

*'Refreshing, funny and romantic,  
it's like a breath of fresh sea air with a cast  
of terrific characters.'* KATE HARRISON

# Turning the Tide



CHRISTINE STOVELL

# *Turning the Tide*

Christine Stovell



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In memory of my dad, Arthur,  
forever in my heart.

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by my side.

## *Prologue*

On a pewter-grey day, with the rain running down his collar and an icy wind chopping him in half, Matthew Corrigan looked at the sorry old sight in front of him and knew he ought to walk away.

The building he was supposed to be viewing was in a lamentable state, too.

‘So, what do you say, then?’ There was desperation in the old man’s eyes, anxiety in the quavering voice. His navy-blue blazer was shiny with wear, his white cap yellowing with service, its gold braid brassy and frayed. ‘Nothing that a bit of imagination and a lick of paint wouldn’t put right, don’t you think?’

A bulldozer wouldn’t hurt either, thought Matthew.

‘And, of course,’ the Commodore added craftily, ‘it’s a prime location.’

Matthew smiled to himself. Anyone would think they were talking about a premium estate on the south coast, the kind of place with a manicured beauty, historic interest and royal connections. An exclusive site where properties sold privately to well-connected buyers. Not some broken-down old clubhouse with an arse of a hinterland behind it. Little Spitmarsh had once been a fashionable Victorian resort, but now its tide of popularity had ebbed to the point when it had finally gone out for good. Just too far from London for any sane person to contemplate a daily commute, and with a local economy so depressed it was almost suicidal, Little Spitmarsh clung wretchedly to the bleak east coast waiting for the cold North Sea to suck it under.

‘It’s beautiful, isn’t it?’ the Commodore said, softly.

Well, it was true that almost anywhere else in the country the raw, wild beauty of this unspoiled waterscape would set his heart racing with anticipation. Campion's Creek, a meandering watercourse through the salt marshes, looped into a neat spoon shape with the Spitmarsh Yacht Club's abandoned clubhouse on one side and a boat yard nestled in the opposite curve. In the Solent it would have been thick with masts; here, just a handful of boats jostled on their moorings as a gust of wind sent mercury waves across the water.

'Could you have picked a bigger dump?' had been Gina's depressingly predictable reaction, when he'd mentioned a possible redevelopment project in the run-down resort. As if having a hotline to celebville made her the expert in an industry where he was the rising star! Well, if she didn't believe in his work she didn't believe in him. He was sick to the back teeth of listening to the crap about her so-called career, as a so-called journalist on the pile of junk she claimed was a celebrity magazine. Maybe once she was seated on the terrace of his new restaurant, with a champagne flute in her hand, watching an amber sunset over the quicksilver creek, she could be persuaded that there was life beyond the metropolis.

'It'll be cash, of course,' he heard himself say. 'At the price we discussed. I'll get my solicitor to make the arrangements.'

The Commodore thumped his chest as he sucked in his breath and tried to speak. Pulling out a handkerchief, he wiped his brow then blew his nose.

Waiting until the other man was composed again, Matthew took one more look at the neat, black-stained, weatherboard buildings along the bank. 'Just out of interest, who owns the boat yard?'

The Commodore seemed to be struggling with something in his eye now, bending his head and fumbling for his

pocket again.

‘Oh, that belongs to Harry,’ he said, his voice muffled in the huge handkerchief. ‘Harry Watling.’

Harry Watling. A good solid name. A bloke he could do business with. Somewhere deep inside a voice was telling him this was a risky development and there was still time to walk away. Matthew ignored it.

Had he realised what he was about to take on, he would have been running.



# *Chapter One*

On a fresh May morning, Harry Watling headed out for her favourite spot a contented woman. She liked to come to this secluded coil in the creek because nobody else did.

Only today someone else was sitting in her place. Harry pulled up and considered the dark brown hair curled into the pale nape of his neck, the black tee shirt stretched across broad shoulders and the long, athletic back which was turned against the world.

'I don't mind you staring at me, sweetheart, but your mother might have something to say about your manners,' he said, without even looking round.

Harry sucked in her breath and waited for the temperature round her face to cool before proceeding.

'Well, are you going to join me or not?'

No way, thought Harry, arranging herself further along the bank and staring firmly ahead to discourage conversation. Whilst her land didn't strictly stretch to this side of Campion's Creek, he had another thing coming if he thought that acting as if he owned the place would make her back off.

Mercilessly carved away by the wind and waves, the soft shore had slowly retreated to leave Little Spitmarsh isolated from its neighbours, divided by miles of salt marsh and hemmed in by the sea. There was a sense of loneliness about the landscape which made it an acquired taste for many people, but which Harry loved. In winter the raw north wind could cut you to the bone, but in summer the sky over the marshes shimmered with heat and was alive with wild cries and flickering wings.

'Perfect,' said the stranger.

Harry gave him a swift sideways glance. Maybe she'd been a bit quick to resent his presence, after all. 'It's a world apart here,' she volunteered, surprising herself. 'You wouldn't even know there was a town nearby, it's so peaceful,' she said, nodding her head at another inlet where the single spire and assorted rooftops of the town centre could just be seen against the dim sky. 'Mind you, it's not for people who come here looking to escape – then moan there isn't an M&S. They're usually gone within a year.'

'Sounds as if you know a bit about the place.'

'I ought to. I was born over at the boat yard. My mother was supposed to have been booked in for a hospital delivery.'

'But you had other ideas?'

'Not just me! Mum and Dad had always wanted a home birth, so they deliberately left it too late. They must have been mad,' she joked.

'Or so crazy about each other they couldn't bear to be apart. Are they still the same?' he asked. 'No, don't tell me. They live in a solid middle-class villa now, and take nice holidays abroad, right?'

Harry clasped her knees and looked at her feet. 'Not quite. My father died when I was eleven. My mother remarried five years ago.' And didn't even try to save the business, she nearly added; simply sat by as a steady trickle of boat owners sheepishly slunk off to the much glossier marina along the coast, leaving a row of empty moorings like a pillaged charm bracelet.

Pulling at a tuft of grass, she went on, 'Now, I run the boat yard. I keep it going in memory of my dad and for everyone who works there or depends on it in some way. We've lost too much already; once there was a good-sized fishing fleet here, trading vessels and sea commerce. These days all that's left is a handful of fishing boats working long hours for little reward.'

There's no tourism to speak of – no one chooses to come here if they can afford somewhere more glamorous – and the weekly market's dying on its feet. No wonder we're an unemployment black spot. The boat yard's one of our last links with a working waterfront.'

'Sounds like a tough call.'

Five years of hard slog. Beating back the waves of doubters, detractors and anyone else who thought that a slip of a girl could never keep the place going.

'It hasn't been easy,' said Harry. 'But the tide's turning, I can feel it. All I need now is a few more people who appreciate this,' she said, spreading her hands towards the water and the quivering silver rushes.

She stopped with a short laugh. 'Anyway, I should be at work, not talking about it. I'd better get back before anyone starts wondering where I am.' Scrambling to her feet, she was surprised to feel lighter for having spoken to him. Sharing a few of her concerns with a stranger made a change from talking to George who usually responded with a touch of his own philosophy; such as, 'Ah, none of us never knows what's round the corner for us, Miss Harriet.'

She turned to the man. 'I'm Harry, by the way, Harry Watling.'

He extended a hand and she smiled to herself at the thin leather bracelet laced round his wrist. Some hippy type, she thought, looking into his face for the first time. Hooded, hazel eyes returned her gaze, sleepy and sexy, and Harry nearly had to sit down again.

He smiled and a dimple creased his right cheek. 'Matthew,' he said in his soft, throaty voice. 'Matthew Corrigan.'

'Matthew Corrigan? Are you sure, George?' Harry squatted down to get a better look at her odd-job man and narrowly

avoided being blinded by a flying barnacle. George had been an old man when she was a little girl and didn't seem to have changed at all since then. An ex-merchant seaman, he'd managed to avoid learning almost any practical skills during his service; his knots came undone as soon as he turned his back and, whilst his painting skills would have given Jackson Pollock a run for his money, 'Convergence' was not the kind of finish most yachtsmen wanted for their boats.

His redeeming features were, firstly, he could tidy up for England and, more importantly, he had a wealth of memories about Harry's father. In addition George was popular with visiting yachtsmen, always willing to help carry their dinghies or take their lines. Whatever comments she might make about him to herself, especially when another load supposedly secured by George came whistling down around her head, Harry wouldn't hear a word against him.

'Persistent bugger.'

'Matthew Corrigan?'

'Who? No, this barnacle. Beats me how they keep hanging on.'

George gave the encrusted propeller another sharp dig and was rewarded with a ripe waft of dead fish as he dislodged another shell.

'Got 'im good and proper, that fellow.'

Harry felt like screaming. 'But what about this Matthew Corrigan? How did he persuade the Spitmarsh Yacht Club to part with the old premises? They've been quite content to let them rot until now.'

'That's what I'm trying to tell you,' grunted George. 'He's told the Commodore that he's going to turn the place into a bloody fish restaurant!' George had to wait for his shoulders to stop shaking with mirth before he could take aim at the propeller again. 'Who wants to eat bloody fish round here, I

ask you? Give me a nice bit of beef any day. The Commodore reckons there's one born every minute. Reckons this fellow doesn't know his arse from his elbow. Wrote them a cheque for the place then and there. More than enough to pay for the upkeep on that fancy new clubhouse of theirs over at Great Spitmarsh Marina.'

Harry felt better. Two Matthew Corrigan's in a week was a bit of a coincidence, but it was a coincidence, nonetheless. The Matthew Corrigan she knew didn't look as if he had two pennies to rub together. There was no way *he* could bail the yacht club out of its financial difficulties in one stroke.

'Funny thing is,' George began. 'Damn! Come here, you bugger. Ah! That's got 'im.'

Drawing closer, despite the appalling stench, Harry willed George to go on.

'Funny thing is that the Commodore reckons this fellow don't look as if he's got two pennies to rub together.'

Harry felt sick and it wasn't just the smell of old barnacles.

Surrounded by oily furballs of old caulking, Harry was definitely ready for another cup of tea. In common with the vast pitch-pine deck of the forty-six-foot steel ketch she was working on in the yard, Harry also seemed to have developed a few weak points prone to rot invasion recently. In both cases the treatment was the same, she thought, her glance straying briefly to the old clubhouse. First, get rid of all the stuff you didn't want, plug the gaps, then seal to ensure a beautiful watertight surface which would maintain the integrity of the structure below. Simple. Who needed therapy when raking out several yards of old cotton and pitch would do just as well?

'I'll come down for it, George,' she bellowed, groping round for a piece of rag on which to blow her itchy nose.

'Right you are, Miss Harriet. It's on this oil drum when

you're ready.'

'Thanks, George.'

Feeling twice her age from being hunched over for so long, Harry rose rather stiffly and placed her feet with extra care on the rickety wooden ladder propped up against the ketch. Actually, now she'd got up she was really quite peckish; maybe she'd nip back to the house to make a quick sandwich, unless she could scrounge a chocolate biscuit from George, of course. Knowing how much he hated to open his biscuit tin even for her, Harry was just trying to picture the anguished look on his face and his eyes rolling like a little dog in distress, when her foot reached the last rung of the ladder and she stepped back into something warm.

'What are you playing at, George?' she grumbled. 'Any closer and I could have sat on your head.'

'Now, there's an offer you don't get every day,' said an amused voice. It didn't sound anything like George.

Harry's hands tightened on the ladder; she didn't need to turn round to see who it was. The point was – what was he doing here? And why hadn't he picked a time when she didn't look as if she'd just been pushed up a chimney or had, at least, blown her nose on something clean?

'Be careful about what you wish for, Harry,' he warned as she reluctantly pivoted round to face him. 'It might come true.'

'It hasn't,' she told him innocently. 'You're still here.'

The hooded hazel eyes sent her a look that could have smouldered a pillow at twenty paces. 'Ah, don't be like that, Harry. Not now we're practically neighbours.'

'So I gather,' said Harry, trying to concentrate on her grievance rather than allow herself to be distracted by long legs encased in faded Levi's or the soft dark shirt unbuttoned to show the pale column of his throat. 'You could have

dropped a hint to me about your plans instead of letting me ramble on. That would have been neighbourly.'

Matthew ran his hand over the ketch's steel hull. 'It would have been rude to interrupt when you were in full flow.' He stopped pretending to examine the ketch and smiled at her. 'I like to keep my ear to the ground and listen for clues about what's going on. That's why I'm good at what I do. Besides,' he added, 'as I see it we could both get something out of this deal.'

Had she heard properly? 'Could we? Now let's see. You, you're going to be the Raymond Blanc of Little Spitmarsh with your trendy new restaurant where, no doubt, all the locals will be queuing up to blow their dole on a deep-fried winkle and a frizzy lettuce leaf. Wouldn't you agree, George?'

George, who had been creeping closer during her exchange with Matthew, withdrew faster than you could say mollusc.

'And me?' she enquired. 'What do I get? Apart from some brash watering hole right on my doorstep and litter in the creek?'

'Well, Raymond Blanc does claim to be able to bring a woman to orgasm with his food alone,' Matthew told her, straight-faced.

'I'll add "noise nuisance" to my list of objections to your restaurant then, shall I?'

A muffled guffaw from behind a nearby keel showed that George was still within earshot.

'Think, Harry,' Matthew said. 'You wanted a working waterfront. Something to bring the visitors back. More jobs for local people. That's what I'm giving you. Come with me a minute.'

Before she could protest, he had seized her grimy hand and was steering her in the direction of the old clubhouse.

'Look,' he said, with a grandiose sweep of his arm. 'That's

the restaurant that will put this place back on the map again. Okay, it doesn't look very promising at the moment but just imagine what it will look like by the summer: a simple interior but with huge windows to make the most of that view. Cutlery gleaming in soft pools of light, the chink of glasses as folks sip their drinks on the terrace in the balmy night air.'

'You're the one who's barny,' said Harry, snatching her hand back and sticking it firmly in the pocket of her work dungarees. 'Who are you trying to kid? Can't you see this town is dying on its feet?'

'I just gave it the kiss of life,' Matthew retorted. 'They'll be swarming round like flies when the word gets out. Won't be able to find seaside homes fast enough. Luckily for them, and you, my regeneration company will be able to provide just what they're looking for.'

'For two or three weekends of the year, maybe, but how will the town survive the rest of the time?' Harry hesitated. 'Run that past me again. What was that bit about me?'

He gave her a patient smile and produced his trump card. 'Look at all the wasted land you've got. Can't you see what you're sitting on here? You've kept the boat yard going, all credit to you – but it's hardly a mega-money game, is it?'

Harry could see where he was going. 'Oh no,' she said firmly. 'Hold it right there. I'm not parting with this place for anyone.'

'No one's suggesting that you should,' he told her. 'It's very picturesque in its own way. Just the sort of thing people want to look at from their balconies. Stops the place feeling like a housing estate. No, the boat yard stays. But the rest of the land isn't doing anything, is it? And if, say, you wanted to see it doing some good, what could be better than a discreet development of exclusive apartments? Include a few moorings in the package and it would be really tempting. Just think what



it would do for the boat yard's business!'

A flock of gulls wheeling above his head added to Harry's disorientation. Now she was imagining things; surely the harmless drifter she'd met by the creek wasn't seriously proposing to build houses all over her land? 'Do you mean to say,' she said, when she managed to speak, 'that you'd be prepared to sacrifice all this? That you would ruin what you told me was a perfect setting, for the sake of a get-rich-quick scheme?'

'Harry, credit me with a little intelligence; we're not talking Tenerife here,' he replied. 'You seem to have formed a rather negative impression of what I'm trying to do. Think environmentally sensitive, with building materials to blend into the landscape – something to attract professional people who will appreciate the qualities of the area. As I said, a discreet development.'

He really believed what he was saying and, judging from the tone of his voice and the self-assured smile that didn't reach his eyes, Harry guessed that this was where they discussed terms. She shook her head.

'There's no such thing.'

The smile faded a little. 'Aren't you being a bit selfish? What you're saying is that you're more worried about keeping this lot to yourself than promoting the town's well-being.' He shrugged. 'Ask yourself which option would benefit most people and I don't think there's a contest, is there?'

She smiled back at him as pleasantly as she could, just to prove how little he scared her. 'This is a deprived community – not a desperate one. Dumping a holiday village along this fragile, beautiful stretch of water and putting it at greater risk is not what local opinion would call a benefit. You might not like what I'm saying, but if you're any kind of property developer you'll listen to me. Today or tomorrow or at the end

of the week when you slide into your nice shiny Saab convertible and head back to London, if you've got any sense at all, you'll realise that this town requires long-term investment and real jobs. And I'm willing to bet you won't be in such a hurry then to throw bad money after good.'

He gave no indication that he'd heard a word she'd said, turning his attention instead to the creek and a suggestion of breeze just lifting the water. Eventually, he seemed to remember she was there.

'You don't know me yet, Harry, but you will,' he began quietly. 'I'm very successful at what I do. You, on the other hand, have good reason to worry.'

Harry braced herself and waited to see what nonsense he was going to come up with.

'You're not getting new customers, are you? And those you have got aren't getting any younger. Keeping a boat on a swinging mooring is lovely whilst you've still got the energy. But your customers aren't like that, are they? Half of them are going to find that they're too old to do the things they used to take for granted. And a trip in the dinghy just to get out to the mooring is one of them. Assuming, that is, they've got the strength to pull themselves onto the boat when they get there.'

By now his eyes were resting on hers and Harry was struggling against the onset of panic. How easily he'd tapped into her deepest fears for the future and made them seem real ... She took a long, steadying breath. It wasn't true. She wouldn't let that happen.

'People are saying that your boat owners are all heading for the marina. Now you're a brave girl and you've worked hard, but it doesn't take a genius to see you're heading for trouble. Have a think about what I've said, Harry, and you'll be glad I came along.

'One more thing, Harry,' he added, whilst she fought back

another hot wave of fear. 'We'll have plenty of time to make each other's acquaintance because I'm not going back to London, not for the foreseeable future. I live here now, took six months' rental on a little place the other day.' The dimple in his cheek flickered briefly. 'I'll be in touch soon.'

She was still standing there, staring at his back, when he turned and looked over his shoulder.

'And Harry,' he called. 'It's a thirty-year-old Volvo.'

Shiny new Saab or Swedish Brick; it didn't make much difference to Harry. Both came from a place where the winters were long and invasion and pillage had once been national sports. It fitted.

## *Chapter Two*

Standing in front of the battered shell from which his pearl of a restaurant would soon emerge, Matthew was frowning, but not at the cracked panes of glass or the sagging roof. Harry Watling was clever enough not to jump at his initial proposal, but sooner or later he'd find a way to change her mind.

If only Harry had been a solid, straightforward bloke, as he'd expected. The last thing he needed was another difficult woman in his life. Not that Gina would ever put her hand up to that; she was far too elusive. She'd always been at her most docile after sex; provided, of course, he approached her whilst she was satiated and adoring. But, even if they both walked away from their joke of a relationship tomorrow, seducing Harry Watling wouldn't be an option. There were her hands for a start; they were small and square with blunt-cut nails. Certainly not the kind of hands he could ever imagine unbuttoning his shirt. In fact, bunched up into little fists, they were just the right size to blacken a man's eye. So no, he definitely wasn't about to climb under Harry Watling's duvet. He'd leave that dubious pleasure to braver men. Men who liked to test their survival skills in frozen wastelands or who hunted crocodiles for a living.

Quite a surprise, thought Matthew, rubbing his hand over his stubble, finding out that Harry Watling wasn't some thick-set bloke, after all. Funny little girl, like a grey-eyed pixie with attitude, especially when she squatted warily next to him on the bank, short dark hair all ruffled by the wind. For a moment he considered what it would be like to watch her large, expressive mouth spread slowly into a smile. Not that it was something he was ever likely to see. Besides, he liked tall,

sexy women, not tough little tomboys; but Harry did have something he found deeply attractive. The dimple flickered across his cheek. She was well endowed with land. Now all he had to do was persuade her to part with it.

