the younger staff. Freddy's grandpa was asleep in a chair with Otto dozing across his feet. It all felt quite normal really, until Nancy took in the location. A private bay on the south coast. This was a different life to hers and they were different people. She leaned back against the largest boulder on the beach and watched the sun melt into the sea. There was a small boat bobbing in the water that hadn't been there on her earlier visit. She watched as the tide turned it gently one way and then the other.

'You okay?' asked Freddy, joining her.

'I'm good thanks.'

He leaned back against the rock, his warm skin brushing hers, making her shiver. 'Are you cold?' Nancy tried to cross her arms over her protruding nipples – the perils of not wearing a bra. 'Let me get you a blanket,' said Freddy and before she could reply he was wrapping a soft blanket around her shoulders.

'Do you usually leave the hall unlocked?' she asked and Freddy raised an eyebrow. 'I'm not going to be tipping off any crooks if that's what you're worried about.'

'Do you know any crooks?' he asked.

‘I might do. Actually a few of the kids I went to school with ended up inside.’ Why was she telling him that? ‘Not that I’m in touch with them. My mum updates me.’ She decided to shut up and stop reinforcing her kid-from-the-dodgy-council-estate stereotype.

Nancy stared at the changing shades of the sky as the sunset bloomed before darkness rubbed out its colour. It was such a peaceful place. She scanned over her shoulder at Oscar and Louisa now holding hands and sipping champagne. She stole a glance at Freddy, the fading light enhancing his features. She’d only been there a day and she’d seen a completely different side to him. ‘It’s been lovely.’

‘How’s the arm?’ asked Freddy.

‘A bit achy but otherwise okay.’

‘Should it not be in a sling?’ he asked.

‘Yeah, it should. I didn’t want to spoil my outfit.’ Nancy lifted up a giraffe slipper and wriggled her toes.

‘Completely understandable. I’m going to be taking Grandpa back shortly. You’re very welcome to stay or you can come back with us.’

Something made Nancy yawn. ‘I think I might come back with you if that’s okay. The combination of champagne and sea air has tired me out.’ It was also the fact she’d not slept well thanks to her cast.

‘I’ll round up Grandpa and we’ll make a move.’

Nancy thanked Louisa and Oscar who both kissed her on the cheek and made her promise that she’d join them the next day for breakfast. Nancy said goodnight to the others and then looked about for Freddy and Grandpa, but there was no sign of them. Grandpa was no longer in his chair and they weren’t on the steps as she’d expected. Surely they’d not dashed up them that quickly.

‘Hey, Nancy! Are you ready?’ called Freddy.

She spun around to see Freddy and Grandpa sitting in the little boat. Freddy beckoned her over. She had to hold her

slippers and the blanket in the air as she waded out to the boat where Freddy helped her in.

‘Hold on,’ said Freddy, carefully wrapping the blanket around her shoulders. He started up an engine and the boat pootled out of the bay before suddenly picking up speed and tearing across the water. Grandpa grinned as they sped along. Nancy tightened her grip. Within minutes the engine slowed and Freddy brought them back into shore, on a much longer stretch of beach. He jumped out into the shallows, pulled the boat in and tied it to a post sticking out of the water.

Freddy helped them both onto the sand and they followed Grandpa up a small ramp to where an old Land Rover was waiting. ‘He can’t cope with the steps but this is manageable.’

They were soon inside Langham Hall and from a quick inspection it didn’t seem that they’d been burgled while they were out which was a relief to Nancy. ‘Did you fancy a brandy or a hot drink to warm you up?’ asked Freddy.

‘But Paul’s still at the beach.’

‘Hey, I am capable of getting drinks. I’m fully certified as kettle safe, you know.’

‘Are you? Because that’s a certificate I’d like to see.’

‘Okay. There might not be an actual certificate but ... do you want a drink or not?’

‘I’d love a hot chocolate. You know how to make that, right?’

‘Actually, I think we’ve got a machine for that.’

Nancy shook her head at him. ‘Show me where the kitchen is in this place and I’ll supervise.’ He tilted his head. ‘Okay, I’m really only coming to point and laugh at you.’

‘Your honesty is admirable.’ He led the way.

As she’d expected, the kitchen was vast with a huge marble island in the centre. To her left were a row of cookers and stainless-steel work areas, to her right was a pale green country kitchen with a cream Aga – it was like the room had two identities.

Freddy was busy opening and closing cupboards but he noticed her turning her head from side to side. ‘Mother wouldn’t hand it all over as she likes to cook so this is her half and the stainless steel is better for events so our cook, Mrs Mason, rules that side. It stops any bloodshed,’ he said with a smile.

‘It’s so big.’

Freddy looked around. ‘I suppose it is.’ He opened another cupboard. ‘Found it.’ He pulled out what looked like a jug and base.

‘I’ve seen those on the telly,’ said Nancy. She’d also looked them up and scoffed at paying over a hundred quid for something that basically warmed up milk. Nancy pulled out a barstool and sat down to watch.

‘Standard chocolate or dark mint?’ asked Freddy, holding up sachets.

‘Standard please.’

Freddy put milk and the sachet contents into the jug and hit the start button. ‘Back in a mo.’ He dashed off, leaving Nancy swinging her legs. He gave her a cheeky little look as he darted past. She’d never imagined he could be this sweet and attentive. Perhaps she had been very wrong about him. Or was all of this just a ploy to butter her up so that she’d lie about him working for her for six months? Either way Freddy was definitely growing on her.

Carrie announced her entrance with a loud meow. ‘Hello there,’ said Nancy, realising she couldn’t reach the cat without getting off the barstool and she really couldn’t be arsed. ‘Have you enjoyed having the run of the house?’ Carrie sat and stared up at Nancy with her unblinking eyes, which basically meant, ‘Cut the small talk and feed me.’

Carrie’s ears pricked up, but before either she or Nancy had worked out what was happening, the kitchen was invaded by one very excitable and sandy Labrador. There was no way Nancy could get to Carrie in time. ‘Jump!’ she yelled at the cat and she held out her arms. Unfortunately, Carrie wasn’t as well

trained as Otto, so she hot-footed it around the other side of the island. Otto gave chase.

‘Shit!’ said Nancy, clambering down from her barstool as the animals did their third high-speed lap around the island. Nancy splayed out her arms and legs in the hope of stopping them, but Carrie dashed past her on one side and the Labrador, close behind, on the other. On their next lap Carrie fled out the door with Otto in hot pursuit. ‘Freddy!’ yelled Nancy as she joined the chase. She quickly lost sight of them but claws on tiles and wooden floor meant she could still hear them. Nancy skidded into the hallway where halfway up the stairs there was a stand-off. Carrie had turned around and was staring down Otto who was standing three steps below with his tail wagging off the scale.

Nancy crept up the stairs. Perhaps she could sneak by the dog and grab Carrie. But suddenly the cat bobbed down and lunged forward, making Otto hop back a step. Otto lost his footing and went further down and before Nancy could grab her, Carrie had run at him. The startled dog tumbled down a couple more stairs, found his feet and darted past Nancy, with Carrie in hot pursuit. They charged through the entrance hall and off down a corridor.

Freddy appeared from the other wing waving a bottle. ‘Did you call?’

‘Yes, Otto is chasing Carrie. No, other way around. You know what? I’m no longer sure who’s chasing who but they went that way.’ Nancy pointed.

A shout from Grandpa had them both charging in that direction. Nancy followed Freddy and they both did an emergency stop in Grandpa’s bedroom doorway. Grandpa was sitting up in bed with the bedcovers pulled up to his chin while Otto and Carrie bounced around him like they were at a soft play centre.

‘Otto get down,’ instructed Freddy. Nancy noted that he was rather masterful with the dog. Otto instantly jumped to the floor and stood looking at Freddy as if awaiting the next command. Carrie trotted to the edge of the bed and watched

them then bobbed down before leaping from the bed and skidding out of the room. Otto twitched. ‘Stay,’ said Freddy firmly. He turned to Nancy. ‘Otto’s only playing.’

‘Running for your life isn’t the same as ...’ but Nancy didn’t finish the sentence because Carrie strolled back in, walked over to Otto, sat down between his front feet and both animals looked up at Freddy. ‘Unbelievable,’ she said as she started to laugh.

‘I’m trying to get some sleep,’ said Grandpa, who was narrowing his eyes at Nancy as if she were to blame.

‘Sorry, Grandpa, we’ll leave you in peace,’ said Freddy, holding up the bottle.

‘Actually, I will have a little one if you’re offering,’ said Grandpa. He downed the water in the glass on his bedside table and held it out to Freddy who obliged. They wished Grandpa goodnight and left the room with the animals trotting at Freddy’s heels.

‘Are you some sort of animal whisperer?’ she asked.