Letting himself into the clubhouse, and ignoring the sound of rasping claws as something scurried away, Matthew lowered himself onto the split red vinyl seat of the nearest bar stool. Before him an old bar towel gathered dust and, in addition to a handful of dead flies, a Red Barrel ice bucket still held a pair of tongs. Running his fingers round the cloudy rim of a VAT 69 whisky glass, he stared into a flecked mirror at the debris behind him. Wondering if he was adding more dirt than he was taking off, Matthew wiped his hands on the bar towel and got up to have a better look round. Once the tired furniture had been removed, he thought, and all the rubbish, there wasn't anything here that his own well-paid and super-efficient team of specialists couldn't handle. Matthew frowned as he pulled open a drawer to find a pile of paperwork forgotten by the Spitmarsh Yacht Club. At some point he'd have to make time to return that, too.

The swirls of plaster on the walls, fake beams, grimy nylon carpet tiles and a dash of 1970s pine cladding made the place seem far worse than it was. But at the far end of the long room the windows opened onto the creek, giving spectacular views of water and sky. Huge anvil-shaped thunderclouds loomed above him, blocking out the sun and chasing the soft blues and greens to grey, and the first breaths of a chilly wind stirred up a few choppy waves. The marshes themselves, it seemed, were turning a cold face to him. A secret, inaccessible landscape with a rare, raw beauty. And that was why Matthew knew his instinct had been sound. In an age where everyone longed to escape, what could be better than this truly unspoilt location? First, the restaurant to tempt them in. Then the

holiday homes to hook them. Over at Watling's a handful of masts, like pikestaffs, did their best to put up a show of defence around the boat yard. Matthew smiled to himself. One way or another he was going to win. Harry Watling wasn't such a big problem. Everyone had a weak spot. It was just a question of finding it.

'Brought you a cup of tea,' said George, offering her a mug labelled Bovril. 'Thought you looked as if you could do with some cheering up.' Nestled in the grimy folds of his coat was a circular tartan tin. George fished it out grudgingly. 'Biscuit?' he ground out, with obvious difficulty.

Normally Harry would have raised a smile at his plight; she must be looking every bit as downcast as she felt for George to go that far. The only sign of the internal battle raging within him was a slight shake of his fingers as he held out the precious hoard for her perusal.

'Er, let me see ...'

She could feel George watching her, waiting in agony to see which jewel in his collection was about to disappear. A rich dark Bourbon, a handful of plump custard creams and several Happy Faces twinkled up at her. Harry waved a finger over them.

'Got any fig rolls, George?'

'Fraid not,' he replied, slamming the lid back on and whisking the tin back into the depths of his coat. 'Can't abide them, Miss Harriet. As you well know.'

Harry smiled to herself but, with his biscuits out of harm's way, George had regained his composure.

'So what are you going to do, Miss Harriet?'

'About what?'

George nodded out to where a scattering of boats bobbed carelessly in a shaft of sunlight glazing the slatey sea.

‘New customers.’

‘Oh, you heard, did you?’ Trust George not to have missed anything. Harry tried to close her mind to the cold whisper of doubt Matthew had started. It was true that many of her customers were retired couples sailing only as long as time and health permitted. Had she really rebuilt the business just to watch it wither away?

‘Short of running a water-taxi service or rustling up breaded scampi and chips every time they come down to use the boat, there’s nothing I can do. I can’t turn back the clock and make them any younger.’ Harry forced a mouthful of scalding tea over the lump that had mysteriously appeared in her throat.

‘There’s no stopping time, that’s true. Wouldn’t be proper either; it’s the natural order for the old ’uns to make room for the young ’uns.’

‘It might be the natural order,’ she croaked, throwing him a sideways glance and debating whether to ask for one of his Happy Faces – which would be guaranteed to wipe the rather too serene look off *his* happy face. ‘But where are we going to find young people in Little Spitmarsh who can afford to sail?’

George gave a distinctly false-sounding cough. Harry looked into his red, weather-beaten face and followed his watery gaze past the yard, past the lapping water, past the line of masts to the dilapidated building collapsing on the opposite bank. He turned and cocked a bushy, nicotine-yellow eyebrow at her.

‘So they were having a little tussle, you know, as they do, and then I noticed things had gone a bit quiet and when I went to look you’ll *never* guess what?’

The Flowerpot Men was the slowest florist in town, but no one protested since it was also the only florist in town.

‘No?’ Harry offered weakly, trying not to let her eyes stray to the clock behind Trevor’s head. For a man who looked like the strong silent type, Trevor could go on talking for hours. Having ended the previous day blowing all chances of having a crack at George’s biscuit tin for the foreseeable future, Harry was mindful that starting the day leaving George to face the bottom of a forty-foot boat by himself would certainly put the foul back into anti-fouling.

The trouble was that Matthew’s predictions for the boat yard had left her with such a horrible empty feeling, it would take more than a biscuit to cheer her up. A bacon butty breakfast, she’d decided, would help set her up for the day and justify a quick stroll into town. Whilst she was there, she’d pop in to ask Frankie and Trevor to look out for all the brand new four-wheel drives and BMW convertibles that, according to George, Matthew Corrigan’s restaurant would attract.

‘Kirstie was giving Phil a piggyback!’ Trevor hissed at her. ‘I thought they were too young for all that.’

In London, The Flowerpot Men would probably have been called Wild Orchids and fitted out in brushed steel and blond wood or such like, but Little Spitmarsh wasn’t the place for such flamboyance. Fortunately, the air of neglect that pervaded the outside of the shop was not reflected inside. Whilst the decor could never be described as trendy, there was a good range of flowers and plants to choose from and the proprietors were always anxious to make sure their customers went away happy – even if they were talked to death in the process.

‘Well, we’ll just have to sit down and have a little chat with them, won’t we?’ said Frankie, winking at Harry as he came in from the back of the shop carrying an armful of hot-pink tulips protruding from cellophane sheaths.

It was a bit early in the day, thought Harry, to deal with



sexual miscreants, especially when the couple involved were Jack Russell terriers. Besides, she had matters of her own to attend to, albeit none of them involving illicit humping.

‘Can’t you just get one of them done?’ she suggested, in an impatient attempt to divert the conversation and amuse them with her news.

There was a collective sharp intake of breath. Even Phil and Kirstie looked up from the basket where they had been curled up together, presumably having a post-coital nap, to turn accusing eyes on her. Frankie, weaving his small, honed and subtly tanned frame through the gap at the end of the counter, dumped the tulips in a bucket and laughed. ‘Well you needn’t think that Phil’s taking all the blame. Why should he have to suffer? She’s the one egging him on. Not just him, either, by the way she keeps slipping out when she thinks no one’s looking.’

‘I wonder where she’s got that from,’ muttered Trevor, with a touch of bitterness.

‘How about this for an idea?’ Harry said, nipping a potential scrap in the bud and silently marvelling at Frankie’s air of injured innocence. ‘What do you think of someone who opens a new restaurant here, installs some low lighting and a high-class chef and claims he’s going to have wealthy townies buying up properties left, right and centre?’

Frankie rocked back on his heels. ‘Since when did Little Spitmarsh acquire a patron saint?’

Obviously she hadn’t made herself clear. ‘Frankie, the old yacht clubhouse has been sold and the guy who’s bought it, Matthew Corrigan, reckons he’s going to reopen it as an upmarket restaurant.’

Trevor clapped his hands down on the counter, frightening the dogs. ‘Excellent! It’s about time there was a decent place to eat here.’

‘Oh, Trevor! Do you mean to say you don’t enjoy those flaccid baguettes they have the nerve to serve at The Admiral?’ Frankie clucked. ‘Other towns may have gastropubs, but we’re the only ones lucky enough to have a gastroenteritis pub.’

Was she the only person capable of seeing past the end of her nose? Trying to make first George and now Frankie and Trevor recognise the dangers of Matthew’s scheme was a bit like warning children not to accept sweets from strangers.

‘Look, it’s not just that; he’s also approached me about buying my land to build houses. The man’s ruthless; luckily, he’ll soon find out that he can’t just march into Little Spitmarsh and expect everyone to roll over.’

Just then the doorbell jangled for a second time. Phil cocked his head expectantly, his stump of a tail switching into first-gear wag, whilst Kirstie flipped over onto her back and poked a coquettish tongue out of the side of her mouth.

‘Glory, glory, hallelujah!’ Frankie drawled softly.

‘Harry,’ said Matthew. ‘Just the person I was hoping to see.’

How dare he make it sound as if he knew what she had on underneath her dungarees?

Frankie pulled himself together. ‘Aren’t you going to introduce us to your friend, Harry?’

Matthew grinned, extending his hand. ‘I’m Matthew Corrigan.’

Since Trevor had gone back to gawping at Matthew, he didn’t seem to notice Frankie’s reluctance to let go of his hand. Pity, thought Harry; an outbreak of bickering might be just the thing to break the spell Matthew was casting.

Then Frankie opened his mouth. ‘If you’re here to order flowers I guarantee that at The Flowerpot Men we aim to offer superb arrangements and unparalleled personal service,’ she

was aghast to hear him say. 'We'll send any flowers you like wherever you like, but you'll also be needing someone to take care of the flowers when you open your new restaurant, won't you?'

Any satisfaction Harry felt about the flash of irritation Matthew sent in her direction was completely extinguished by her horror at Frankie's audacious sales pitch. Hadn't he listened to a word she'd said?

'Let's just start with one order, shall we?' Matthew said, looking pained.

Frankie drew himself up to his full five feet eight and took a deep breath. 'This is my partner, Trevor Dillon. There's not a lot of call for it in Little Spitmarsh, but Trevor's had considerable experience in dealing with flowers for some of London's best hotels. He's handled everything from small-scale weddings to grand corporate occasions and he isn't flustered by budgets, installation deadlines or anything else you can throw at him. If you want simple, beautiful and original designs in your restaurant, why don't you let us show you what we can do?'

As the shop bell jangled for the third time, not even Phil and Kirstie looked up. Harry, who couldn't bear to watch any longer, closed the door behind her. All right, she was prepared to admit that Matthew Corrigan could turn a few heads, and his personal magnetism was formidable, but it was too soon to panic. Once he'd looked around, would he really want to pursue a rather uncertain project in a dull seaside town?

Beneath the gold lettering that should have read Crimps but, due to ineptitude or sheer mischief on the part of the signwriter, looked unfortunately like Chimps Hair & Beauty Salon, Carmen Moulton lounged in the doorway like Little Spitmarsh's answer to Sophia Loren after she'd eaten all the

pasta. A firm believer that neither hair nor breasts could ever be described as too big, she was pulling at the plunging vee of her tight top and blowing down her cleavage, trying to disperse some of the heat built up blasting perms into submission all morning. As Harry headed towards her, Carmen's immaculately plucked and sculpted eyebrows rushed towards each other like two playful tadpoles, and her face darkened.

Harry had plenty of dark thoughts of her own without needing to know how she'd managed to incur Carmen's disapproval. She tried a smile, the kind she used for fierce dogs, which made Carmen stamp a tiny stiletto-clad trotter and scurry inside.

'Hey, Harry!' she cried, reappearing and almost making Harry jump out of her skin. She pushed a piece of paper into Harry's hand. 'Special half-price offer next week. Make sure you come, yes?'

Fortunately a stomach-churning waft of permanent wave solution and a tremulous cry of 'I think I'm done now, Carmen!' from within made the other woman squawk and run back inside. It also spared Harry the necessity of telling her she'd probably prefer to eat her own foot than take up the offer. Even so, rather than risk being spotted binning the leaflet – which could result in her being forcibly dragged in for half a head of highlights and a leg wax – Harry scrunched it up and stuck it in her pocket. All right, so she didn't actually feel the need to shout about the fact that she got George to trim her hair when it needed it; but, given that it was one of the few skills he had managed to pick up in the merchant navy, she felt marginally safer in his hands than Carmen's.

Harry went into the baker's and ordered a bacon roll. Wandering back to the boat yard, she was so busy tearing at it in large, fretful bites, that she didn't see the figure waiting on

the high wall of the sea defences until it was too late to take avoiding action. George she could have coped with, but being caught by Matthew Corrigan with bulging cheeks and bacon fat glistening on her chin put her at a considerable disadvantage. With her mouth crammed full, Harry was not best placed to tell Matthew what to do with the single red rose he was holding out to her; but she sincerely hoped that the message in her eyes left him in no doubt about where she thought a suitable receptacle might be. Shrugging, Matthew broke off the long stem and stuck the flower in the top pocket of his faded chambray shirt. He gave Harry a smile which she returned. Deep frozen.

‘Don’t think you can get round me the way you seem to be getting round everyone else,’ she told him hurriedly, wiping bacon roll remnants from her mouth. ‘I don’t believe in your restaurant idea, I don’t need your money and I can certainly resist your particular brand of charm.’

Matthew gave her the benefit of his dimple. ‘What kind would that be, then?’

‘The short-lived variety. The kind that lasts just long enough for you to get what you want then fades away like the morning dew. Little Spitmarsh might have been asleep for a hundred years, but it doesn’t mean that *I’m* fooled by the first handsome prince to try his luck. Let’s not waste any time pretending it’s my good looks or my personality you’re interested in, okay?’

Matthew jumped down from the wall, laughing. ‘It’s all right, Harry, your body’s safe with me. Seducing owners to get my hands on their land isn’t one of my usual business methods.’

Especially not those reeking of brown sauce, thought Harry self-consciously.

‘So,’ he said, the hazel eyes watching her closely, ‘what’s

your price?’

‘My *land*,’ she said, through gritted teeth, ‘is not for sale.’

‘I don’t imagine that a boat yard sold on the open market would reach anything like the amount I’d be able to offer you for a parcel of land,’ he suggested, softly.

‘Forget it,’ said Harry, ‘I’m not so easily bought.’

‘I’m only trying to show you that, if things don’t pick up, you might not have a choice. And who knows,’ he murmured, reaching out very slowly to trace a line across her cheek with his thumb, ‘I might end up with more than your land.’

Harry flinched, hating the flush of colour she could feel staining her face.

‘Stop taking the ...’

‘Brown sauce,’ said Matthew, raising his thumb to show her. ‘Trust me, I’m trying to help.’

‘And I’ve already told you,’ Harry said, as firmly as she could, ‘that I can manage by myself.’

He considered her for a moment, the hazel eyes flicking over her face to see if she was about to crack. ‘Whatever you say, Harry.’

## *Chapter Three*

Just three and a half miles away, as the gull flew, Great Spitmarsh lay on the opposite side of the mudflats and backwaters to its smaller neighbour. The much-hyped marina development was bland, unimaginative and had done as much to reinvigorate the town as a set of gleaming acrylic nails on a wizened old paw. Far from creating a millionaire's playground, the yacht owners it attracted turned out to be an aloof bunch who, although content to wander a few yards for breakfast at Tesco's or dinner at the marina bar, brought most of their supplies with them and rarely ventured as far as the old town. In Harry's opinion, the unsympathetic development had destroyed the town's character and turned the high street into a ghost town. No way, she vowed, would she allow Matthew Corrigan to subject Little Spitmarsh to the same fate.

Having collected an order from the marine engineer's, Harry decided to take another look at the marina. She liked to think that Watling's attracted all the true sailors, the salty old dogs who weren't afraid to go a few days without a shower and drank strong tea in tannin-stained mugs; but, casting her eye over row upon row of gleaming white hulls and expensive sails set simply for the sake of showing off, she could certainly see where the smart money lay. A lot of people were prepared to spend a lot of cash to keep their boats lying safely idle.

Utterly depressed, Harry returned to her van and was about to drive away when there was a tap at the window. From the small gap left between a full set of whiskers, enormously overgrown eyebrows and a nautical cap, a pair of beady blue eyes bored into her. Eric Drummond, Commodore of the

Spitmarsh Yacht Club, had unwittingly been the cause of more grief to her than he would ever know, thought Harry, sighing as she switched off the engine; but he was a well-meaning old boy who had known her father and didn't deserve to be ignored.

'You can't run off without thanking me!' he said, leaning down to give her a hairy kiss. 'Not only have I fixed it so you don't have to watch the old clubhouse falling down any more, but you're also, it seems, going to have the best restaurant in town right on your doorstep.'

'Not much use to me, I'm afraid,' said Harry. 'I'm not really the eating-out kind.'

'Ah, that's because you've had nowhere to go until now!' he beamed. 'I could just see you becoming one of those ladies who lunch.'

'Don't take up fortune-telling for a living, then, whatever you do, Eric.'

Eric looked sadly at Harry's van and Harry's clothes. 'Ah well, you always were a practical girl, weren't you? Now, I'm glad I've caught you because I'm a man down in the committee boat for the regatta next Sunday. My regular's gone in for bypass surgery. You're a fit young thing; you could stand a few hours with me making sure everything's fair and square, couldn't you?'

The blue eyes beseeched her from the ground cover of facial hair, like a faithful old mongrel waiting for its master. A few hours wouldn't kill her and she could always catch up at the boat yard in the evening.

Harry sighed. 'What time would you like me to be there?'

As *Bella Vista* gently rocked to a rhythm that had nothing to do with the tide, Lola Moulton sat on deck drinking her tea and thought about the prospect of pulling pints for most of the day.



It was better than thinking about her parents, just below her feet, starting the day with a bang. By now, she should have been so used to the morning ritual that she was beyond disgust; but it was like they'd just discovered sex and couldn't stop showing off about it. Perhaps that's what came of being such late starters. Her mother, after all, had been thirty-nine when she'd had Lola; but, even so, you'd think that after nineteen years they'd have had the grace to call it a day, instead of going at it hammer and tongs trying to make up for lost time. And her mother seemed to take such delight in pegging out her FF-cup basques and the thongs that must have been completely engulfed by the cheeks of her outsize bottom. All Lola could do was fervently hope that no one connected these shameful items in any way to her.

When the rocking of the houseboat slackened to a close, Lola was simply relieved that it wasn't an Old MacDonald's Farm morning: here a 'Royee!', there a 'Royee!', everywhere a 'Royeeeee!' A little later they would emerge, Carmen flushed and dozy and Roy beaming with pride that thirty-five years of winkle picking had ensured that his mighty whelk had never shrivelled.

Lola grimaced at the last of her tea swirling round her cup. And if all that wasn't bad enough, the real tragedy – one that she could hardly bear to face – was that she was doomed, apparently, to follow in her parents' footsteps. Already that rare creature, a nineteen-year-old virgin, if she took after her mother she would go without sex for another nineteen years; well, eighteen and a bit, she supposed, from the time of doing the deed. Almost her entire lifespan all over again! It wasn't that she hadn't had the opportunity, she reminded herself; she could have had sex on any number of occasions. She'd probably get a few offers today, at the regatta, once those crabby old yachtsmen, high on adrenaline from the racing,

crawled into the bar, convinced they were born-again studs. And if things didn't improve, then one terrible day she might take one of them up on it.

Perhaps that's what had happened to her mother? Perhaps she'd got so tired of waiting that, in the end, fat old Roy Moulton, with his greasy quiff and spivvy little moustache, had seemed – hard to believe it – almost attractive? Was that her fate too? Stuck in Little Spitmarsh until she finally did it with

—

Whoa! Wait a minute! Sauntering along the bank like he owned the place, all brooding arrogance and animal beauty, was a vision of sex in Levi's.

Almost bored by the predictable drop of masculine jaws when they first caught sight of her, Lola knew she didn't have to make the slightest bit of effort to be noticed. So she just sat and waited, pretending to be engrossed in deep, important thoughts whilst silently praying that her mother wouldn't come squawking up the companionway with an armful of underwear. With her eyes half closed, Lola heard the crunch of footsteps along the path and waited for the hesitant cough, the 'Lovely morning' with a not-too-subtle pause between the two words; or even the frequently purred and truly unoriginal 'Bella Vista!'