‘One of my many gifts,’ said Freddy, opening a random door as they passed and flicking on a light. The dog and cat filed in, but Freddy carried on along the corridor.

‘Hang on,’ said Nancy, doubling back. She was still undecided on whether or not Otto was intent on eating Carrie. She popped her head around the door and looked into a vast room. A huge fireplace was halfway down one side, with three large navy sofas pointing at it. Oversized paintings adorned the walls on the same side and opposite were three lots of vast navy curtains between which was a large brown beanbag where Carrie was curled up with Otto sitting on the wooden floor watching her.

‘See, they’re fine,’ said Freddy. Nancy had to agree.

* * *

Alice woke up with a plan and that made waking up in her old childhood bedroom a lot more palatable. She showered and after taking a while to decide she put on a daisy-print T-shirt and pale yellow shorts – she was feeling sunny and her outfit

matched. She bounded into the kitchen where her mum was buttering toast. ‘You’re up early. Did you sleep okay? Is everything all right?’ Her mum’s brow was furrowed.

‘I’m fine, Mum.’

Her dad checked his watch. ‘Good morning, Alice, to what do we owe this pleasure?’

Alice got out a bowl and the Coco Pops. ‘I thought I’d check out the beach.’

‘That’s a lovely idea,’ said her mum, clapping her hands together. ‘We could take a picnic and I could make—’

‘Actually, I was just going to walk down there with Cindy.’ The dog twitched an ear at the sound of her name. Her mum looked bereft.

‘Cindy doesn’t go very far these days,’ said her dad. ‘Any further than round the block and she lays down in protest.’

‘I’m sure Cindy’ll be fine. I’ll take it slowly. And maybe we could have a picnic tomorrow?’ Alice felt she needed to offer a compromise to counter the look of disappointment on her mother’s face.

‘That’s even better because then I’ve got time to bake a cake and think of sandwich fillings. We’d best go shopping.’

‘Now look what you’ve done,’ said her dad good-naturedly as he batted her with his newspaper.

Alice was starting to think that perhaps she’d not fully thought through her idea when just ten minutes into their two-mile jaunt Cindy was already lying flat on the pavement and refusing to budge. ‘Please walk,’ she said, crouching down to the dog who simply huffed. ‘I’ll take that as a no then.’ She looked around. She could carry her home. That was probably the smart thing to do but without the dog her plan didn’t really work. Without the dog she was just a sad person stalking Dom and his family. With the dog she was just out on a casual walk and bumping into him by accident. Alice gave another gentle tug on Cindy’s lead, but nothing happened. Across the road was a bus stop. Alice had another idea. She lifted Cindy into

her arms and carried her over where she scanned the timetable. 'Blimey you've put on some weight.'

'Excuse me?' came a disgruntled voice behind her.

Alice spun around. 'Oh, Mrs Quinn, sorry. I didn't see you there. I was talking to Cindy.' Mrs Quinn didn't look convinced. 'Do I know you?'

'I'm Alice, Mr and Mrs Pelling's daughter.'

Mrs Quinn's expression immediately softened. Alice was used to this, but it had been a while since she'd used it to her advantage. 'Goodness, Alice. I didn't recognise you. How are you, dear?'

'Fine thanks. Do you know what bus I need for Walton?'

'The ninety-seven which should be along in a few minutes. What are your plans in Walton?'

'I'm taking Cindy to the beach,' she said, turning the dog's bored face in Mrs Quinn's direction.

She recoiled slightly. 'How lovely.'

Thankfully the bus journey was uneventful. Cindy behaved herself and actually seemed to enjoy sitting on Alice's lap and looking out of the grubby bus window as the world whizzed by in dirt-smudged focus. When they got off Alice carried Cindy down to the prom and a little way along until Butterfly Café was visible. This was the location of the last Instagram post from Dom, so it made a logical starting point. All Alice and Cindy had to do was wander around the vicinity until they spotted them – simple.

However, Cindy had other ideas. She wanted to get on the beach, so they went down the concrete steps. Over the years the sand had been eroded and now Alice couldn't see up onto the promenade. Cindy barked at a seagull. Perhaps the beach was a more likely location for a family, anyway. Alice conceded to the dog and they strolled along the sand. Cindy spotted a flock of gulls ahead and with a burst of energy worthy of a much younger dog she gave chase, pulling the lead from Alice's hand. 'Cindy, wait!' called Alice as she sprinted after her. It took a good five minutes to get Cindy

back, by which time they were both out of breath. At least Cindy was walking which was a definite improvement. But it wasn't long before Cindy was lying down on the sand and giving Alice her best puppy-dog eyes. 'You're old, I get it,' said Alice. She scanned the shoreline. There were a few families gathered around picnic rugs and behind windbreaks but no sign of Dom. 'Let's walk along the beach until we're level with the café and then we'll go home. Deal?' Alice asked Cindy. The dog huffed out a breath. 'Fine, I'll carry you, but I swear if I see him you're back on four legs.' Alice lifted Cindy into her arms and marched off across the sand and that was when it happened.

Chapter Twenty

Nancy slept better, she wasn't sure whether that was down to her previous lack of sleep, sea air or the brandy Freddy added to her chocolate. The brandy was definitely something she was going to have in her hot chocolate again as it was a very moreish combination. Breakfast was in the dining room which was another new room to Nancy and housed an enormous table and umpteen chairs and very little else.

Oscar pulled out seats for her and Louisa before quickly sitting down himself. Nancy didn't want to make any assumptions, but Oscar did seem fit and healthy which made her wonder about the reasons behind him wanting to hand over the estate early to Freddy. The whole thing made her curious. This was certainly a lot to be handing over – the house was vast, the gardens covered a large chunk of Devon and it had its own beach. As her parents rented a council flat on an iffy London estate *her* inheritance wouldn't amount to much. But she was okay with that. Her parents hadn't had an easy life so she was pleased when they treated themselves, although they weren't able to do that often. One day she hoped she'd be able to help them a bit so they didn't struggle. Her mum and dad had been saving for such a long time to take the holiday they were currently enjoying and she didn't know anyone who deserved it more.

Nancy scanned the table. Despite its size it was set for four with shiny cutlery and what she guessed were antique plates. Oscar poured them all coffee and the three of them sat in silence for a bit.

'I absolutely adore a fry-up on a Sunday,' said Oscar, rubbing his hands together.

'Don't worry, Nancy. You don't have to clog *your* arteries though,' said Louisa.

‘I love a bacon buttie,’ said Nancy.

‘That’s my kind of woman,’ said Oscar. ‘None of this vegan substitute nonsense. If you like bacon eat bacon. If you like vegetables eat those but don’t process a bean into something that looks like rashers but tastes like seasoned cardboard.’

Nancy wasn’t sure what to say so was thankful for the interruption of the door opening.

‘Morning,’ said Freddy, coming in with Otto and Carrie trotting behind him like Dr Dolittle.

Nancy immediately got to her feet. ‘I’m sorry. Come on, Carrie, you can’t be in here.’

‘She’s fine,’ said Louisa. ‘We’re terribly lax and have very few boundaries with the dog. Bring her over and introduce me.’

‘Okay.’ Nancy felt like she was presenting a gift to the queen as she picked up the cat and took her over.

‘What an absolute beauty.’ Louisa scratched Carrie’s head as she lay in Nancy’s arms – the very epitome of a teddy bear. ‘And what’s their name?’

‘Carrie,’ said Nancy, feeling quite proud.

‘That’s unusual, where’s it from?’ asked Louisa.

‘I’m guessing *Sex and the City*,’ said Freddy, taking a seat and pouring himself a coffee.

‘Actually,’ said Nancy, instantly disgruntled by his assumption, ‘she’s named after Carrie Chapman Catt.’

‘Don’t tell me, I know this.’ Louisa started clicking her fingers, her eyes tight shut. ‘Carrie Catt was a suffragette,’ said Louisa, her eyes popping wide open. ‘Am I right?’

‘Yes. She was an American women’s suffrage leader who campaigned for the right of American women to vote. Most people don’t get the reference,’ said Nancy. She’d spent a number of hours googling until she’d found something she felt was fitting her ballsy little kitten.

‘How clever.’ Louisa tickled Carrie’s tummy. ‘Your mummy is very smart, isn’t she?’

Nancy gave her best smug look at Freddy, who pushed out his lip and conceded a nod of approval.

While Louisa and Oscar cooed over Carrie, Nancy mouthed at Freddy, ‘Have you told them you’re fired?’

Freddy’s eyes widened. ‘Not yet. And I resigned,’ he mouthed back.

Nancy didn’t like the deception and much preferred to face things head on. ‘Freddy, have you had a chance to speak to your p—’

‘Good morning,’ said Paul, striding into the room. ‘What would everyone like for breakfast?’