Nothing. Interesting. Keeping her gaze averted until she was sure his back was safely turned, Lola spun round to see where the first man to completely ignore her was heading. She could have howled with disappointment as he wandered towards the boat yard. No doubt he'd be back to his boat and off to sea without ever knowing what he'd missed. Then she saw him walk past the boat yard and down to the old yacht club building that now sported a 'sold' sign.

Lola smiled as the sun came out. Suddenly the day looked a lot brighter.

Reflecting that the regatta had very nearly been the death of her, Harry staggered into the relocated Spitmarsh Yacht Club, desperate for a pee; grateful, even with all the experience of a seasoned sailor, not to be bouncing around in the committee boat any more. But she was dreading coming face to face with the competitor who'd repeatedly tried to cross the starting line too early and who *she'd* had to disqualify – because Eric refused to do it on the grounds that 'He knows where I live!' She'd just have to hope that the man had calmed down a bit and was not as big as he appeared in his cockpit.

Having relieved her most pressing need, Harry realised she was trapped. Short of launching herself out of the fanlight in the Ladies, she had no alternative but to run the gauntlet of yacht club wives brandishing sausage rolls and vol-au-vents in the post-regatta spectacular that was the awards ceremony. Bracing herself for a gas attack of Trésor and face powder, Harry took full advantage of the rumpus caused by a smoke alarm going off in the kitchen to make for the bar.

'A pint of best bitter, please,' she asked, doing a double take as she recognised Lola Moulton behind the counter. With a figure that made Beyoncé look like an ironing board, glossy black hair and the proud, straight nose of an Egyptian princess, Carmen and Roy Moulton's beloved teenaged daughter must have rivalled Helen of Troy for launching ships. So many yachtsmen had unintentionally dropped their lines and lost control of their boats at the sight of her, that Harry was seriously thinking about getting all new nautical charts of Little Spitmarsh marked with a navigational warning.

Lola had done the occasional weekend stint at the old yacht club, but Harry hadn't expected her to move with the premises. In Little Spitmarsh, however, there was no such thing as a casual job, since they were all taken by the surplus of serious workers.

‘Make that two, please, and whatever you’re having.’

Lola Moulton was like a dangerous mountain with tremendous peaks and plenty of ice. Many men had tried to conquer her, but were always beaten back to base by the hostile environment. Now, as Lola returned the comment with a little flirty smile instead of her perpetual sulk, Harry didn’t need to look over her shoulder to see why.

‘I’ll get these, Harry,’ said Matthew.

Harry watched Matthew watching Lola. She wouldn’t have thought that, style-wise, there was a lot to choose between her own denim shorts and rugby shirt, chosen to suit the afternoon in the committee boat, and Lola’s jeans and white tee shirt. So it had to be the way Lola moved, like a couple of giant peaches in a silk body stocking, that made Harry feel like the invisible woman. She was about to pick up her beer and figure out a way to swim against the tide of men surging towards the bar, when Matthew did it for her.

‘Come with me.’

Harry had no choice; she was tired, she was thirsty, Matthew had hijacked her beer and the bar was heaving behind her. He led her to a table in the corner and made her sit down; then went off and came back with a paper plate laden with the yacht club ladies’ non-burnt offerings. He was a thorn in her side, but he had his uses.

‘Eat.’

Harry shrugged and picked up a drumstick.

‘You did a good job this afternoon. It’s not easy laying down the law when everyone’s pretending they can’t hear you. My brother and I used to do some dinghy racing when we were kids, so I know every trick in the book.’

And still did, she thought, peering inside a sandwich to check the filling, which was a lot easier than having to meet his sleepily sexy gaze.

‘I thought I might get out on the water again now I’m here. You know, buy myself a jet-ski, perhaps, or a little speedboat.’

Harry drew in her breath so sharply that she sucked in a crumb from the sausage roll poised at her mouth. Matthew waited for her to stop choking and handed her her beer.

‘Relax,’ he said, whilst she was still unable to speak. ‘I’m more of a windsurfing kind of guy. I’m not trying to add to your list of reasons to dislike me, but I knew you’d have me down as a flash boy racer and I was right.’

Matthew in a wetsuit? If she didn’t have sunstroke already, then conjuring up images of that lean, hard body wrapped up in rubber was definitely making her feverish. At least if he was on a jet-ski, he’d be moving so fast it wouldn’t disturb her for very long. ‘I can’t think of anything worse than engines tearing through the backwaters, scaring off the birds and churning up the marshes.’ She gulped, hoping he’d think the catch in her voice was down to the crumb.

‘And neither can I. Do you think I’d have accepted the invitation to be a guest of the yacht club today if I had such little respect for the place?’

The first part of the sentence had been fine, but any tentative goodwill towards him faded at the mention of the yacht club. Yes, the Matthew Corrigan approach to business had been very successful in that instance, hadn’t it? The club could afford to subsidise the bar for a good few months yet, thanks to the cheque he’d waved at them. No wonder he’d been invited along; the committee had probably fallen over themselves in the rush to make him their guest at the earliest opportunity. Harry glared at her sausage roll, wishing she could tell the committee how many sleepless nights she’d had. If the town was about to become a smart London outpost, that would fuel demand for holiday homes; and she’d come under

more and more pressure to let her land be concreted over ...

‘Depends what you mean by respect,’ she began, wondering if by sounding reasonable she could make him listen to her. ‘It’s true that most of the locals won’t see any harm in your restaurant idea. They’d probably agree that it’s better to restore an unused building than let it rot. But the locals aren’t the ones who’ll pay your bills, are they? And the kind of people you’re hoping to attract are not exactly going to be charmed with Little Spitmarsh as it is.’

Giving him time to digest her words, she rubbed a bruise she could feel appearing on her shin, most likely picked up during the regatta.

‘And this parcel of land you want to buy from me, it wouldn’t stop there, would it? The boat yard’s way beyond your potential customers’ idea of shabby chic. They won’t be happy until the peeling hulls, piles of scrap and the rest of the detritus that comes with a working boat-repair operation are replaced with a waterside shopping development and piazza. In the unlikely event of your scheme taking off, the town will be tidied up and smoothed over beyond recognition. So, no, I’m not sure your idea of respect for the place is the same as mine.’

Matthew slammed down his glass and looked at her impatiently. ‘D’you know what, Harry? Your image of Little Spitmarsh is beginning to resemble a holiday postcard that’s been in the sun too long. The place is crying out for a touch of local colour and, like most of the paintwork and a few other things around here, a lot of gloss.’

‘Oh, really?’ If he was trying to make her feel uncomfortable he could save his breath. As for the dreary downbeat pubs, the half-hearted takeaways and the sad shops full of other people’s clothes and furniture, they, like the muddy brown North Sea gnawing at the land, were what made

up the weary heart of the place she loved. 'So you want to turn it into a marine metropolis where your urban escapees can carry on shopping just like they do at home. Well, good luck! Whilst you're busily polishing up the town, mind you don't polish it off, won't you?'

'Thanks for the advice,' he said, getting to his feet. 'But there's no danger of that, I can assure you. I'm beginning to realise that there are some things you can't bring a sparkle to, no matter how hard you try.'

Lola wasn't one of them, thought Harry, noticing the other girl's expression as Matthew returned his empty glass to the bar. Ignoring all her other customers, Lola turned to Matthew to give him her undivided attention. Another of her rare smiles softened her strong features, making her look very beautiful and very young and making Harry feel like part of the furniture. As soon as Matthew sat down opposite Lola, she leaned across the bar to catch what he was saying – with a purposeful thrust of her breasts that momentarily stopped the disgruntled clamour of all the thirsty punters demanding to be served. Sheesh! Why should Matthew be any different from any other man in the bar? What made her suppose that he might have a bit more depth or might, perhaps, be capable of looking beyond the entirely superficial?

Lola blushed and nodded and wrote something down on a beer mat and handed it to Matthew. Harry strained her bitter through teeth gritted in disgust that Lola, who spurned men as a hobby, hadn't even put up a token show of resistance. But she took comfort from the thought that, judging by the faces round the bar, Matthew had just lost the battle to win the hearts and minds of over half the local population. And anything that made Matthew Corrigan's world domination of Little Spitmarsh seem less urgent had to be good. With some breathing space, she could look at her costs and maybe come

up with some offers which might entice penurious sailors back to the yard. There she'd encourage them to sand, grind, turn over engines and generally make all manner of noises and smells guaranteed to make the place deeply unattractive to anyone looking for a peaceful site for second homes.

So if Matthew wanted to chat up the barmaid it was fine by her. She would even prove how fine it was by being completely nonchalant as she passed him.

Harry drained her beer and stood up to leave. But, to her annoyance, Matthew had already left.



## *Chapter Four*

Mindlessly pushing stems into an oasis, Frankie was beginning to wonder how much more he could stand. He was bored with the pedestrian nature of his life, bored with the sheer predictability of his day and confident that he was capable of much greater achievements. The trouble was, Trevor was far too scared that taking a bold new approach to life might cost him the little he had of his past.

At the jangle of the shop bell, Phil shot up and launched into an unnecessarily full-throated bark. God, even the dogs were trying to find ways to break the monotony. Frankie looked up wearily. Or maybe they were just showing off? Perking up at the very welcome sight of Matthew Corrigan, he debated whether all that lean and rapacious virility might be what was really making Harry's dungarees flutter.

'What can I do for you?' Your Satanic Majesty, he added silently.

'The flowers I ordered from you.'

'Yes?'

'I just dropped by to say thanks.'

'You thought it was going to be all "Our Nan" funeral wreaths and wedding bouquets for small-town brides, didn't you?' Frankie guessed that Matthew had been guilty of casting a jaundiced eye over the business and forming his own conclusions about what standard to expect. 'The flowers hit the spot, then?'

Matthew scrolled through his phone. 'She says, "2L8".'

'Ah.' Well, that had blown it.

'Give me a good reason why you and your partner should deal with the flowers for the restaurant?'

‘How about long-term experience in corporate floristry?’

Frankie watched Matthew’s gaze drop to the violent salmon-pink and acid-yellow concoction of carnations he was working on. It was possibly not the best advert for his work. ‘Ghastly, isn’t it?’ Frankie grinned. ‘The proud grandparents ordered it and were most specific about the colours.’

He took down a large album from the shelf behind him and handed it over. Matthew started to flick through quickly, his pace slowing as he studied it with more care.

‘Trevor was already running a successful business when I met him. He’d done it the hard way, all on his own, taught himself the skills and knew the trade inside out.’ He paused and watched Matthew’s face. ‘So far so good. But there was a bit of a problem. All that work made Trev a dull boy, you see, or at least someone who hadn’t had very much play time. So when his friends started to settle down Trevor thought it was about time he did too; he acquired a wife and then a daughter and if his marriage wasn’t exactly setting the world alight ... well, Trevor just assumed that was how it was meant to be.’

Reaching for some fern fronds to fill up the arrangement, he carried on with his story. ‘It was only when his business was up and running that Trevor had time to face something about himself which refused to go away. The CV in his head, the one which read “Successful businessman, homeowner, husband, father”, didn’t quite match what he knew in his heart. Trevor was not only married to the wrong woman – he shouldn’t have been married at all. Then we met, and that’s when life really became tough.’

He paused to see if Matthew would react and, when he didn’t, carried on.

‘My aunt left this place to me, and it’s been the perfect bolt-hole for us. Somewhere Trevor’s been able to recover. Where people have left us alone and no one cares about the

past. But if I thought that five or ten years down the line I'd still be trying to stretch the cheapest possible combination of flowers into something that represents a lifetime of love for yet another penniless widow to place on her husband's coffin, I'd pack my bags. Except that would be a hell of a way to repay Trevor after everything he's done for me. So good luck to you and your restaurant. If it changes the face of Little Spitmarsh, I won't be shedding any tears.'

Matthew was distracted from wondering just what he'd signed up for when he noticed George, tucked in a doorway along from The Flowerpot Men. Harry's right-hand man was trying to keep a struggling Jack Russell, apparently desperate to get away, under his arm. Neither of them looked happy with the arrangement. George was typical of a certain breed: men who'd served their country, becoming displaced back in civilian life and rattling around until they'd found a refuge of sorts. They were the shadowy figures moving unnoticed around the perimeters of society, collecting glasses in pubs, washing up in small town B & Bs or, as in George's case, clearing up after other people; and all the time invisibly watching the happenings around them.

Matthew decided it was worth his while to see what George was up to. George was someone who knew an awful lot about Harry Watling; he'd be a useful person to cultivate on that basis alone. But, he wondered, how much did Harry know about George? If George was engaged in some clandestine activity, a spot of dog-napping for example, how far would he go to prevent Harry from getting to hear about it? The older man clamped a horny hand gently but firmly round the little dog's muzzle as she let out a series of excited little yelps, and Matthew waited to see what would happen next.

For a dog-napper George didn't seem to be in any hurry to

get away, but stood rooted to the spot staring at the desultory bouquets in front of the shop. At last Frankie appeared in the doorway and took a swift, moody glance up and down the street before bending to pick up a bucket. Another bout of wriggling from the Jack Russell seemed to remind George of her presence. As Frankie righted himself and went back inside, George, to Matthew's surprise, practically threw the dog in after him. Cue an outburst from Frankie that the next time she tripped him up like that he'd have her fucking guts for garters.

George nodded to himself. And Matthew decided to find out what was going on.

'Afternoon, George. Didn't you want that dog any more?'

George's lip curled. 'Wassit got to do with you?'

Matthew took a bet that, like a tired old bulldog, George's bark was worse than his bite. 'Nothing whatsoever. My apologies. You carry on throwing little dogs around whenever you want to.'

George growled. 'Good at poking yer nose in other folks' business, ain't yer?'

'I'm good at scenting trouble,' Matthew agreed, ignoring the black look George shot at him. 'It's a useful tool in my trade. Do those boys know what you've been doing with their dog?'

'Ain't me they've got to worry about,' George said, with a hint of a smile. 'But they might not be too chuffed with that little madam when they find out that the local mongrel's been courting her. Found her sleeping it off in my old chair, I did. Still, I gave her a biscuit to keep her strength up before I brought her home.'

Matthew nodded his approval, sensing in George a craving for some comradely male company. 'Very considerate. But then I expect you've done a bit of courting in your time.'

‘I’ve had the pleasure of meeting a few ladies,’ George allowed. ‘Tell you a few stories to make your hair curl, an’ all.’

‘Really?’ Matthew looked at his watch. ‘It’s about that time. Care to join me for a drink?’

George shifted uneasily. ‘Ah well, I don’t know about that. Miss Harriet, you see, she don’t really like me drinking.’

Matthew’s eyebrows rose steeply. ‘Surely you’re not worried about what Harry Watling does or doesn’t like, are you?’

‘Now let’s get one thing straight, young fellow,’ George said, waving a hefty mitt at the boat yard. ‘There’s been one person, rain or shine, night or day, keeping that place going and it ain’t been me, that’s for sure, no sir.’

Matthew quickly revised his tactics. ‘Okay, so she’s a hard worker. It doesn’t mean to say that you don’t have the right to take a break,’ he shrugged.

George glared at him. ‘That’s all you city types worry about, ain’t it? Yer so-called rights. Rights is all very fine if someone else up the ladder is paying for them. Never mind rights, it’s responsibilities what counts round ’ere. When old Harry passed away it damned near broke that girl’s heart. Miss Harriet’s mother took it bad, too. Couldn’t stay there without him. So it was Miss Harriet who took on the responsibility of running the boat yard. Put all her waking moments, and some sleeping ones too, into turning the place round.’

‘Sounds as if Harry’s had a tough time.’ Matthew decided to probe a bit deeper. ‘It can’t have been easy for her to get this far. Family businesses can get into considerable difficulties if they lose their driving force. The big personality, say, who keeps the place together, gives it a foundation. Once that’s gone customers start to get uneasy, they feel insecure

and drift away. Small debts accrue and turn into large ones, and before you know it you've got creditors coming at you from all directions.'

George looked pensive. 'I did what I could, of course,' he went on. 'But only one person had the heart to make Watling's what it is today and that's Miss Harriet.' He stepped closer. 'So if you're asking me if I worry about what Miss Harriet does or doesn't like then, yes sir, it's my great honour to do just that. And if you and me, young fellow, are going to rub along then you better remember that or else don't show your face round here no more. Right?'

'Right.' If Harry had a weak spot it wasn't George; he would clearly defend her to the hilt. And yet the old man's gaze was troubled as it travelled towards the boat yard. George was a man with too many burdens. Sooner or later, Matthew would lighten them.

Sometimes, thought Frankie, angrily pushing the Hoover round the spare room after a long, tense afternoon, it was hard to read Trevor. Anyone else would have been marking the biggest opportunity to come their way for years. They'd always closed early on Wednesday, supposedly to make up for being rushed off their feet on Saturday – although in truth they could stay closed half the bloody week for all the difference it made – and they ought to have been celebrating. Instead of the frivolous afternoon he'd been anticipating, it was business as usual with Trevor downstairs moodily starting the dinner – leaving him to do what? More housework?

What the bloody hell was Trevor doing anyway?

'When's dinner?' he bellowed. 'I'm starving to death up here.'

No reply. Maybe the silly fool had got the wrong end of the stick and forgotten he was the one who was supposed to be

cooking? Frankie unplugged the Hoover and huffed downstairs, ready to give Trevor a piece of his mind.

Trevor was flopped out on the sofa, distractedly tickling Kirstie's ears whilst Phil surveyed them jealously from the floor. One spoilt bitch had been quite enough, but since he'd had the chop Phil had taken to sulking nearly as much as Kirstie.

The sitting room had been designed with muted earthy colours and plain natural materials to create a tranquil space with a sense of inner calm; but the only face Frankie could see that wore anything like a beatific expression was Kirstie's. Even that was ruined by the smug sideways glances she kept shooting at Phil.

'Trevor?'

Trevor ran his large hand over the little dog's back. 'I just keep wondering what Sophie would think of me?'

'You what?'

Kirstie went pop-eyed as Trevor's hand applied extra pressure to the downward stroke of her coat. 'Frankie, what happens if this restaurant takes off? What happens if the press cover it? Have you thought about that? What are we going to do once there are photographers swarming all over the place or some bloody commissioning editor from Channel 4 wants to do a piece about it?'

Frankie flopped down next to Trevor and picked up the glass of wine he'd poured himself as an incentive to get through the chores. 'Come on, Trevor. I mean – as if?'

'You know what it means though, don't you? That'll be it, won't it? She'd never let me see Sophie again.'

Kirstie slid off Trevor's lap before her head was crushed, while Frankie tried to curb his resentment. The prospect of fun had turned into the one topic that would send them spinning in endless circles.

‘Then seize the bloody initiative, Trev! Get Jane out of the driving seat. Sophie’s not a kid any more – she’s eleven now. It’s about bloody time you told her the full story and stopped conveniently pretending I don’t exist.’ For a moment Frankie was carried away by the thought of how it could be: arranging Sophie’s favourite flowers in the spare room for her when she came to stay; counting out all the spare change he threw in a drawer, so they could feed the slot machines in the arcade; buying bacon and eggs made of seaside rock for them to put on Trevor’s plate at breakfast time. Yeah, it could be good. Imagine being a family man! He looked at Trevor, waiting to see if any of the excitement he was feeling was reflected back at him. As he met Trevor’s eyes, the small tide of happiness surfing up his sunny beach was sucked back and surged forth in a bitter flood of resentment and disappointment.

‘You do it your way then, Trev, and when you decide the time’s right you’d just better hope that I’m still around.’

Back at his rented cottage, a lot later than planned, Matthew began to wonder what had happened to his business sense. Commissioning a couple of florists whose word was the only testimony to their skill, and hiring a lovely, sullen, big-bottomed girl who appeared to have an NVQ in rudeness was not where most managers would start. Although he had to admit that the contempt with which Lola treated her customers seemed to create a fair amount of erotic charge; which was more than could be said for Harry Watling, who was a pain in the arse whichever way you looked at it. She didn’t want money, she despised flattery and she all but refused to give him the time of day. Oh, Ms Watling certainly thought she’d got the upper hand all right.

The girl in the estate agent’s hadn’t done badly out of him either, although she’d been so taken aback that he could afford



the rent on Sea Shanty that she'd left out some essential information. Such as – only people who didn't have to live there all the time were daft enough to put up with the tiny bedrooms; and the dining room was so small that, once you'd taken your place at the table, you thought twice about getting up to go to the loo.

Ducking to avoid hitting his head on the low doorway, Matthew wandered from the adjoining bathroom into the so-called master bedroom. From here, he'd discovered, he could see out across the long grass of the meadow behind the cottage to a strip of stone-grey water where the boat masts speared the dove band of sky. Float with the tide back towards the land and you'd come to the old yacht club and, beyond that, the boat yard. Matthew thought about the dark waves licking the slipway at the foot of the converted boathouse where, he now knew, Harry lived. George, he'd discovered, liked to talk, especially once Matthew had adapted his approach to suggest that his interest in Harry was purely altruistic. Like a proud parent, the old boy had been unable to resist boasting about Harry's achievements, her renovation skills being amongst them. 'Right shipshape it is an' all!' was his judgement of the boathouse.

Matthew considered it further. Envious location, double front doors, sliding glass panels leading to a sun deck off the first floor, probably the main bedroom, with unparalleled views across the water. Nice house. Although George had remained guarded about the exact state of the yard, there'd been plenty of nautical metaphors and hints about bad weather. It all suggested that if Harry didn't look around to see what was happening she was certainly going to catch a storm. Matthew didn't think it would be very long before he wandered over to the boat yard to have another concerned chat with George. Very nice house, he thought, feeling more

cheerful. He might even buy it himself when, inevitably, Harry was forced to sell.

It would have been good to ring Gina to tell her that the development was working out, despite her predictions. She was a hard habit to break; the relationship had reached a stage where it wasn't doing either of them any favours. There had been rows, silences, infidelities and intense, claustrophobic reunions – all of which only seemed to fuel their mutual addiction.

In the fading light he felt for his phone again and scrolled through until he came to the photo Gina had sent him; there she was at another nightclub, dark eyes smouldering directly at the camera, dark hair swinging against her cheeks. In one hand was a bottle of Bud; the other rested possessively on the shoulder of the DJ who, even on a screen this size, had a style and presence that shone out through the pixels.

Wdnt u like 2 no who this is?

No, thought Matthew, pressing delete. Not really, Gina.

## *Chapter Five*

Harry rubbed her eyes. The figures on her screen didn't look good, but they'd be a lot better if she could only get her clients to pay their bills on time. Was this the shape of her future? Forever hunched over a spreadsheet trying to make the sums add up? Closing the program down, she squashed the faint stirrings of fear uncoiling inside her. What if she couldn't stop the steady trickle of cash leaking out of the system? What if people got to know about her financial problems? What if they started to whisper that maybe Harry Watling didn't have what it took to take over from her father? What if she had no choice but to sell off land to pay her debts?

Leaning back to stretch her stiff neck, Harry stared at the ceiling; but her mind stayed as blank as the smooth white surface. Everyone had cash flow problems from time to time; her dad had certainly had his fair share. Getting up, she walked across the room to slide back the glass doors, stepped out onto her terrace and breathed in the fresh night air, seeking reassurance from her realm. Yet across the water, silhouetted against a clear, deep-blue sky, the old clubhouse was changing daily; from its worn, sloughed-off skin, the glistening carapace of something beautiful and sinister was emerging.

And now something with an equally tough shell – but a lot less beautiful – had also crept out from his shed, where he'd been sulking, to poke about in the last of the light. Harry watched George beetling along the pontoons, tugging on mooring lines, which she would undoubtedly have to double-check later, and realigning perfectly well-placed fenders. He walked away from one boat and Harry counted up to six before a rope mysteriously untied itself and a fender plopped

into the water. Sometimes she thought she only kept him on because it was what her father would have wanted. Harry sighed and got up to find a jacket. Flaming June it certainly wasn't, especially at this time of the evening.

George found her fishing in the water with a boat hook. 'Blow me. That was safe as houses just now – had it tidied up proper.' He stepped back as a wet fender landed at his feet. 'Still, at least you found it. Wouldn't do to have to replace it.'

'You're not wrong there,' said Harry, drying her hands on the legs of her dungarees as she stood up. 'Mind you, if a few people don't start settling up soon I might have to put some of their kit in safe keeping until they do.'

George cocked an eyebrow at her. 'Trouble?'

Harry shrugged. 'You know what it's like sometimes.' She didn't even sound convincing to herself, let alone George. 'Gets a bit tight when none of them can find their wallets.'

George shuffled on the pontoon, which let out a groan. Harry bent down and let out a curse. 'Someone saw me coming when I bought that last batch of timber. Look at this,' she said, pointing to a split in the wood. 'If I fix this tomorrow, will you have a look around and see if any of the other planks have gone? The last thing we need now is someone breaking their ankle and suing me.'

'Pah!' said George, frightening a few roosting birds. 'No one round here would do that. They can't afford the solicitor's fees in the first place.'

Harry frowned up at him. 'They can't, George, but if Matthew Corrigan gets his way there'll be a few up here who can. All it will take is for some spoilt wife to trip up and break a fingernail whilst getting her five-minute fix of the real Little Spitmarsh, and we'll be out of business.'

George hurrumphed to himself. 'You're not getting this out of proportion are you, Miss Harriet? Anyone would think the

Prince of Darkness 'ad fetched up at yer doorstep. Matthew Corrigan's only flesh and blood, you know.'

Harry tried not to let herself get distracted by the thought of Matthew's flesh. She turned to the old man who had been part of her life for so long, and smiled. 'You're probably right, George. I guess I'm just feeling the strain. It's one thing to hear there's going to be a trendy eating place on your doorstep and another to watch it happen.'

'Ain't there yet, Miss Harriet,' said George kindly. 'We can all dream big. Doesn't mean to say that it's going to come true. There's a lot of money being spent tarting that old place up, but they've still got to fill it when it's done, eh?'

Harry nodded and remembered all the times when George had been there for her, handling all problems with equanimity; from scraped knees when she was a little girl, to letting her sob unashamedly when she missed her dad. Except for the odd awkward pat on the back, there was nothing demonstrative about their relationship; no hugs or kisses, no sense in any way that George had ever tried to fill her father's shoes. Just his simple constant presence, the one continuous thread in her life.

'George,' she said, clearing her throat, 'when you're checking the pontoons tomorrow, if you come across any of the owners will you have a quiet word and see if you can get some of them to pay up?'

She heard him sigh. 'Can do, Miss Harriet. Can do. But we've got to start thinking about the future. A few bob here and there isn't going to make all that much difference, is it? We need to get in owners who can pay. And we need to put the prices up too; they've been dirt cheap for too long. The thing is,' he continued, 'if you carry on like this, you won't need to worry about someone else putting you out of business. At this rate you'll do it for yourself.'

Hmm, thought Harry. That was the other thing she remembered about George; years of him always thinking he knew best. Most of the time it took the form of one of his own peculiar pearls of wisdom: ‘Any fool can walk into trouble, Miss Harriet. Takes a wise man to know when to steer clear’; or ‘Better a sea cow you know than one you don’t’ – whatever that meant. Occasionally it took the form of a short sharp dressing-down – like the time he’d caught wind of a brief fling she’d had with one of the few eligible yachtsmen to fetch up at Watling’s: ‘Ain’t proper, Miss Harriet. That’s all I’m saying.’ This, delivered with a face like thunder, had certainly made her toes curl. But once in a blue moon, and especially in the old days when he used to drink, George could really get up on his hind legs and feel he had the right to lecture her.

‘It’s just a temporary problem, George,’ she told him, hoping that the exasperation in her voice would shut him up.

‘So why ’ave you got me crawling round perfectly good pontoons in case someone sues?’ he retorted, coming back for more.

‘Health and safety, apart from anything else.’ She folded her arms, although he probably couldn’t see in the dark. ‘And, as I said, I think that last batch of timber may have been faulty.’

‘Nature is responsible for lengthwise cracks and Man is to blame for transverse and like much of Man’s mistakes they’ll be harmful in the end. Them cracks is lengthwise, Miss Harriet, so nothing to fret about.’

That was another thing about George; he could be very smug. ‘Remind me of that, George, when you fall through one. In the meantime I’d be very grateful if you could just do what I ask.’

‘What I’m told, you mean,’ he grumbled. ‘It’s all right, Miss Harriet, I know my place. Well, I best get some kip.

Looks as if I'll be crawling around on my hands and knees tomorrow. Ain't easy at my age, but if those are my orders I know better than to question them.'

'Yes, and if you squeeze any money out of anyone I'll even be able to pay you!'

George pulled up the collar of his ancient woollen coat, the one that was so redolent with the smell of him that Harry felt he was still in the room on the rare occasions he took it off. 'Pay as well, Miss Harriet?' he sniffed. 'There was me thinking that I was working my fingers to the bone for the honour of serving the Watling family.'

Harry watched him wander off and suddenly felt very lonely. Perhaps she did expect too much of him? Despite his occasional grumbles, George was in extraordinarily good health for someone who'd been torpedoed in the war, had drunk like a fish for many years afterwards and still believed that smoking cleared his lungs. Perhaps it was time he had an easier life?

She felt really guilty about him by the time she returned to her boathouse. Her bedroom was usually a safe haven where she didn't have to keep up the tough, capable face she wore at work. The cream-painted wrought-iron Victorian bedstead had refused to be ignored when she'd spotted it in one of Little Spitmarsh's junk shops; she'd sneaked it home before anyone could laugh and wonder what Harry Watling was doing with something so unashamedly romantic and feminine. Now, with its goose-down quilt and the best bed linen she could afford, it was the place where she could dream or cry and not have to pretend to be the toughest girl in the class.

The trouble was that her safe haven didn't feel quite as secure as it used to. Plenty of hard physical work and an unwavering confidence in her own abilities had once meant that nothing woke her up, except her own sixth sense tuning

into a change for the worse in the weather or a potential problem in the yard. But, increasingly, doubts and anxieties were crowding in on her. Tonight she was worried that George's years of self-destruction would suddenly catch up with him. He was all she had and, if anything happened to him, it would be her fault for not making enough money for him to retire in comfort. Not that his caravan was her idea of comfort; but God knows how many times she'd offered him better accommodation and he'd turned it down with a protest of 'All I need is a dry bed and a tight deckhead, Miss Harriet.' Stubborn old bugger.

Eventually Harry gave up trying to sleep and reached for the photo she kept on the pale-blue painted cabinet beside her. With his shaggy, sun-bleached surfer hair, blue eyes crinkling in the light, her dad seemed forever young. A big man, there were many ways in which Harry Watling senior had acted up to his larger-than-life image. Yet there was a quieter side to his personality. He read widely, and especially loved travel stories and poetry; and he was fascinated by Far Eastern culture, from his days skippering charter trips in the Indian Ocean. It would have surprised anyone only familiar with the man who, perhaps with precognition, lived each day as if it were his last.

A fleeting sensation came to her mind, of being swept off her feet and onto her father's shoulders. The giddy excitement of being held high, the sound of her mother's protests fading away, wind in her face and fear making her breathless as her father picked up speed. That reckless enthusiasm for life might have clouded his judgement about priorities at times; and certainly the size of his debts had been unexpected and worrying. But Harry was quite sure that everything would have been repaid if only he hadn't died so tragically young. Leaving his wife and child with such a financial burden had



surely been unintentional. In her memory her father had never worried much about tomorrow. Harry hadn't inherited his confidence, but she had inherited his boat yard and, unless she found new customers to keep it afloat, she would lose the little she had left of him.

Unlike his shed, which was his daytime retreat and filled with the detritus of his everyday life, George's caravan huddled by the waterside and was shipshape to the point of austerity. He'd had plenty of time to discover what was really important and it wasn't possessions. Leaving his coat and boots by the door, George poured himself a glass of water and crossed the dimly lit room to prepare for bed. His body ached, but his head was full of the past.

George rubbed his hand across his face as if to wipe away the memories. He buttoned his pyjama jacket and tried to concentrate on what mattered. He loved Miss Harriet, just as he'd loved the man who'd brought her into the world, however flawed he'd been. He'd already done more than she would ever know to protect the girl, but these days he was beginning to feel his age. He couldn't just stand there and watch her let everything she had worked so hard for slide away from her; but he was too worn out to take her on. If only she could see that Matthew Corrigan might – and even George felt it was a long shot – just provide the lifeblood that would reinvigorate the boat yard again.

George turned out his light and rested his head. Tomorrow he'd check the pontoons and maybe he'd have a word if he saw any of the owners. Although in his opinion the ones who were left, the ones who hadn't buggered off to the marina, were not worth having anyway. His last thought, before he nodded off, was that in some ways it wouldn't do any harm if they all slung their hooks; then Miss Harriet would have no

option but to cast her net wider, would she?

For someone who still behaved like an adolescent boy, thought Trevor, staring up at the ceiling of their bedroom, Frankie wasn't completely selfish; he seemed to have been persuaded that they were better off out of the limelight, whatever happened at the restaurant.

Frankie was naïve to expect that Trevor's relationship with his daughter would continue if Sophie was allowed to know the truth about them. His ex-wife might have remarried, but she was as poisonous now as the day she had evicted him from the marital home, jealously guarding Sophie, malignant as a virus, always threatening to infect his fragile relationship with his daughter. If Frankie thought a contact order could protect them, he'd underestimated Jane's ability to thwart the law. Trevor had regularly turned up at her house to find that Sophie was mysteriously ill or had a pressing appointment within the hour. The only answer, as far as preserving his relationship with his daughter was concerned, was to keep apart the two people he loved most, however much it disappointed Frankie.

Sensing a gap in the door just wide enough for her to work on, Kirstie came bustling in, sniffing the air suspiciously. Miffed that she had been excluded from the fun, she jumped up on the bed and curled into Trevor. She knew he was a softer touch than Frankie who, for once, seemed disinclined to shout at her. Trevor ran an idle hand over her, setting her quivering as he tickled her tummy. Suddenly his fingers encountered a swelling and he sat up to inspect his discovery.

'Oh look, Frankie, what's that?'

Frankie took a quick squint. 'It's a nipple, you fool.'

'Yes, I know,' he said, pinning a protesting Kirstie down. 'But why does it look like that?'

Frankie dumped the towel he was bearing on the floor. 'Like what?'

Trevor pointed. 'Isn't it a bit, you know, pinker than usual?'

'How the hell should I know?' Frankie scowled and threw himself down beside Trevor.

'Well, perhaps you should find out.' Trevor dropped Kirstie on Frankie's lap. 'Perhaps you should take her to the vet's.'

'Absolutely not, Trevor,' said Frankie, handing her back. 'You're the one who wants to know.'

Since the frolics were clearly over, Kirstie dropped to the floor and started worrying Trevor's pants.

'All I can say is, thank goodness we haven't got kids,' said Trevor, shooing her off. 'I can see who'd always be the one getting up in the night.' As he headed for the shower he caught sight of Frankie's stricken face in the mirror. A bit of him wondered if Frankie just made noises about being a surrogate stepdad to Sophie because he knew it would never happen; but perhaps even Frankie yearned for someone else to take care of? Trevor groaned. After Frankie had respected his need to be discreet about the restaurant, he'd rubbed him up the wrong way over a dog.

'I'm sorry,' he said, returning to the bed and putting his arm round Frankie's shoulder. 'That was unfair of me. Tell you what, I'll ring the vet's to make amends.'

Frankie smiled. 'Well, that would be a start.'

Kirstie glanced up but couldn't raise the energy to make a further nuisance of herself. Perhaps a Doggy Choc had disagreed with her, because she really was beginning to feel quite unwell.

## *Chapter Six*

‘Harr-ee!’

Seeing Trevor waving frantically from the other side of the road, Harry resisted her first impulse, which was to pretend she hadn’t seen him. Since he was wearing a pink floral shirt opened halfway down his hairy chest, she had to admit that this would be a difficult claim to pull off. Reluctantly, she waited whilst he crossed over, wondering if she would be able to hide her disappointment from him. She hadn’t quite forgiven Frankie for making a business proposition to Matthew right under her nose – and straight after she’d expressed her own disapproval of the man.

‘You don’t look very happy, what’s the matter?’

‘I’m fine!’ Harry lied. After another tense morning trying to negotiate more time to pay her bills and cheaper prices from her suppliers, she had walked into town to clear her head. The fact that there was nothing in the deal for the suppliers considerably reduced her bargaining power. For a little while she’d even considered sobbing down the phone, but since she’d always been proud to run with the big boys it was an underhand tactic and certainly not one her dad would have respected.

Still, there was no point in depressing Trevor, who was prone to being a bit morose himself. Since he had to put up with Frankie, that was understandable. As much as she liked Frankie, who could be both charming and bitchily amusing, no one would ever describe him as a rock of support. But at least she only had to worry about Frankie’s business propositions; unlike Trevor, who had to live with him.

‘You know, Harry, it’s never too early to think about a little

Botox here and there,' he beamed at her. 'It'll just freshen you up a bit and stop you looking quite so down in the mouth.'

Smiling through gritted teeth, Harry thought it best to change the subject. Kirstie was cradled in Trevor's arms, looking like the cat who'd got the cream or whatever it was that spoiled dogs got. 'What's up with Madam? Is she too grand to walk anywhere?' Now that she looked closer at Kirstie, the lack of exercise was definitely showing. 'Gosh, Trev, you are going to have to be careful about doggy obesity. She's getting positively porky!'

Two sets of accusing eyes turned on her. That's for the Botox dig, Harry thought, her face a picture of innocence.

'Well!' Trevor confided, clearly so desperate to tell her something that he was prepared to overlook any slight to his pride and joy. 'I've only just come out of the vet's and I really should wait to tell Frankie, but all I'll say is that it's not fat.'

'Congratulations!' Harry said uncertainly. 'When's the happy event?'

'Not a word,' said Trevor, raising a finger to his mouth. 'My lips are sealed.' He looked at her closely. 'I know you'd prefer us not to have accepted the contract to do the flowers for Matthew Corrigan's restaurant, Harry, but business is business. I'm not sure how happy I am about the whole thing either. I mean, we've lived very quietly here. But Frankie needs this. He's desperate for a new challenge and I don't think I can hold him back. It wouldn't be good for us.'

Harry eyed Kirstie who smirked at her. 'One way or another Frankie's going to have his hands full. So, you didn't get round to taking Phil for his little operation, then?'

'Oh, we did, poor thing, and he was quite grumpy about it –

Harry watched as Trevor stopped tickling Kirstie's ears. He looked at Kirstie who looked back, innocently. 'Oh!' he said,

looking shocked. 'Who's the daddy?'

But when Harry arrived back at the yard, she soon stopped smiling. George had dragged a couple of old deckchairs from his shed, and he and Matthew were sitting in the sun drinking tea, like an old married couple in front of a beach hut watching the world go by.

'Come and join us,' Matthew invited, waving a biscuit from George's tin which was perched on a box between them. Judging from its depleted condition, he'd enjoyed unrestricted access.

'You may have plans to turn this place into a holiday camp, Matthew, but unfortunately for you I'm still in charge here,' Harry said, folding her arms.

Matthew and George looked up at her resentfully, like two small boys who had just had the remote control snatched away during the big match. Neither of them seemed keen to get on with what they were supposed to be doing. George made a show of mutiny by raising his mug and taking a conspicuously leisurely sip.

'If you've finished the pontoons, George, I'd be grateful if you could clean the shelves in the stores. Some of those tins are so dusty I'm in danger of painting more dirt on than I've taken off.' She ignored the huffing and puffing, the ponderous wiping of his lips and the exaggerated effort it took to get off his backside. She was just thinking what a good job she'd made of exerting her authority, when George turned to her.

'Message from Ted Butler.'