Nancy put the cat down and Carrie trotted over to the window. Everyone gave Paul their orders and he disappeared, returning them to silence. Nancy went to open her mouth, but Freddy looked pleadingly at her. ‘Please don’t,’ he mouthed. Maybe she could give him a bit longer.

‘What happens here on a Sunday?’ asked Nancy. She’d assumed her usual routine of big shop, long bath and preparing for work on Monday in her pyjamas wasn’t happening. She felt like she’d been away from work for ages.

‘We go to the church in the village,’ said Louisa. ‘You’re very welcome to join us.’

Nancy hadn’t been to church since her mum’s old neighbour died a couple of years ago.

‘It’s okay,’ said Freddy. ‘You don’t have to come.’

That was all the incentive she needed. ‘I’d love to come, thank you.’

Paul arrived with the breakfasts and Nancy concentrated on eating hers with one hand and not dribbling ketchup down her chin.

Oscar shared out a sausage under the table between the cat and dog and Louisa pretended she hadn’t noticed until Carrie

started mewling and clawing at Louisa's legs.

'Ouch,' said Louisa as Carrie dug her claws in. Nancy went to stand up but Louisa held up a hand to stop her.

'Oscar! That's your fault,' said Louisa, carefully picking up Carrie and putting her on her lap. Carrie's head popped up above the table.

'I'm in trouble again,' said Oscar with a wink. He finished his breakfast. 'Right, I'll drive. See you all out the front in say twenty minutes?' He left the room.

'Mother, you need to do something,' said Freddy, putting down his cutlery.

'Believe me I've tried,' said Louisa, standing up and putting Carrie on her chair.

As they filed out of the room Freddy's phone lit up. 'Hello, Uncle Dickie,' he said.

'Ask him about the contract,' whispered Nancy as Freddy stepped back to let them past. Louisa carried on but Nancy hovered the other side of the door and listened in on Freddy's conversation.

'Something came up ...' said Freddy. 'I know Arabella was expecting me but ... Sure ... I will be there. Okay ... Yes ... Bye.'

Freddy walked through the door and was a little startled to see Nancy waiting for him. 'You didn't ask him?' Nancy was puzzled. 'Why didn't you ask him?'

Freddy scrunched his shoulders up. 'Don't get angry, there's a reason.'

'Which is what exactly?' Nancy waved her arm in a circle in the hope of speeding him up.

'Because I know the answer already.' Freddy's head dropped to his chest before he raised it again and eyeballed her. 'There's not going to be a contract with All Things Crafty.'

'What? Why? What?'

‘I spoke to Uncle Dickie a couple of days ago and he said he never offered you a contract. He said you must have got confused.’

‘Confused! *I* got confused? He’s the one who offered me a contract in exchange for employing you and then has been dodging the deal ever since.’

Freddy waved for her to keep her voice down. ‘Did he though?’

‘Yes,’ said Nancy firmly, although seeds of doubt were rapidly growing into weeds of realisation. ‘I was heading down to the tube and I didn’t catch all the conversation but I’d pitched to him a few days before and our products are great but he’d turned me down so when he called I ...’

‘Assumed it was about a contract,’ said Freddy, filling in the rest.

Nancy’s shoulders slumped. ‘So there never was a contract?’ She looked up at Freddy for confirmation.

‘No. I’m afraid not.’

Nancy took a breath. ‘Hang on. And you knew this when?’

‘Ah.’ Freddy seemed to realise his mistake. ‘I probably should have mentioned it.’

‘You think?’ Nancy was so cross she feared she may spontaneously combust. ‘Bloody hell, Freddy. You should have told me. There was a lot riding on that contract.’ More than he could ever understand.

* * *

Alice hadn’t felt that sensation for such a long time. A discomfort in her chest that contained the threat of pain. Her heart was thumping rapidly. She needed to rest. There was a spot of shade by a gnarled and seaweed-covered breakwater where she flopped down, making Cindy land unceremoniously on the sand. As if sensing there was something wrong the dog pawed at Alice’s shorts. ‘It’s okay,’ she said in a small voice. Alice closed her eyes and concentrated on her ragged breathing. If she could get that back under control perhaps her

heart would join in. She took deep breaths in through her nose and out through her mouth. Her heart was still pounding like she was running a marathon. Alice had a decision to make. If she called her parents, it would worry the life out of them, but then again if she called an ambulance and they called her parents that wasn't much better. The only other option was to sit still and hope her heart calmed down on its own.