'Yes?' Harry said, waiting to hear that Ted, one of her long-term owners, had discovered his wallet at last.

'E's packing up. Says 'e can't afford it no more. Wants the boat out the water as soon as yer like, so he can put it on the market.'

Bum! Ted might not have been one of her most prompt

payers, but he was one of her regulars. Harry watched George shuffle off and wished he'd waited until Matthew was out of the way before dropping that particular titbit into the conversation.

'And don't 'old yer breath, but there's a couple of fools looking over *Lapwing*,' he added as he sloped off.

*Lapwing* was, or at least had been, beautiful. Her elderly owner, Ian, had been too busy caring for his sick wife to spare much time for the boat; and, since *Lapwing* was on the point of needing major remedial work, Ian had reluctantly decided to let her go. Harry only hoped that the couple being shown over the boat by Ian's son, David, hadn't heard George's parting shot.

'Give the poor old sod a break,' said Matthew, as if he'd been reading her thoughts. 'He works hard enough for you. He was telling me how he was torpedoed twice in the war – he's lucky to be alive.'

Very lucky, Harry privately agreed – and, depending on what other tales he'd been spinning, even luckier if he managed to survive another day. 'Oh, George has plenty of stories, he'll talk all day if you let him – and he gets a decent salary for the privilege.' Because Matthew was still seated in the deckchair Harry, for once, had a height advantage. She raised an eyebrow at him. 'Something you wanted?'

Matthew looked up at her and she couldn't help noticing that his hazel eyes were flecked with green in the light.

'What's going to happen to George if you keep losing your regular customers? He's never going to get another job at his age, is he?'

Matthew also, she remembered, had a wonderful habit of reminding her where his real interest lay. Just in case she got too comfortable. 'Oh dear! Is there no place for George in your plans? No niche job to keep him occupied? I know –

perhaps you can set him up in one of your luxury apartments, I'm sure the other residents will love him!'

She leaned over him to press the point home. 'Nice try, Matthew, but this is my business and George is my employee, so I'd be very grateful if you would just butt out and let me get on with it.'

Leaving him sprawled in the deckchair, she shot over to *Lapwing*. The prospective buyers were, she guessed, in their early forties; she with wavy, chin-length brown hair, his grey and slightly receding. They looked fit and well with, from what Harry could see, a full set of working knees and hips apiece to equip them for a good few years' sailing; and, judging by their expensive casuals, enough spare money to afford it. In short, they looked like just the kind of owners she was looking for. Since David could be a bit limp, Harry had no hesitation in muscling in.

'Have you come far?' she asked, once David had got the introductions out of the way.

The woman pulled a face. 'Surrey. It was a bit of a trek on the motorway.'

'But worth it when you got here, I hope,' Harry beamed, crossing her fingers that she sounded convincing. 'It's very peaceful. Just the place to recharge your batteries.'

They seemed to like what they were hearing; their faces brightened as they visualised tranquil weekends pottering round the backwaters.

'And *Lapwing*'s got so much character,' she added for good measure.

Oops. That had raised a concern. 'She is lovely,' agreed the man, 'but we were just saying to David here, she does need a lot of work and, frankly, after a three-hour drive the last thing I'd want to do is get my hands dirty.'

Lazy beast, thought Harry. Perfect. 'Oh, quite,' she agreed.



‘But you could always consider having the work done here. Watling’s has a long-standing reputation for offering a complete service whether you’re ashore or afloat. I’d be more than happy to give you a quote for all or some of the work, and you’ll certainly find our rates are a lot more reasonable than on the south coast. And, of course, the sooner you get the work done, the sooner you’ll be out on the water. There are some really lovely places to explore.’

‘And a brilliant new restaurant opening this summer,’ said a voice beside her. Despite her best effort with a look that would have felled most people, Matthew was still standing.

Large as life – and how she wished she could say twice as ugly; but his particular brand of beauty, all that tousled hair and fallen-angel charm, still gave her a jolt every time. If bystanders were caught by the sparks flying between them, one look at their body language would prove that the electricity wasn’t generated by sexual chemistry. Certainly not on his part, anyway.

‘Why don’t we just leave these people to concentrate on what they came all this way to see?’ she said, trying to sound pleasant. She turned to the couple. ‘You carry on looking at *Lapwing* and, if you decide to go ahead and want a quote, just let me know.’

‘And if you’d like to come to the opening night at Samphire, let *me* know,’ Matthew smiled, handing them a card.

What a chancer! Samphire indeed! The place was barely out of the ground and it already had a name. He didn’t miss a trick, did he? Harry ignored him and stomped off to do some sanding and take her anger and embarrassment out on nineteen layers of old paint clogging up a hull. After several minutes she became aware that someone was watching her; she hoped for the sake of her future liberty that it was George.

No, it was Matthew, still looking lean and lovely; but armed, she must never forget, with a ruthless business mind. He mouthed something at her and she guessed it probably wasn't 'Darling, you look so attractive like that.'

'What?' she snarled, putting down her sander before it attracted unflattering comparisons with the Texas Chainsaw Massacre, and snatching off her ear defenders. To make absolutely sure he could hear her, she also pulled her mask down round her neck. 'Look, what do you want? Because I'm busy.'

It wasn't an invitation to start up a conversation, but Matthew seemed to take it as one.

'Harry, will you stop cutting off your nose to spite your face and listen to me a minute?' he told her, in that low, sure voice. 'There's a lot at stake for both of us here. Why don't you wait until the restaurant's up and running before you make a judgement?'

Harry wiped the back of her hand across her forehead, then realised that she'd probably smeared herself in blue paint dust. Didn't the ancient Britons use blue dye to scare off the Romans? Harry sighed. It hadn't worked for them and it didn't look as if it was going to work for her either; Matthew was still determined to persuade her that she was going to like what he was doing.

'And in the meantime I'm supposed to ignore all the disruption during the refurbishment, am I? All the banging and crashing, the white vans coming and going and the builders' radios blasting out across Campion's Creek where there used to be perfect peace?' she said, conveniently ignoring all the banging and crashing she created at the boat yard. 'I like living here because it's so quiet and I'm not surrounded by people. I was never going to be thrilled to bits at the prospect of having a busy eating place right on my

doorstep with Hoorays braying and slamming car doors into the small hours. It'll disturb the wildlife and it won't do much for me; with the kind of hours I work, it's important for me to get some rest when I can.'

'Yes, you're always on the go,' Matthew said, stepping closer. 'In fact, you never keep still; caulking decks, trimming sails, stripping paint. No wonder there's so little of you.'

'That's the nature of my work, and there's plenty of it. So if you've seen enough for one day, perhaps you'd let me get on with it?' She untangled her goggles from the face mask hanging round her neck and hoped he would take this a sign to leave; they were always going to disagree about the restaurant, so there was no point in prolonging the conversation.

Matthew didn't take the hint. 'I've checked up on your rates, and if you keep offering those prices you'll always be busy – but where's it going to get you? I like the way you pitched your service to that couple, but you've got to be realistic. You're running yourself into the ground trying to make a living and George isn't getting any younger.'

George? Why did he keep going on about George? Oh, so George had been blabbing, had he? Well, she'd deal with him later. In the meantime she had Mr Caring-and-Concerned to contend with. Matthew, still standing too close, was doing such a good job of maintaining his air of sincerity that Harry went along with it for a moment. She even imagined what it would be like to lean against his solid chest and let him hold her in his arms whilst he promised to take care of her. She was almost beginning to like the thought when Matthew ruined it by speaking.

'You told me once that you kept the boat yard going in memory of your father,' he said softly. 'Would he be happy to see you like this, Harry? Do you think he'd want to see you working yourself to a shadow, your brow always furrowed

with worry?’

‘You’ve got a nerve,’ she said, pulling up her goggles. ‘You come sniffing round, poking your nose in where you’re not wanted and then have the audacity to tell me what my father would have wanted. Well, since you’re such an expert on my father you’ll know what he always said: “Keep fighting, Harry, especially when you’re in a corner. Come out fighting or go down.” And I can tell you, I’ve no intention of going down.’

Matthew looked at her sadly. ‘That was a hell of a legacy to leave a little girl. No wonder you’re still taking on the whole world.’

Harry was glad she’d donned her goggles; her anger could so easily spill over into tears. ‘Free psychoanalysis, too,’ she nodded. ‘However did we manage without you?’

Matthew raised his hands. ‘All right, I’m done. One day even you’ll be tired of feeling your back against the wall, but it won’t stop me giving you a fair price when you finally come to your senses and realise that you’re sitting on an asset which could make your life so much easier.’

‘Listen,’ said Harry. ‘Just so you understand, Watling’s never was and never will be one of your cut-and-thrust operations. We’re not here today, gone tomorrow looking for a fast buck, we’re in it for the long haul. Your property makeovers are about a quick win, but we take pride in a steady pace, hard work and bringing some continuity to this community. The rewards we reap here are worth more than money.’

‘That sounds very fine,’ said Matthew, stepping towards her, obliging her to move back. ‘But fine words don’t pay the bills and some airy-fairy talk about rewards won’t feed you. We both know that you’ve got problems, Harry, and sooner or later you’re going to have to address them.’

She shook her head. 'Or what, Matthew? Or you'll step in and buy the lot? You're not worried about us. Let's not forget that it would suit you if George and I did go to the wall, that's why you want me to believe there's something wrong. Well, I don't scare easily. I'll still be here when you've forgotten that Watling's ever existed.'

Harry replaced her ear defenders and started up the sander. When she turned round again, Matthew had gone. She waited a couple of minutes, then went out to make sure he wasn't pumping George for further information.

He was sauntering along the creek; but, instead of going straight to the old yacht club, he detoured to the Moults' houseboat. She shrugged and resumed her work. What he did with Lola Moults was up to him.

## *Chapter Seven*

Pulling her tee shirt down as she went, Harry pushed the duvet away, got out of bed, opened the glass doors and stepped outside. Once upon a time, the first light fingering the little boats would have restored her peace of mind; but what if she was being short-sighted about the best direction for the boat yard? What if she was wrong?

The previous evening she'd even tried phoning her mother – in the forlorn hope that, if she told her about the pressure she was under, Maeve might come up with a few homespun words of comfort. Well, there was supposed to be a first for everything, wasn't there? When Maeve had taken flight with Don, the man who became her second husband, she couldn't have chosen a worse time. Harry had paid in blood, sweat and tears trying to convince the maritime world that Watling's was still a vital business and hadn't died with its founder. What kind of parent did that to their child?

Maeve sighed down the phone. 'It sounds as if you're badly in need of a holiday. Why don't you come and stay with us for a while?'

'I can't just leave the boat yard to go out to France at the drop of a hat. You know that.'

It wasn't that Harry minded her mother, now running a holiday lettings agency, grabbing what she called a chance for happiness. Although that did seem to imply that happiness had been thin on the ground, which was clearly not the case. Nor did she have anything particularly against Don; she barely knew him and, when she tried to remember him, she could only summon up a colourless, rather ordinary man who was reliable rather than exciting. Quite why Maeve had been so

keen to marry him and leave everything behind was beyond her, especially when Don didn't have half her father's vigour or a quarter of his personality.

'Can't or won't?' Maeve said, sounding irritated. 'Harry, you weren't exactly a child when I left. You were twenty-one, you'd finished your education. You could have come and lived with Don and me at any time, but you've hunkered down and flatly refused to leave even for a holiday.'

So much for the mother-daughter chat. Maeve had always claimed that her reason for leaving was because she couldn't go on living with ghosts. Never mind the ghosts, Harry wanted to say; what about the living? What about me?

This was her comfort, she realised, looking out across the water. She'd muddled on without a family this far, so she could carry on relying on herself. Below, to one side, the neat weatherboard buildings looked reassuringly black and solid against the pale dawn; and, ahead, the cluster of small boats out on the moorings turned as one as they caught the stirrings of the tide. Then she envisaged it with concrete terraces and wooden decking spilling to private moorings, and luxury motorboats waiting to disrupt the peace. Upmarket food driven in from a faraway Waitrose – or, if they were particularly intrepid, assembled with the help of a cocky TV chef's latest food porn manual – would smoulder on barbecues. The younger children would scream their heads off, while the older ones mucked around in dinghies or sulked because there was nowhere to surf. Harry folded her arms as the cold air travelled over her bare legs. No, she wasn't going to stand back and allow that to happen.

*Rely on yourself.* She hurried back inside and closed the door. That was the answer, that's what she'd needed to do all along. Throwing a dressing gown round her shoulders, she grabbed her laptop and propped herself up in bed. The phone

call to her mother had only highlighted what she'd already known; who was it who'd traipsed round after her mother had left, visiting suppliers, cajoling them into extending her credit? Who'd phoned up every yachtsman on Watling's books, reassuring them that service at the boat yard would be even better than it was in the past? Who'd squashed the whispering campaign that a young girl simply wouldn't be able to do the heavy work? Yep, that had been her. All by herself.

Harry scrolled through page after page, bookmarking sites for reference and making a list of numbers to ring. Initially she'd feared that, whilst she didn't know what a panic attack felt like, there was a serious risk she was about to find out. Then she'd taken a couple of deep breaths and ploughed on, trying to disregard the eye-watering figures being bandied about.

Whether it was hyperventilation or exhilaration that was making her giddy, Harry wasn't sure, but the zing of fighting back made her want to punch the air. For the next three months all the major yachting magazines would carry large ads for 'Watling's berthing and boat yard – where help is always at hand'. If George counted as help, that was. Harry continued going through the list. Sheltered berthing? Check. Storage ashore? Check. Package deals for fitting out? Check. Resprays, refits large and small, repairs and rigging. You bet. There wasn't much she couldn't turn her hand to, although some of the electronics could be a bit tedious. Who wouldn't be interested in taking a second look?

Okay, it had cost more than she hoped, but if it brought in extra business it was worth it. The busier Watling's looked, the less appealing it would be to the kind of second-homers Matthew was hoping to attract. If she had ever, in weaker moments, entertained thoughts of succumbing to Matthew's



offer, this would be the money-spinner that would chase such thoughts away. No going back – first strike to her.

Feeling more positive than she had in weeks, she lay back, closed her eyes and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Deep in the bowels of G Mag House, Corinne Akoley, a pretty black English graduate, noted an ad that had just been taken on *Cruising Monthly*. Not the most glamorous magazine in the G Mag stable and not, as Corinne joked, as much fun as the title suggested. Its main readership consisted of a dwindling supply of armchair sailors. Its editor, a ruddy-faced, wiry-haired man in his fifties, had just been ousted in favour of a frumpy but feisty thirty-something woman. A woman who, having exhausted every team challenge she could find on the high seas, had taken on the far riskier gamble of turning *CM* into a publication readers might want to buy. Of most interest to Corinne was the fact that she was also rumoured to be receptive to new ideas, especially anything that cocked a snook at the rather fusty gentlemen's club of contributors she'd inherited from the previous editor.

Having perused the back copies of *CM* and finding no coverage of the sleepy backwater mentioned in the ad, Corinne composed a succinct email to her boss. She proposed an article on Little Spitmarsh, suggesting that it would be both an ideal stopover on an east coast cruise or an interesting place to explore in its own right, and telling the new boss why she'd be a good person to write the article. 'Good one, Corinne,' she told herself, and pressed send.

The summons came even faster than she'd imagined. Corinne had barely enough time to rush to Starbucks and grab a double espresso for mental agility and a chocolate muffin for a quick sugar rush. She'd just made it back to G Mag House, when a woman in a silver trench coat and leopard-print

stilettos powered out of the revolving door straight into her.

‘Oh, you clumsy cow!’ the woman shrieked, staring at her coat in horror. ‘Do you know how much this cost?’

Corinne, who was certain that the lid was still firmly on her coffee, neither knew nor cared; but, with a coffee in one hand and a muffin in the other, she hadn’t been able to save the pages of notes she’d been studying whilst she’d been in the Starbucks queue. Crouching down to rescue them before they were scattered all over the West End, she balanced her coffee on the floor and stretched out a hand – just in time to see them speared by a leopard-print stiletto.

‘Just a minute,’ the woman said. ‘Let me see what you’ve got there.’

‘I’m only waiting for charts to arrive and then I’m going to sail up and see my daughter in Hull.’ It was a line Johnny MacManus trotted out regularly, as if he was trying to convince himself that he really was going to cast off one day and escape the backwaters. Standing there in a pair of once-white Y-fronts – which appeared to be the full extent of his summer wardrobe – he convinced no one, least of all George.

From the pontoon George looked down on the cockpit cluttered with dirty plates, battered saucepans, half-empty tins of beans and spent cans of strong lager. ‘Ah! Well, best those charts come soon then. Probably be a sight cheaper up there than down ’ere.’

‘You’re kidding, aren’t you?’ Johnny laughed, running his hands over his close-cropped grey hair and picking out something of interest. ‘Nowhere’s cheaper than here!’

George tapped the side of his nose. ‘You ’aven’t ’eard this, right. See that there clubhouse.’ With Johnny’s crossed eyes it was hard to tell whether he was looking at the clubhouse, or indeed whether he was sober enough to register it. ‘That is

soon gonna be a restaurant 'eaving with yuppies.'

'What?'

'Folks with plenty of money.' George squatted down, braving the sour smell of alcohol emanating from Johnny just to make sure he was still following his train of thought. 'Them yuppies is *desperate* to find moorings for their yachts.'

'So?'

'Well, think about it, my friend. What would you do if you was Miss Harriet and there was folks with money burning 'oles in their pockets?'

Johnny's mouth went slack.

'That's right, my friend. Come September when Miss Harriet starts looking at spaces here, she's going to put 'er prices through the roof. Why not, when she can fill every mooring twice over? So if I was you, Johnny, I'd chase those charts up pretty smart. Do yerself a favour and get yerself up to yer daughter's.'

As he walked away, George heard the pop of a ring pull as another can of strong lager was doomed to lie with the other fallen soldiers in the cockpit. Good, he thought. Good riddance to bad rubbish. Good riddance, too, to all the other assorted flotsam and jetsam that generally washed up at Watling's at this time of year.

By putting the word out that essential maintenance was being carried out and space at the yard was severely limited, he hoped to deter many of the timewasters who contributed so little to Watling's well-being. Once they'd cut out all the bad, he and Miss Harriet could fill the place with respectable customers. George knew exactly the sort he had in mind and they weren't going to be lured all that way just to look at the scenery. Offer 'em a swanky new restaurant when they'd got fed up with being cold and miserable, and it would be a different story. They'd be queuing up to claim they'd been the

first to discover the place!

Back in his shed, satisfied with a job well done, George made a strong cup of tea and selected a custard cream to dunk in it. As far as he was concerned, Matthew Corrigan was a bright young feller with sharp ideas who had been consistent in his concerns for the boat yard. Trouble was that, in Miss Harriet's eyes, no one lived up to her father. Would she still be so devoted to his memory if she ever found out what had really gone on?

Feverishly restless and always looking for a challenge, Harry senior had been a great bear of a man, passionate, impatient and so full of energy it was almost as if he had an intuitive sense that time was running out. George's eyes clouded with tears as he recalled the man who'd given him a chance when they were both at their lowest ebb, broken from past lives in the Far East. Harry, his fingers badly burnt after a business partnership had ended in acrimony, had seen past the man so mentally scarred by his war, and hired George to help at the boat yard he was creating, hoping to make a fresh start. When Harry senior set eyes on a pretty little twenty-year-old brunette who had fetched up at Watling's with her boyfriend, George really believed that the hurt had healed. Maeve stayed, the boyfriend left alone, and if Miss Harriet had arrived with what some would call indecent haste, where was the harm in that?

George cursed as the soggy half of the custard cream suspended in his fingers broke off and splashed into his tea. If only he could make Miss Harriet see that Matthew Corrigan could be the solution to the boat yard's problems. Her father hadn't been able to let go of the past and it had destroyed him. How far would he have to go to ensure that nothing rose up to the surface that would bring Miss Harriet down too?

The problems were beginning to stack up, thought Matthew. Coming up with a name for the restaurant didn't seem so clever when he still didn't have a chef. Using the restaurant as the springboard for a much larger development wasn't feasible unless Harry Watling rolled over, did the decent thing and gave up some land. Harry Watling wasn't his only frustration; Gina's ploy had obviously been to make him so jealous that he'd hotfoot it back to her. His libido might be all for it, but his ego wouldn't let him. Until he had something positive about the development that he could wave under Gina's nose so she could see how wrong her predictions of failure had been, he wouldn't bother.

There had to be a way to make Harry listen to him, he thought, slamming the door of the Volvo and trudging towards his development. Well, there was no chance of charming her into submission, so he could rule that out. The look on her face, when he'd assured her that seducing owners into selling their land wasn't one of his usual business methods, had been priceless! He tried to imagine what her hair would look like when she hadn't been dragging a pair of goggles through it. Or what her soft mouth would do if it wasn't pursed in anger. And maybe ear defenders didn't make for the hottest of looks, certainly not with those habitual dungarees.

Mentally discarding the dungarees, Matthew reasoned that, given all that physical work, Harry was probably very fit; but the dungarees gave so little away he was having trouble filling in the gaps. Were her breasts cute and pert, or soft and succulent? Did she have a flat surfboard stomach for a hard, exhilarating ride, or a sweet, feminine softness? *Wait a minute!* No, I did *not* think that, Matthew told himself, rewinding fast. No, he was never going to find out what was going on beneath Harry Watling's dungarees, because he was *never* going to take her to bed. In any case, she was far too

likely to scowl and bend his ear half the night about his wanton desecration of Little Spitmarsh. Not so much of a guilty pleasure but rather a making-you-feel-guilty pleasure, and he was tired of being told what a terrible idea his redevelopment of the area was. Couldn't Harry see that what was good for him would help her business, too?

The sight of his project stopped him in his tracks. From the outside, at least, the building was looking a whole lot more attractive than it had done in years. With a new roof and fresh timber cladding stained an ethereal silver grey, the neglected building was scrubbing up pretty well. Floor-to-ceiling windows, mirroring Campion's Creek and flooding what would be the dining area with light, would complete the transformation. A chef would be useful too.

His boys had been just as thorough about the interior: asbestos cladding, old ceilings and clapped-out kitchen and bathroom fittings removed, to leave a bare shell that was even more promising than he'd anticipated. All the same, there was a lot of making good to do before the interior designer could get in. And, he thought, still some clutter. He eyed a clapped-out chest of drawers which, judging by the footprints in the plaster dust on the top, had doubled – quite illegally – as a ladder, and decided to jettison it before one of his workmen took a dive off the top and broke a collarbone. Peering in a drawer, Matthew remembered why he hadn't thrown the thing out in the first place. The question was, if the Spitmarsh Yacht Club had done without their paperwork all this time, was there any point in returning it to them now? On balance he thought not, and was about to tip the entire contents in the pile destined for the skip, when a thicker piece of rolled paper caught his eye. He spread it out and bent over to look at it more closely – then whistled softly through his teeth.

This was more than just a piece of scrap paper he was

holding; now he had Harry Watling in the palm of his hand, too.

## *Chapter Eight*

There were worse ways to spend an evening than sitting at a bar downing champagne, but Matthew was starting to feel that during his brief visit to London he ought to be doing more than watching the bubbles rise in his glass. His solicitor Piers Scott apparently thought so too, as he eyed a cluster of sharply dressed women and smoothed down his fine blond hair in preparation for muscling in. Quite a contrast to his disapproving manner earlier in the day, when Matthew had made his appointment with only seconds to spare.

‘So this is a legal document, then?’ Matthew had asked, lifting his gaze from the parchment spread out before them. The whole thing seemed so far-fetched that he still expected to be told it was a hoax.

Piers silently adjusted a crested cufflink. ‘Absolutely. It was granted as a reward to one Percival Campion, innkeeper and purveyor of fine oysters. Apparently the king, having consumed a meal of his oysters, spent a night of passion at Campion’s establishment with an unnamed lady and felt moved to express his gratitude. Acts of Parliament ensured the ownership was passed on with the land.’

Piers had paused for what in anyone else Matthew would have called dramatic effect, then added, ‘I trust there will be an invitation for me when the restaurant opens?’

Matthew nodded. ‘Naturally. But I’m afraid you’ll be disappointed if you were hoping to test the effects of the local oysters. Unfortunately, they were seen off by pollution and disease at the beginning of the last century.’

Piers looked at him over his steepled hands. ‘A pity. Still, I can always put you in touch with a very good Scottish



supplier. Perhaps you could drill for oil instead?’

Matthew grinned. ‘That won’t be necessary. I’ve just struck gold.’

Now, as he watched Piers charm his way into the group of women, he wondered if Gina was missing him – or was she too wrapped up in her latest boyfriend? He noticed Piers nod in his direction. One of the women looked round, smiled and swivelled in her chair to turn her body towards him.

Matthew smiled politely and turned away. If he caught a cab over to Gina’s, was there any way he could pretend he was just passing? It was easy to overlook the rows and the fights as the memories of all the good things about their relationship came flooding back. He was so tempted to find an excuse to drop in on her that he could even smell the fruity, leathery smell of her distinctive Hermes perfume.

Suddenly, someone covered his eyes with cool hands and a familiar voice whispered in his ear, ‘Are you real?’

Matthew’s stomach lurched as he turned and met the sultry, knowing gaze of the girl every man in the room was staring at. His eyes travelled down the black satin dress with God-knew-what delights underneath. He followed her endless legs down to towering gold sandals and then took the trip back up to the top.

He got to his feet. Piers, apparently remembering where he’d started the evening, was approaching fast.

‘I’ll be in touch,’ Matthew said quickly and, taking Gina’s hand, spirited her out into the night.

Finding out that the astonishingly good-looking guy in Gina’s photos wasn’t her lover had done a lot to ease some tensions, even if it had provoked the usual weary plea to read the dross she produced. ‘If you had, then you’d know that the actress he’s been dating back home in Sydney isn’t at all happy about

the succession of beautiful young women he's been papped with.' And the rest of the night had eased a lot more besides, but it hadn't resolved everything. Come on, Matthew, he told himself sharply, they'd never made any commitment to each other, kept their lives and apartments pretty much separate. Last time they'd ostensibly split for good. Wasn't that what he most admired about her? Her spirit? Her independence? That she never demanded any promises about the future from him? So why did it all seem so mechanical? Why did he sometimes wonder how it would feel to be in a more traditional relationship?

Matthew had just slipped an arm round her so that they could finally settle down for the night, when she pulled herself free and met his gaze, her dark blue eyes sparkling. 'Of course it will take some organising, but I've had a brilliant idea. I want to do an article on illicit weekends for *What's Hot*. I might as well make use of this restaurant you're building. We'll stage a party there, pick some good-looking models who look as if they can't keep their hands off each other and create a little photo drama around them.'

'Gina, the restaurant is nowhere near ready for business yet,' he heard himself say weakly.

'Well, darling, you don't think I want real customers in there messing up the place, do you? They must all be inbred and deformed up there!' She shuddered. 'It's better if the place *isn't* open – we can just create the look we want for the photos. Oh, don't look like that – we'll be gone before you know it, it'll hardly hold you up at all, and think of the publicity it will bring!'

He should have been pleased that Gina's opinion of Little Spitmarsh had shifted enough for her to come up with a pretext to look at Samphire. It was a start. But when he suggested that she might like to have regular weekends there,

Gina had just laughed.

‘What? Stay in the place where they still work by feudal law?’ she’d yawned when he’d explained the reason for his visit to Piers. ‘Listen, this Harry guy deserves to lose his land cheaply if he’s too much of a peasant to know the value of what he’s sitting on.’

Matthew decided not to try to correct either of Gina’s impressions. Once she saw the restaurant for herself, he was willing to bet she’d see the point of his plans for development. As for Harry, somehow he didn’t feel like admitting to Gina that a little slip of a girl had been standing in his way. It might have been easier all round if Harry had been some brutish great bloke trying to see him off at every opportunity; then he would have been delighted to pull the rug out from under his opponent.

Really, he thought, back at the rented cottage in Little Spitmarsh, he ought to be thanking the lucky stars which had so conveniently placed right in his hands the means to spare himself time, money and further dealings with Harry Watling. Yet he couldn’t account for an unusual queasiness about delivering the *coup de grâce*. Harry Watling, edgy, determined and doomed to fail, had got to him in a way he didn’t like to look at too closely. Suddenly it felt like an unfair contest, as if she was competing against him with one hand tied behind her back. Neither could he shake off the feeling that choking off her business would leave a bad taste in *his* mouth.

After a shower, which failed to leave him feeling any cleaner, he headed out to Champion’s Creek to consider the matter further. It seemed to Matthew, at a distance, that George was turning a boat away and he wondered if it was a trick of the light. It was a rather smart boat at that; a nice new motorboat which, if not very large, was, judging by the way

every surface gleamed and sparkled, clearly its owner's pride and joy.

'Damn stinkboats,' said George, who looked a bit caught out as Matthew came up next to him. 'All that splash and noise.'

'Can you afford to be that choosy?' asked Matthew.

'Them's the one who is choosy,' George said vehemently. 'And I can see a load of problems if they fetch up here. It's all right for local mariners who know Watling's, but strangers'll be expecting a certain standard. All those complaints can give a place a bad name. Best they clear off to the marina rather than moan about what we 'aven't got here.'

Matthew trusted George to know what he was talking about and to recognise potential troublemakers, but he couldn't really see why George had been so quick to dismiss an opportunity to pick up some berthing fees. Whatever else he could say about Harry's stubborn refusal to acknowledge the fix she was in, Matthew couldn't fault the way she presented Watling's. Every outward detail, from the trim buildings to the brimming tubs of flowers, suggested an efficient and organised business. If she capitulated and accepted his terms, maybe he could offer her the chance to run a pared-down outfit; it would make a rather charming contrast to his new marine development, a bit like the blend of old and new at Portsmouth harbour.

'So what do people new to the area expect to find?' he asked, genuinely interested.

George fished in his pocket and brought out a tobacco tin. 'Where shall I start, Matthew? Power showers, hairdryers, a fancy shop where you can buy your Musto sailing gear, mugs with Captain and Galley Slave written on 'em and a stuffed ship's cat.'

Declining a roll-up that George had made earlier, Matthew

grinned. 'I can't see Harry going down that route.'

'If she doesn't accept some changes she's gonna go under,' said George, lighting up and nearly taking off his own nose as the cigarette paper blazed away before catching the tobacco. 'It's as simple as that.'

'But Harry's not going to change willingly, is she?' Matthew pointed out. 'Not when her father told her to keep fighting.'

George's watery eyes narrowed and he took a meditative first drag on his cigarette, which all but finished it off.

'The boat yard's Miss Harriet's way of filling the space her father left, but I tell you something, Matthew, one day she's going to have to accept that he really isn't there. Until she deals with her loss she'll always be haunted by the fear of everyone leaving her or taking something away from her.'

Matthew gritted his teeth; he *would* not feel guilty.

'That girl needs someone who won't be scared off, someone with a bit of persistence to see the person inside.' George sighed, staring accusingly at his dog end as if it had stolen the rest of his roll-up. 'As it is, she's afraid to trust anyone.'

Matthew tried to prepare the ground. Maybe it was because of this old boy that he was wavering. In other circumstances he would have been glad to get to know him better and to listen to more stories about his life, but that wouldn't be possible now. 'It works both ways, George. How is anyone supposed to gain Harry's trust when she thinks everyone's out to get her? Look, I can understand her feelings for the boat yard, but she's flatly opposed to any kind of progress. Hoping that Little Spitmarsh can thrive in a time warp is entirely misguided and when the tide turns against her, as it surely must, that'll be one more burden added to all the baggage on her back. Surely her father wouldn't have wanted that?'

George looked at him sharply and Matthew wondered if he'd gone too far. George, after all, would go to hell and back for Harry.

'Listen, that man was a good friend to me but he weren't no saint. Who's to say what he would or wouldn't have wanted for Miss Harriet? No one 'ad the chance to find out, did they? The fact is that he's not here and Miss Harriet's the one dealing with all the mess,' the old man said, grinding his cigarette butt into the earth and closing the subject. He eyed Matthew craftily. 'Course, if someone came along, someone with a bit of money put by, someone who might want to invest it in Watling's, say, who could give it a bit of a facelift or summat, that would give Miss Harriet a bit of a breathing space.'

Matthew didn't mention that, thanks to his newly acquired manorial rights, no one in their right mind would want to invest in Watling's now. 'Look at it this way; there's no point at all in making cosmetic alterations if there are no customers to appreciate them. Harry's got to realise that Watling's fate depends on the town; if that stagnates, so does the business.'

That, at least, was true; he wasn't about to invest in a swathe of land and build holiday homes on it to lose money, even if the rights he had just acquired meant he could secure the land at a rock-bottom price. But every instinct told him that Little Spitmarsh was ripening into a potential property hot spot and Harry had just lost her chance to take advantage of it. George was looking very glum and Matthew cursed himself for letting business get so personal. If Harry went under, what would happen to George? Matthew sighed; he wouldn't think about that now.

Having replaced the drum on the roller reefing she was busy repairing, Harry took a deep breath and prepared to hoist the

sail. It was the perfect day to tackle the job, with sufficient breeze to stop the sail collapsing on the deck, but not enough to take her arm out of her socket. All the lovely endorphins the physical effort would send skipping round her body would do her far more good than sitting around worrying about Little Spitmarsh.

Sooner or later everyone who was desperately hoping that some of the money generated by the restaurant would make a difference to their lives would have to wake up to reality: the only people likely to be enjoying lobster on ice any time soon were Matthew's customers. Without real people creating real jobs, it would still be mushy peas all the way for everyone else. After years of coping with economic marginalisation, the town, as Harry tried to point out, was putting too much trust in one man.

Squinting against the sun, Harry turned her attention back to the task in hand. It was a fiddly job and past experience had shown her that George, who was not blessed with vast reserves of patience, would not be the ideal assistant. She'd probably complete it quicker without him. There were times when she longed for a crack team of fit young men round the place to do the heavy work. There were even some occasions when she had the tiniest pang of thinking that it might be nice, sometimes, to have someone to turn to. Taking on the business had put a stop to anything resembling a social life; the demands of the sea didn't fit conveniently round theatre trips, dinner dates or weekends away. But Harry didn't stop to think about what she might have missed – she was simply proud to have made it on her own.

Hoping that the sail would set smoothly, Harry was irritated when it jammed at the top of the reefing. She gave it a couple of experimental tugs to see if that would free it and, when nothing happened, went for brute force – only to see the

plastic swivel at the top shear cleanly in half.

‘Oh, fuck!’

‘Lovely day, isn’t it?’

Harry groaned to herself and peered down over the edge of the sail to see who she might have offended. She was instantly intrigued: in his white shirt, skinny black tie and tight black trousers, the guy staring up at her didn’t look the type who was easily affronted. With floppy dark hair falling over dark glasses, a knowing smile and the sallowness of someone with scant experience of fresh air, it was easy to imagine him on stage, strutting his stuff before a sea of fans. Harry shot back behind the sail and resisted the urge to punch the air; if her adverts had succeeded in attracting a wealthy rock star in search of a mooring for his luxury yacht, she ought not to jeopardise the proceedings by acting like an impressionable teenager.

‘Hang on!’ she sang out, in case he dematerialised. ‘I’m just coming down!’



## Chapter Nine

From deck height he'd looked rather waif-like; but, having scuttled down the ladder, Harry was surprised to discover he was much taller than she'd expected and very toned. At closer quarters he crackled with energy; the fashionably thin look, she reckoned, was one that he worked at.

'Hello! Have you come about the advert?'

He frowned and took off his sunglasses, surprising her with mesmeric, slanting dark eyes, which added to his already striking appearance.

'I wasn't aware there *was* an advert. As far as I'm concerned, the position's mine if I want it.'

He sounded a bit petulant, like someone used to getting his own way, and seemed to find the suggestion that this might not be the case rather offensive.

'Oh.' Harry was more disappointed than curious. 'You're not enquiring about moorings then?'

'Fraid not.' He gave a short laugh, apparently recovering his sense of humour. 'Don't worry. You're not the only one who's confused today!' He gestured towards a black sports car stretched out next to her white van. 'I turned in looking for directions. I assumed the old boy back there was the Harry Watling on the sign. He, er, put me right.'

Oh, George would have done that all right, thought Harry, reflecting that on another day she might have had some fun trying to guess exactly what was said.

'After that I had to come over to see what the real Harry Watling looked like.'

American? Australian? It was hard to place his accent. 'Yeah, well,' she said, outwardly calm whilst her mind

worked frantically to place him, 'now you know.'

'No offence,' he smiled. 'You're not quite what I was expecting; I mean, you're tiny and you're a chick. And you're getting your hands dirty.'

Harry tried not to scowl at him. He wasn't to know she'd spent her whole adult life watching eyebrows rise in dull surprise when she emerged from an engine bay.

'How did you get stuck with a name like Harry?'

'Using my full name would make it even harder for me to get some people in this business to take me seriously. Believe me, if they hear that Harriet's on the phone they have a tendency to find other jobs to do. Harry gets a much quicker response and it was my dad's name. To anyone who dealt with him, I guess I'm the son he never had.'

There was a pause whilst he thought it over.

'Right. So the old man's put you in charge now, eh?'

For a young man, his view of what he thought the natural order ought to be was pretty outdated, thought Harry, always acutely sensitive to any suggestion that she wasn't up to running the business. 'Actually,' she corrected him, 'I own the yard. Just me, with some help from George. I took on the place when Dad died.'

'Quite a responsibility.'

Harry got the impression his smile was a little forced and there was an undercurrent to his observation that was completely lost on her. Or maybe Matthew Corrigan had taught her to be suspicious even when there was no good reason. She managed to smile back despite her unease. 'It can be,' she acknowledged, trying not to give too much away.

'Doesn't it get lonely?'

'There are plenty of people who would like to be their own boss, choosing their own working hours and having the freedom to enjoy this wonderful scenery. Look, am I missing

something here? For someone who came in to look for directions you ask a lot of questions.'

He laughed, showing white even teeth. 'I haven't got the hang of your British reserve yet. Yes, I was curious; you're an unusual woman, Harry Watling. Takes some guts to hang on in a place like this, I bet most people in your position would have sold up. I mean, this is a pretty desirable location.'

'I'm not most people,' Harry told him, feeling that he'd taken up enough of her time. 'Do you know where you're going now?'

'Good question.' He studied her face before replacing his sunglasses. 'As it happens, I've found what I was looking for.' He pointed across to the old clubhouse. 'I've come to talk to a man about his kitchen.'

Harry tried not to sigh. For a little while, at least until it all fell flat, she would no doubt have to put up with a steady stream of exotic strangers in smart clothes and flashy cars invading Watling's in their search for the old clubhouse. Matthew was hardly going to traipse down to the retail outlet to fit out his restaurant. Presumably he wouldn't use anyone who wasn't ostensibly at the top of their game, and the man standing in front of her certainly acted as if he was used to nothing less than complete adulation. He raised one eyebrow at her and Harry realised she'd been staring.

'Oh, so you're a kitchen designer?' Bit rude to suggest he flogged them; he didn't look the sort to appreciate being called a salesman, even if he was very good at it.

He looked as if he was struggling to contain his amusement. 'Not quite, I work in them. I'm a chef, my name's Jimi Tan.'

His voice lifted at the end of the sentence. Harry couldn't decide whether it was a peculiarity of his accent or if he was trying to tell her something. Maybe she *should* have heard of

him, but she had better things to do than flick through celebrity magazines. On the other hand there *was* something about him that seemed faintly familiar. Eventually she gave up.

‘Should I know who you are? Because I’m afraid I don’t. Sorry.’