As if making the decision for her, Cindy got on her lap, curled up and settled down for a nap. *Animals were meant to be calming, weren't they?* thought Alice as she gently stroked her fur. Alice opened her eyes to see if anyone had noticed but everyone else on the beach was carrying on regardless. A small child was singing to herself as she skipped by with a bucket, a mum and dad were having a crafty cuddle behind a windbreak while a small boy was having a wee on the other side. And another family were arguing over who had eaten the last of the cheese and pickle sandwiches. Nobody had noticed the young woman slumped against the breakwater.

After a few minutes the uncomfortable sensation in her chest eased although she was still short of breath and her heart still thought she was being chased by an axe murderer. The barnacles on the wood were digging into Alice's back and doing goodness only knew what to her favourite T-shirt. She took a few steady breaths. The simple fact was that she couldn't spend the rest of the day where she was. For one thing the tide was on the way in and drowning was not how she wanted to die. Not bringing a drink wasn't a smart move either as the sun was beating down. She looked over her shoulder at the café. It was really close. If she could make it up the steps there was a little oasis of shade, seating and somewhere she could buy a bottle of water.

Alice took her time to sit up straight and very gradually move from sitting to kneeling. The whole time she was paying close attention to her pulse and her breathing to ensure it didn't worsen. Cindy was not happy at being turfed off Alice's lap. Alice got to her feet as slowly as she could but still she had that horrid faint feeling come over her. She held onto the breakwater for a moment until it eased. Alice locked her sights on the café and slowly made her way up the beach. The sand

that had seemed soft and undulating before was now the hardest thing to walk on as it shifted with every footstep. She made it to the steps and held onto the handrail while she dragged in air like an old lady. This wasn't fun and she was starting to panic. Usually episodes didn't last as long as this but then in the past she'd not been out alone in the midday sun when they'd happened.

A gull squawked above them which got Cindy's attention. She barked and then made a dash up the steps dragging Alice with her. She daredn't let her run off again because she knew she'd never be able to catch her in her current condition. Apart from the pain returning to her chest Alice was almost grateful for the impetus the dog had given her to get up onto the promenade. She made the few strides across and sat down hard on a plastic chair. She wrapped Cindy's lead around the arm in a rough knot as she gasped for breath. She dug her hand in her shorts pocket and pulled out her phone. She had run out of options.

'Miss Pelling! It is you! It is!' shouted Bonnie as she ran to greet her.

Alice looked up to see a delighted-looking Dom approaching her. *Yep, that is literally the last person I wanted to see*, she thought as everything around her turned to black.

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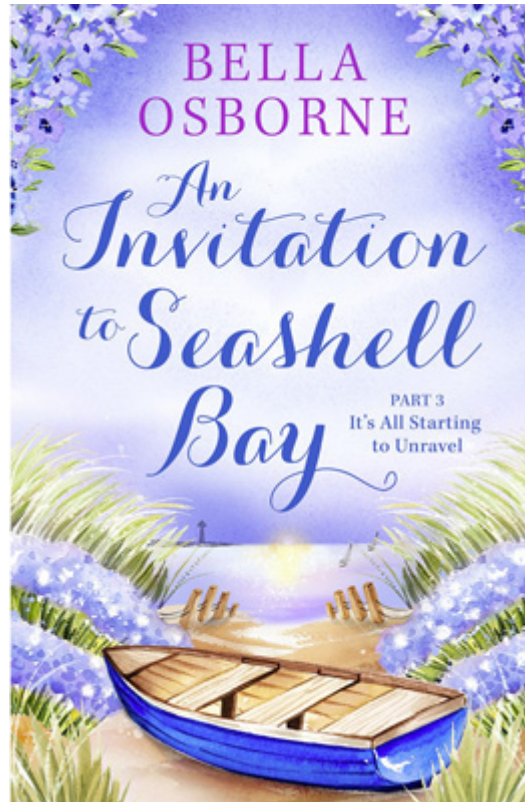
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About the Author

Bella has been jotting down stories as far back as she can remember but decided that 2013 would be the year that she finished a full-length novel. Since then, she's written nine bestselling romantic comedies, two bestselling book club reads and won the RNA Romantic Comedy Novel of the Year Award.

Bella's stories are about friendship, love and coping with what life throws at you. She lives in Warwickshire, UK with her husband, daughter and a cat who thinks she's a dog. When not writing Bella is usually eating custard creams and planning holidays.

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