The smile flickered briefly. ‘No need to apologise, Harry, it’s not your fault.’ He glanced at his watch. ‘Well, I guess I’ll be on my way. Best not to keep the man waiting too long, eh? Good to meet you, Harry. Maybe I’ll see you around?’

Unlikely, she thought. ‘Perhaps. Anyway, good luck with your meeting.’

He nodded and went to walk off before seeming to remember something. ‘Hey, I’m sorry about your dad, Harry. I know how you feel.’

Matthew stood in the middle of the clubhouse and laid out his vision for his palace of light and glass, whilst the other man listened impassively. With his ruthlessly efficient project management skills, Matthew would take an unpromising beginning and achieve a sleek conversion - or what the interior designer called ‘A clean modern look with a reassuring sense of permanence’. Sunshine would suffuse the room, bouncing off the subtly placed mirrors and shimmering along the bar, which would appear to float on slender glass pillars. Concealed lighting and the palest-gold walls would make the room warm and welcoming at night against the bleak black windows. There would be huge, specially commissioned abstract paintings on the walls, but centre stage, as he had planned, would go to Champion’s Creek in all its moods.

Matthew stopped talking to let the lonely skyscape, mysterious backwaters and the benign bowl of the creek do

the rest of the work for him, but he guessed he wouldn't have to try too hard. According to Gina, and he wanted to believe her, Jimi had been the one pressing to meet him.

With his back turned, Jimi had implied that several offers were on the table; he'd hinted at collaboration with Marco and a possible deal with Jamie. Matthew hadn't missed the hunger in his voice even though Jimi hid it well. For a moment, he'd been sorely tempted to ask him why, if there was such a demand for his services, he'd bothered to come all this way. He was on the point of inviting Jimi to pick up the phone and go right ahead and accept one those tempting offers, just to show him that he *knew* he was talking bollocks, when Jimi swivelled to face him.

'If we create a top-class restaurant here, high-spending couples will make the journey. Add accommodation and they'll stay. What's stopping you developing the rest of the waterfront?'

Matthew laughed. 'I like your thinking. But let's start with the restaurant. Are you on board?'

'What if you could get your hands on that boat yard?' Jimi persisted.

'Well, for a start it belongs to someone who's pretty determined to hang on to it.'

'Harry Watling? Yeah, I met her.'

Matthew inclined his head. 'She didn't chew you up and spit you out then? Congratulations.'

Jimi shrugged. 'She didn't look like much of a problem to me. The land she's sitting on must be worth a fortune.'

'Ah well, don't tell her that now, will you?' Matthew grinned. 'I still want to come out of this with a profit. Although Harry Watling says it isn't about the money.'

'It's *always* about the money! Is the business doing so well that she can afford to turn you down?'

Somewhere along the line, Jimi Tan had known how it felt to go without, Matthew noted, watching him closely. He was willing to bet that Jimi's carefully cultivated show of success was only a veneer, but it didn't bother him. Speculate to accumulate. Okay, the guy was young and on fire with ambition, but it would be good to harness that energy for his own use.

'Harry Watling doesn't see the boat yard as a business; she thinks it's her vocation. Why are you so interested?'

It was hard to read the younger man's face: the slanting dark eyes were downcast, his lips pursed, and he seemed to be wrestling with some inner battle. Finally he met Matthew's gaze.

'All right, I'll level with you. Look, things didn't go quite the way I hoped in the last place I worked; the guy was a complete tosser. I didn't get what I'd been promised so I walked out. Feels good at the time, but it's not so clever afterwards, especially when your credit card bill turns up.'

'I'm glad you told me now. It would save me having to sack you later.'

'Yeah, well, you'd be the one with regrets. I can always find work, but it'll be a long time before you find a chef as sensational as me. You asked why I'm interested in the boat yard? Listen, I like what you've got here, but the way I see it you could take it so much further. Still, if you've had second thoughts, I'll spare you my ideas.'

*Got you!* thought Matthew as Jimi tried to give him the hard stare. Not very far beneath the surface was a kid with no friends; the fat boy, perhaps, who got laughed at, the kid with the wrong clothes or thick glasses – now he was setting out to show the world how badly it had misjudged him.

'Just don't fuck *me* about,' Matthew said, and held out his hand.

Elation flickered in Jimi's eyes and a broad smile reached his lips. 'I won't let you down. I'd like to take this place all the way; great place to eat, great place to stay. Hey! Maybe I'll even get Harry Watling on board?'

Matthew thought of all the women Jimi had been photographed with; try as he might, he couldn't imagine him being caught by the paparazzi with Harry tucked under his arm – although he wouldn't mind being a fly on the wall when Jimi tried his chat-up line. 'Oh no,' he said quickly. 'You're worth more to me alive. Besides, Harry Watling won't be putting up a fight for much longer.'

Jimi turned a curious face towards him, but Matthew decided to remain silent.

Harry had expected George to appear as soon as the black car had reversed out of Watling's, but clearly he was still sulking. After searching the yard, she trailed round to his shed and hesitantly knocked on the door. George emerged looking out of sorts, his blanched hair stringy and dishevelled, his purple-veined face tinged with grey. She half expected the telltale sign of strong mints on his breath, then felt ashamed of herself for suspecting him of sneaking off for a drink. He was an old man, after all, and entitled to get tired from time to time.

'Everything all right, George?'

He looked around warily and closed the door behind him, catching his breath as he did.

'Chest is playing up today, that's all, Miss Harriet. Nothing to worry about.'

Perhaps she was asking him to do too much? And he had been chasing up some outstanding accounts. Maybe it was unfair to involve him in matters that might make him fret, quite unnecessarily, about his future?

'Do you want me to drive you round to the doctor's?'

He waved her concerns away. 'No, I don't, Miss Harriet. You must think I'm going soft or something. Stop fussing around like I was some old man, will you?'

She turned away to hide her smile. That was more like George. 'So what did you think of our visitor?'

He cleared his throat. 'Can't say I really noticed, Miss Harriet.'

'Bloody hell, George!' Harry laughed. 'Did you speak to him with your eyes shut or something? You must have noticed he was a bit different from the kind of people we usually get here. I hear he mistook you for Dad?'

'Damn fool,' he snapped. 'Arrogant too, with 'is "So, where's 'Arry Watling then?"' Looking at me as if I was something on his shoes. "*Miss Harriet*," I told 'im, "is fixing a sail."'

'Oh.' Perhaps she'd just got the wrong impression. If all Jimi Tan wanted was a simple answer to a straightforward question, why would he have deliberately sought her out? 'Well, he told me he's a chef so I hope he hasn't spun me a line. I hope he's not a surveyor or someone sizing up the yard for Matthew Corrigan to build on.'

'What? In that get-up?' George spat.

'No, you're right. There you are, I keep seeing problems where there are none. I'm sure Jimi Tan's a really nice guy.'

George gave a strangled cough and Harry tried not to laugh. He was so transparent in his likes and dislikes; he wouldn't have liked Jimi's smooth style at all. Matthew's scruffily casual approach fitted his idea of a certain work ethic nicely. She decided to annoy him a bit more. 'Maybe Matthew's restaurant isn't such a bad thing after all, if it means we see more of Jimi Tan at the boat yard.'

She threw him a quick sideways glance and was alarmed to see the old man looking even paler. 'George! Are you okay?'



Bending to pick up the post, Harry found that her legs were shaking. George had frightened the life out of her. Only the fear of doing anything to risk upsetting him even more had stopped her from calling an ambulance. When she was quite convinced he wasn't about to die on her, she'd driven him round to his caravan, where he gave his reluctant consent for her to make him a cup of tea. Quite soon, his colour was back to normal.

'Is there anything else I can do for you, George?' she asked, still frightened.

'Yes, Miss Harriet,' he said quite firmly. 'You can bloody go away.'

Back home, as she sank gratefully into one of her own carefully chosen sofas, she was struck by the contrast between her place and George's meagre caravan. She decided it was high time she changed his mind about where he lived. It was George, after all, who had pointed out the need to do something about the shortfall in her own accommodation.

A few years ago, Harry had been doing little more than camp out in the disused boatshed she was supposed to be refurbishing. But when, during a lunch break, a force-ten gale whipping through the wooden slats nearly blew the soup out of her mug, George had insisted that something more permanent needed to be done.

How they'd coped between them still made Harry wonder. There were several moments during the refurbishment when George became terrified they'd never finish. He even came up with the bright idea of filming the project, so they could send the video diary to a TV makeover programme – with the hope of scraping together some additional funding. As George could barely tell one end of a camera from the other, Harry had at least felt secure that she wouldn't be starring on Freeview television any time soon. True, there was some

strange stuff on the high numbers of satellite viewing, but neither she nor George was up for 'Naked Builders on the Job'.

With its lofty proportions and stunning views across the water, Harry's house might have surprised anyone who had seen her running round the boat yard in all weathers and thought she was indifferent to her surroundings. White tones kept it simple, with just a few splashes of aqua and ripples of blue to reflect the sky, the water and clear soft light. Far from being cold, the tranquil colours framed the waterscape and boats beyond, whilst the personal touches made it a comfortable, relaxing home.

Yes, Harry decided, George might not like the idea of it, but she'd get him out of the caravan if it was the last thing she did. Mind made up, she picked up the thick ivory envelope that had come in today's post. Hmm, quality paper. She paused for a moment, trying to guess the contents. Perhaps an unknown benefactor had left her all his money? Or maybe a shipping magnate wanted to enquire about leaving a fleet of yachts at Watling's? Smiling happily, she smoothed out the paper and began reading.

## Chapter Ten

Wouldn't it be nice, thought Harry as she hopped around her bedroom in her knickers, if she had something smart to wear? And, as a scrunched-up piece of paper with a half-price makeover offer fell out of the pocket of her discarded dungarees, wouldn't it be nice if worrying about her appearance was something she *did* have time for? Even better if it was her *only* worry, she thought a bit later, tearing down what passed for a high street. What would it be like to spend spare hours getting various bits and pieces plucked or dyed, instead of having to face the constant fear of trying to keep body and soul together? Marvelling at the thought that there were women out there whose idea of a tough decision was choosing the next season's handbag, she forgot to keep a low profile as she shot past Crimps. Completely absorbed in her thoughts, she failed to notice the significance of the absence of humming driers or the cries of startled clients. Carmen was on her before Harry could take avoiding action.

'Hey, Harry, when you come to see me?'

As piercing brown eyes bored into her like a chocolate laser, Harry wondered how you said, 'Never in a million years,' politely. All right, so her usual work-stained clothing and personal style could make the term 'low maintenance' seem excessively demanding. It was a look built for speed and practicality so that she could get up at a moment's notice without having to fuss over her hair, and run the boat yard in all weathers without mascara melting down her face. Just as well, too, given that she couldn't afford to do anything else.

The intense brown gaze softened a little. 'Soon you get your nails done too, yes? French polish? Gel nails? Nail art?'

Carmen clapped her hands. 'My Lola, she is learning all this! Already she is getting experience in a bar!'

Is that what they called it now? Harry thought, wondering how long it would be before Carmen realised that she too was a victim of Matthew's avarice. Harry had seen Lola once or twice sliding into Matthew's car beside him and hadn't missed the look on her face. It was an even bet Carmen didn't know that Matthew had personally escorted Lola to her training. Lola was certainly learning something, but Harry doubted that it had much to do with nails.

'Well, maybe I'll wait until Lola's completed her course, then I can have the works,' said Harry, trying to imagine what George would say if she turned up to mend an engine sporting inch-long, painted talons. At least she'd got Carmen off her back, she thought, watching her trot away proudly; although hopefully Matthew would find himself being waxed in all kinds of painful places once she found out what he was up to with Lola. And, if the letter she had in her pocket turned out to be a real threat, she would be only too happy to volunteer to help Carmen.

'It's all right, Trev, she's not stopping.'

Trevor emerged from the back of the shop where he'd been trying to hide his big frame in the shadows and edged forward until he was standing just behind Frankie.

'What am I, Trev, a human shield? She's gone. Look! I wonder where she's off to in such a hurry?'

Together they watched as Harry disappeared up the road.

'I'm just glad it's not here. I couldn't face her today, Frankie. I'm nervous enough about whether or not this is the right direction for the business, without a cross-examination from Harry.'

Frankie sighed. 'You're not having second thoughts, are

you, Trev?’

Trevor lifted his stubbled chin. ‘I can’t say I’m not worried, Frankie.’

‘What are you worrying about, Trev? Not what Harry Watling thinks, surely?’ said Frankie, feeling mutinous. ‘You know my theory about that. What Harry Watling needs is a right good - ’

‘Frankie!’

‘Oh, all right, Trev. Stop being so sensitive. I’m not asking you to do it. Anyone can see who she’s got the hots for. That’s what this fuss about the restaurant really boils down to. Harry’s just found out that you can’t choose who you fall in lust with and she doesn’t like it. Any normal guy walking into that place after a stream of round-Britain sailors would make an impression,’ - he shuddered - ‘but someone like Matthew would have really woken her up.’

Frankie turned to get a better look at his partner. ‘Look, Trev, we don’t need Harry’s approval to do some work for him or to revamp the business. I mean, by anyone’s standards the place is due for an overhaul, but if all you want to do is give the shop a lick of paint we might as well not bother. Let’s think big and not make excuses for it.’

Trevor drew back. ‘I’m not, but ...’

‘I know,’ Frankie said gently. ‘I understand that this is about more than Harry’s opinion. I know what you’re scared of, but really, Trev, isn’t it about time we started living truthfully? It’s the deception that’s breaking you down, not what Harry thinks or doesn’t think about how we decorate the shop. I like Harry, she’s always been good to us, but if she expects everyone to live in the past like her, she’s wrong. If that restaurant brings in half the customers it’s expected to, we’ve got to be prepared to use it to our advantage.’

‘I just feel for her, Frankie. You know she’s not half as

tough as she makes out; it's worrying about what's going to happen to the boat yard that's making her so snappy.'

Frankie rubbed his head. 'Yeah, I know. But Harry's got to let go like the rest of us. It's about time Little Spitmarsh had its day, so let's be part of it. Let's enjoy it and deal with any problems that come along the way we always have – together.'

Big old softie, he thought, as Trevor struggled to control his emotions.

'Well, then,' said Trevor. 'How about soft pinks with amber, a little turquoise and a touch of chartreuse green?'

'Lovely, Trevor, if you want it to look like a teenage girl's idea of a tart's boudoir.'

'Look, Frankie, I've had it up to here with calm and neutral. What is the point of a "robust buff" colour anyway?'

Frankie slapped his hand to his forehead. 'Now I remember the real reason why we've never managed to decorate the shop; it's because we have to overcome the problem of your execrable taste.'

Trevor looked at him beadily. 'You said it.'

'Right, that's it.' Frankie clicked his fingers and summoned Phil towards him. 'Phil and I are going for a walk,' he said, fastening the dog's lead. 'We may even catch up with Harry, and I might just let it slip that you've insisted on a huge, flamboyant makeover for the shop to attract all Matthew's high-spending customers.'

Hmm. Now who had a touch of chartreuse green about him?

Harry wasn't sure what Little Spitmarsh had done to merit having a solicitor like Andrew Lawrence; well over six foot, in his early forties, with the hooked nose of a natural predator and glittering black eyes, he oozed equal quantities of Aramis,

charm and virility. There was talk of a rather lurid sexual harassment case in a previous life, which had forced him to lie low in Little Spitmarsh until the dust settled; but Harry had no doubt that, given a couple of years, he'd be back in the race for world domination.

At least he took the trouble to pull out a chair for Harry, rather than, as she'd feared, inviting her to sit on his lap.

'Now, please tell me this is a joke,' Harry began.

Andrew Lawrence beamed back at her. That had to be a good sign, surely?

'Manorial rights.' He smacked his lips as if he was preparing to take a bite out of her. 'Very interesting! It goes without saying, I suppose, that you had no idea, when you assumed ownership of the business, that the area referred to in this document was subject to such rights? No mention on the Land Registry?'

Clearly he knew she didn't, Harry thought helplessly; he just enjoyed watching her squirm whilst he prolonged the agony. After a pause while he waited, presumably, for beads of fear to appear on her upper lip, he tore his eyes away from her to give a soft chuckle at the paperwork laid out before him.

Harry couldn't wait to join in the fun. 'My father could be impulsive, but he wasn't reckless. He would never have chosen that location for the boat yard if he thought someone else owned the access. If this is a genuine claim, don't you think we would have known about it sooner?' she asked nicely.

Andrew Lawrence ignored her. 'It makes fascinating reading; the title was originally bestowed on Percival Campion, "Innkeeper and purveyor of fine oysters". The story goes that the king granted the honour after being Percy's guest. Percy provided the king with a feast of his oysters, and

the king decided to put their renowned aphrodisiac qualities to the test. It must have been quite a night, or quite a lady. Who knows? It might even have been Percy's own wife, in which case he was definitely owed a favour,' he observed, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms behind his head to give her a blood-curdling smile.

'But surely,' Harry began, then had to clear her throat so that she could continue on a stronger sounding note, 'surely feudal law has nothing to do with a twenty-first-century legal system?'

'You'd think so, wouldn't you?' said Andrew Lawrence, leaning across the desk as if trying to smell her. 'But as it stands manorial rights are categorised as overriding interests, so you as a landowner are subject to them even if they are *not* mentioned in the register.'

She shook her head. 'That can't be right. If it was, land disputes would be breaking out all over the place.'

'It is and they are,' he nodded. 'Of course it's a complicated legal landscape; it's true that whilst manorial rights can, for example, grant mineral rights, you can't, of course, build a mine without planning permission, so you won't have to worry about that happening!'

*Bloody great!* Harry waited for him to tell her more good news.

'And in 2005 the law changed so that a person can't be charged for accessing their property via common land any more, providing, naturally, they could prove they'd been using it for at least twenty years.'

'Oh, good,' she said, brightening up and forgetting to keep still.

'Ah, not so fast,' he breathed. 'I'm afraid the problem is, as far as you're concerned, that we're not talking about common land. It would appear that Mr Matthew James Corrigan is



indeed the rightful owner of two square miles of the foreshore and seabed surrounding what was previously the old clubhouse.'

'No!' Harry wailed. 'There must be something I can do to stop him? Surely he's just trying it on!' Only the certain knowledge that Andrew Lawrence would gobble her up and hide what was left of her body in his safe stopped her passing out.

'I'm afraid that under the law Mr Corrigan is perfectly entitled to protect his land against trespass; in effect, there is no right of way for vessels leaving or entering Watling's. He has, however, offered a solution to your predicament; in the first instance Mr Corrigan is willing to grant access across his land in return for an annual rent.'

Harry could feel the blood draining from her face as she thought of all the money that had gone on advertising. 'We're stretched to the limit as it is.'

Fortunately Andrew Lawrence suddenly seemed to lose interest in her as a tasty snack and focused on his unknown adversary. 'Naturally,' he said, crisply, 'meeting his demand for rent will be our very last course of action.'

'That should be easy,' she said, 'because I haven't got any money.'

The black eyes snapped up at her. Did his tongue flick out as well? 'Um, except for what I've allowed to settle your account,' she added hastily and inaccurately.

'Miss Watling, the point is not whether or not you have the means, but about verifying Mr Corrigan's claim. If we open negotiations about the sum Mr Corrigan is demanding, he may well come back to us with a new offer; say, to lease the land to you at a peppercorn rent. On the surface this might seem to you to offer a quick and easy way out of this difficult situation, but would mean in effect that you recognise him as

your landowner.'

'But that's outrageous!' said Harry. 'What's the other solution?'

'That you sell the land up to the boat yard to him at the market rate and in return you'll be granted access rights in perpetuity.'

'Isn't there anything else I can do?'

'Well you can wait until such time, under the Land Reform Acts, as these rights lose their overriding status.'

She shook her head. 'I can't believe we're having this conversation. Why hasn't something been done about this stuff? It's completely anachronistic. Do I get anything out of it?'

Andrew Lawrence just looked at her.

'Okay, so Matthew Corrigan can just waltz in and use some ancient rights for his own gain and his own business opportunities. Nothing else involved, is there? Do I have to fight crusades for him or give him my firstborn child?'

Five years. Five years of back-breaking slog and sacrifice, only to have it snatched away. Surely that wasn't possible? Her body had started to believe it; she could feel her heart pounding and her breathing becoming shorter. Even Andrew Lawrence was looking at her with a trace of compassion.

'These remnants of feudal law do cause uncertainty, but, unfortunately for you, what Mr Corrigan is attempting to do is entirely legal. We do, however, have a small window of opportunity. It would appear that, as a goodwill gesture, and allowing for the fact you have staff whose needs also have to be considered, Mr Corrigan has given you six weeks' grace before he takes any action. I need hardly tell you, Miss Watling, that this period could prove to be invaluable to us if we can find evidence to dispute Mr Corrigan's claim.'

'Like?'

‘Something to prove that a subsequent lord of the manor, sometime after Percy Campion, gave up his rights over the foreshore.’

Harry felt ill; she was doomed. ‘Where am I supposed to find that?’

‘I will pursue my own inquiries,’ he told her. ‘And in the meantime you might usefully go through every piece of existing paperwork, even to boxes in attics, to see what you can find.’

Fear was making her hysterical. ‘What? Just in case we’ve got any old scrolls of our own kicking around, I suppose.’ Couldn’t he give her something easier to do, like a grail quest?

‘Miss Watling,’ he warned her, ‘I can only hold off the inevitable for so long. Without evidence to the contrary, Mr Matthew James Corrigan is your legal landlord.’

Over my dead body, thought Harry. Or, if I’m very lucky, his.

## *Chapter Eleven*

As the summer evenings drew out Harry liked to work late, making the most of the available light. But when George went to take her a mug of tea, the shed where he expected to find her was unusually quiet. For a moment he pictured her on the beach having fun, like the hard-up students from Great Spitmarsh Further Education College. On days when it wasn't dull, grey and cold, they found any excuse to head to the coast to play games and light portable barbecues.

Sometimes George tried to imagine Harry at home with a family. After all, his own mother had had a fair brood by her age. But this scenario seemed particularly unlikely. As he climbed the wooden ladder beside the boat she was refitting, he could see why. Harry was determined to leave no room in her life for anything but the business; and she was working herself to the bone to prove it.

The topsides she was working on forgotten, Harry was curled up on one of the narrow cockpit benches, fast asleep. George was inclined to creep back down and leave her to it, but he was shocked at how vulnerable she seemed. She'd always been small, like her mother, but he was dismayed at how thin her face looked. Without the almost permanent scowl she wore these days, she seemed much younger too, as if in sleep she could slough off the worry she carried around with her all day. Maeve was one of those women whose beauty drew lingering glances wherever she went, but catching her daughter off guard like this made him realise that Harry was quite a looker too. What a damn shame it was all wasted.

Heaving himself on deck, George swirled the tea round to

disperse the slight skin that had formed and plonked the mug, celebrating the nuptials of Fergie and Andrew, down beside her. ‘‘Bout time you got yerself some early nights,’ he muttered.

Harry groaned and rubbed her eyes. ‘I want to get this done before I turn in.’

‘What’s the bleedin’ rush?’ he said. ‘Ain’t nobody gonna die in a ditch about it. There’s no Stelios whassisface waiting for it, just some whingeing skinflint who probably won’t pay up ’til the middle of next year. You’re gonna make yerself ill going on like this.’

Harry put on her stubborn face. ‘There’s no one else to do it.’

‘Same’ll be true when you collapse with exhaustion. Now you don’t need a straw to see the way the wind’s blowin’ here, so you’re gonna have to get some help.’

She was her father’s daughter all right. Worryingly so, sometimes. George made sure he had her full attention. ‘I’m told there’s a bit of a do over at Sam— the restaurant tonight,’ he said, correcting himself quickly before she realised it was Matthew who had spoken to him.

Harry opened her mouth and he motioned for her to shut it. ‘Just ’old yer ’orses, will you? Pre-publicity, so I’ve ’eard. Now you’ve only got to take a look at what’s going on to see there’s a lot of money involved. If you want some of the cash to find its way over ’ere, you’ve got to make some changes. You should ’ave thought of that before wasting money on advertising. You don’t want no more riff-raff ’ere, you want quality.’

‘Times is changing, Miss Harriet, whether you like it or not, so why not make it easier for yourself? Why don’t you have a word with your mother? She and that new ’usband of hers have made a tidy sum through that business of theirs, and

she could afford to put some of it in your direction.'

'What?' Harry looked up from her tea. 'And let her think that, after all those years of turning away, she can simply buy her way back?'

'Whoa, whoa, whoa! Just a minute, young lady. All right, she don't win no prizes for being Mother of the Year, but you'd be cutting off yer nose to spite yer face to refuse it. Think of the difference it would make to the cash-flow problems.'

'Tell you what, George. I will phone Mum, but not to ask about money, she can't just pay me off to salve her conscience. There's something much more important I need to find out. Actually, you might be able to help too.'

He tried to tell himself to relax, but his sixth sense was kicking in, ordering him to get away as fast as he could. He backed towards the ladder, but Harry hadn't finished.

'George? You've got some of Dad's stuff, haven't you?'

Willing himself to act normally, he set one trembling foot on the ladder. 'One or two bits, Miss Harriet.'

'Well, that might be a start. You wouldn't mind digging it out for me, would you, George?'

Both feet on without a hitch. 'Don't know as I've got anything of value, Miss Harriet, it's just sentimental stuff.'

Harry laughed. 'Relax! I wasn't thinking of putting it on eBay. I'm just interested in something that might have happened in the past.'

He clung to the bottom of the ladder, glad she couldn't see his face. That was exactly what he was afraid of.

Singing along with the Scissor Sisters, Frankie eyed himself appreciatively in the mirror as he worked styling wax into his hair.

'Gorgeous!' agreed Trevor, tucking his black tee shirt into distressed jeans. 'Those orchids are going to open at exactly

the right time, aren't they? I think we should be really proud; our designs are going to look fabulous. Everything's arrived on time and we don't have any last-minute panics to worry about either.'

'Your designs, Trev, you're the one with the all the creative flair. I'm just going to make sure that your work is noticed – when this article gets published I want you to get the recognition you deserve.'

'Maybe,' said Trevor, spritzing himself with aftershave, 'but I don't think anyone's going to be looking at a few flowers once all the models turn up. Illicit weekends, indeed. Talking of which, that Gina looks a handful, doesn't she? No wonder Matthew's been looking a bit stressed.'

'Not half as stressed as Harry will look when she sees the competition.' Frankie tore his gaze away from himself for a moment. 'Poor girl doesn't stand a chance against that! Here, Trevor, I don't think we should tell Harry what we're doing tonight, do you?'

Trevor shuddered. 'You can, if you like, but I'm not brave enough.'

Sulking behind the linen curtain, Kirstie did a puddle on the floor and looked at the pair of them reproachfully. No one was taking the slightest interest in her. It was really too bad.

Against his better judgement, Matthew had persuaded himself that Lola could be an asset to his service staff. It wasn't much, but with looks like that who knew what opportunities might open up for her. She wasn't the sort to offer a smile to the customers, but who cared? Having watched her working the bar at the Spitmarsh Yacht Club regatta, he knew how electrifying she was in action. At the very least she'd got some training; heck, he'd even gone as far as taking her there because of the transport difficulties. And when Gina had

floated this preposterous idea for her bloody magazine, one of his first thoughts was how great it would be for Lola to be involved. There wasn't a lot in the way of glamour and excitement for a nineteen-year-old in Little Spitmarsh. So when he'd looked round the room earlier and realised she hadn't turned up, he had been bitterly disappointed. The one thing he hoped would have been drummed into her was that she was expected to arrive on time; but it looked as if he'd been mistaken.

Having first checked to make certain she was really missing and not lurking in the Ladies with stage fright, Matthew hissed through his teeth and dragged out his car keys. Slamming the door, he started the engine and screeched away, sending pebbles flying. What really stuck in his throat was that Lola had the audacity to let him down. Lola Moulton could take the piss out of everyone else but she wasn't going to do it to him.

Striding up *Bella Vista's* gangplank with enough force to cause the deck to shake, Matthew thought grimly that it wouldn't exactly come as a shock for Lola to find him at the door. It was no surprise, therefore, that she had sent her father to receive him instead. Interesting that the houseboat was built from a decommissioned torpedo boat, because Matthew sensed a battle ahead.

'She ain't coming, mate,' Roy sneered.

For a second, Matthew admired the Brylcreemed quiff shining fixed and proud on Roy's skull; but then his anger got the better of him. 'Let her come and tell me herself, then.'

'Hey! Are you deaf? She's not coming, right?' Roy said, jabbing his finger at Matthew. 'And you've got a bloody cheek turning up here. After what you've been doing with our girl behind our backs, you're lucky not to get a right hook, mate.'



‘And I thought you were a decent boy!’ accused Carmen, squeezing through.

Matthew wouldn’t have thought there was room for Carmen and her twins in the doorway as well as Roy. As it was, he thought, eyeing Carmen’s heaving sequinned cleavage warily, the twins seemed to be making a bid for escape.

‘Mr Corrigan! I’m here. They won’t let me go!’ said a voice at the back.

Great, he was supposed to be taking the lead at his restaurant – not playing a bit part in an episode of *The Sopranos*. ‘Right’, he said, taking the plunge into a mountain of Moulton flesh. ‘Will someone tell me what’s going on?’

Harry had been unable to resist George’s invitation to take a look at what was happening over at the restaurant, now proudly displaying its name on a fashionably understated sign. She adjusted the outboard engine and followed the meandering current along Campion’s Creek. In any other circumstances it would have been a beautiful evening. Thin white clouds like ostrich feathers fanned the duck-egg sky and the warm air rang with the piping calls of wading birds, but she was too conscious of Matthew’s restaurant rising above the water before her to enjoy it. How long would it be before these unspoilt and simple pleasures were eclipsed by the tinny ringing of mobile phones and the hooting of Up-From-Londoners?

What a pity George had gone to ground, or else she could have told him exactly where his advice had got her. Harry had phoned her mother, not for financial assistance, but to see if she could shed any light on the likely whereabouts of any old paperwork.

‘Harry,’ Maeve sighed, shutting down as she always did when Harry tried to talk about her father. ‘I didn’t need any

physical mementos of the past. My memories of the good times are what's important to me.'

No one could accuse Maeve of being sentimental. She'd redistributed her husband's belongings shortly after his death. His clothes went to charity shops, his weightier books to the local library and George inherited the lighter reads and travel yarns. As for his daughter and his business, Maeve had abandoned those as soon as possible. Little wonder she didn't hang on to paperwork. Oh, Maeve had been good at decluttering all right.

'Why the sudden interest anyway, Harry? Just what are you hoping to find?'

Harry thought fast. It didn't help that she was afraid to be too explicit about the legal stranglehold Matthew could have over her. There was too much of a risk of it getting back to George and the less George knew of what was at stake the better. Silly old sod that he was at times, he'd been looking very fragile lately. Harry didn't need him troubled by something that, with a bit of diligence and a lot of luck, he would never need to know about.

For some reason Jimi Tan sprang to mind. 'No reason, really. Just that a guy turned up at the boat yard recently who thought Dad still owned the place. It reminded me that it was about time I did something about putting all the paperwork in one place.'

It sounded a bit flimsy. Maeve apparently thought so too.

'Your dad? What did he want to know about him? Everyone in Little Spitmarsh knows the history of the business.'

'Oh, he wasn't local. He was a young guy, a couple of years older than me. Something to do with the restaurant. Quite nice-looking actually, a really stunning combination of Asian and European features. Hey? Maybe he's got designs on

my assets?’

Maeve didn’t seem to think it likely from her silence. For a moment Harry thought she’d lost the connection and, when Maeve spoke again, there was an urgency in her voice that suggested she had something more important to do.

‘Harry, have you thought any more about selling some land to that property developer?’

Ah, same old Maeve, get rid of the problem.

‘Perhaps redevelopment is the answer if you’re determined to keep the yard. You could clear the debts and have the satisfaction of owning the place outright. If you’re struggling with legal fees, Don and I can probably help you out. Why don’t you approach the developer and see if you can come to an arrangement that will suit both of you?’

No point in telling her mother that it was far too late for that. Harry was feeling too disappointed to prolong the conversation, but at least one possible source of evidence had been eliminated; Maeve certainly wasn’t sitting on any documents from the past. Maeve’s offhand dismissal of her previous life could be really painful, Harry thought, before reminding herself that she was trying to take her mind off her problems, not add to them.

Having illegally crossed Matthew’s land to check the moorings, she went to secure one of the lines. A bruised fingertip later, and sprayed with slime in the process of stripping mucilaginous threads of seaweed, she found it easy to pretend that the changes on her doorstep weren’t really happening.

When she had finally run out of the dirty and difficult work she’d drummed up as an excuse to see what was going on, Harry navigated from the deep-water channel to the shallower basin where the smaller boats were moored. Certain that her hair was adorned with dried seaweed and her dungarees caked

with mud and oil, she drew closer to the foot of the restaurant feeling horribly conspicuous. What if Matthew and his smart London friends were looking down on her as she chugged past? Too bad if they were, she told herself; she still had the best part of six weeks to do what the hell she liked. Nevertheless, a morbid need to dismiss her fears as stupid and completely groundless compelled her to glance up at the restaurant.

Harry gasped. Instead of presenting a black eyeless gaze to the waterway, Samphire glittered and twinkled in the twilight, its huge glass windows affording her a spectacular view of everything that was going on inside. She cruised past feeling shocked. Matthew had achieved everything he'd promised her he would do. Visually, the restaurant was a resounding success, with a simple and understated interior, and subtle lighting turning every table into an intimate venue where glasses and cutlery gleamed invitingly. If the quality of the food lived up to the standard the setting appeared to promise, visiting Samphire would be a memorable dining experience.

Of course, delivering the restaurant was only half the story. It might look superb but, unless there was a further reason for the customers to return, the odds were that Samphire would close in a matter of months. Was Matthew's claim over her land as secure as he hoped, or was he just bluffing to make her cave in quickly? Since no one was taking any notice of what was happening outside, and certainly not of her, Harry turned the outboard down lower and eased the dinghy round for a second look.

Frankie and Trevor, mysteriously wearing black tee shirts with Black Narcissus in white lettering across them, seemed to be putting the final touches to spectacular table centerpieces: purple orchids and deep burgundy dahlias arranged in low vases filled with polished pebbles. Flashes of light indicated

there was at least one photographer about, whilst a scary-looking woman – wearing the kind of clothes that could get you arrested in Little Spitmarsh – appeared to be delivering last-minute instructions to a bevy of beautiful couples.

Harry felt completely insignificant, a forlorn piece of flotsam floating past; she shivered as her wet feet grew cold in the evening breeze. When Matthew told her he would create the restaurant that would put Little Spitmarsh on the map, it had been easy to dismiss it as an empty threat. But what if she was wrong? Perhaps she was alone in her fears for what might happen to the area? Frankie and Trevor seemed delighted with the changing face of Little Spitmarsh, but Harry had deep concerns about the effects of Matthew's particular form of cosmetic surgery on her flawed and dearly loved old town.

As a car crunched to a halt to swell the growing number in the car park, she couldn't even console herself that no one was going to turn up. Doors slammed and two figures rushed towards Samphire. Someone was keen, but not Harry. She'd seen enough.

## *Chapter Twelve*

Nothing he could ever do would make Harry Watling change her mind, Matthew thought, shoving Lola Moulton into the cloakroom to get ready in double-quick time. But if anyone thought he acted only out of self-interest, he'd just proved them wrong.

It was a relief that he didn't have to sing castrato after the bollocking Roy Moulton had given him. Matthew pushed his hands through his already untidy curls and smoothed his jacket. Why hadn't Lola just come clean about the fact that she'd been working for him, instead of inventing some cock and bull story about nail bars? It had added a good ten minutes to the frantic explanations, cutting it very fine to get back to Samphire in time.

Lola pulled a face as she emerged from the door in front of him. 'You'd think I was being forced to work in a massage parlour rather than a restaurant.'

'They just want the best for you, that's all,' Matthew said, thinking at the same time how much the photographer would love Lola in her sexy fitted white shirt and black trousers. Now he remembered why he'd gone out on a limb to offer her a job.

'Hairdressing? Yeah, that's really good.' She sniffed.

Matthew, who had long since given up trying to explain why women happily parted with huge sums of money to lose a few millimetres of hair, felt that stubbornness was making her miss the point. 'It's your mum's business – and a successful one. Of course they want you to be part of it.'

She looked mutinous. 'In other words they won't be happy until I'm in the salon doing old ladies' roots all day and

waxing their chins.'

Yep, that sounded like Little Spitmarsh. He could see why she wasn't exactly thrilled at the prospect. Had he been foolishly optimistic to hope that he'd given her the opportunity to learn all sorts of transferable skills when, in reality, her choices were being confined to the salon, or visiting care homes to look after Little Spitmarsh's ageing population? Or perhaps she'd find work in a bigger town further away, then there'd be even fewer young people around.

'Go on, you're late,' he said pushing her towards the dining room and depressing thoughts from his mind. 'Get in there and find out what the fuck you're supposed to be doing.'

'Love the way you treat your staff, darling. Perhaps we should have a little game of French maid and master later.'

Gina was wearing long boots, black vinyl leggings and a military-style jacket. She raised her eyebrows as Lola sashayed out of sight.

'Not quite the dough-faced chubby teenager I was expecting, darling. We might be able to do something with her.'

Matthew went quite hot, wondering what she was suggesting; but then he noticed her gaze drift past him and light up as someone else came through the door.

'Oh good, you made it!' She turned back to Matthew, eyes full of mischief, daring him to protest. 'I thought we'd get Jimi in some of the photos, darling. It'll be good publicity for when the place opens.'

'Great idea,' said Matthew, through gritted teeth. With final inspections to be carried out before the restaurant officially opened, he'd set Jimi the task of forging ahead where he could, creating menus and sourcing food. Clearly he hadn't kept him busy enough. 'Have you got somewhere to stay

tonight, Jimi?’

‘A place called The Admiral?’

An establishment entirely unrecognised by the tourist board, Egon Ronay or Michelin. A night there was guaranteed to take the spring out of anyone’s footsteps, spent cheek by jowl with the next room, hearing non-stop sport on their TV, followed by a queue for the communal bathroom down a draughty hall and breakfast at eight. Perfect, thought Matthew, thinking it would do nicely and shaking Jimi’s hand with more warmth than he’d intended. ‘There’s champagne through there, help yourself.’

‘You didn’t ask me where I was staying,’ Gina teased.

Matthew grabbed her perfectly cut bob and pulled her towards him. ‘You’re lucky; there’s space for you in my bed.’

Right now Matthew was feeling like a spare part. Whilst Gina directed, bullied and charmed - and it hadn’t escaped his attention that Jimi always got the charm - Matthew had no involvement in the proceedings. Whatever Gina had promised him once everyone had gone home, it would have been nice if she’d shared her thoughts or sought his opinion. She was quick to run to Jimi - ‘He’s got such good taste!’ - as if Matthew was some heavy-handed oaf; he was beginning to feel he was only good for one thing.

Looking round the room, *his* room, as he consoled himself, everyone else seemed to be having a good time. The place was buzzing, the women were beautiful and the guys were lusting after the waitresses - even though Lola returned their compliments with scathing looks.

He’d overheard Jimi apparently trying to negotiate his own TV series. Even Roy Moulton and Carmen, who Matthew had sweet-talked into popping along to see for themselves that Lola wasn’t in the middle of Sodom and Gomorrah, seemed



reluctant to leave, and were keen to take up the invitation to be his guests when the restaurant officially opened.

Pausing only to smile for the misguided individual who - clearly unaware he was a nobody here - wanted to take his photograph, Matthew headed for the door and some fresh air. If he'd expected anything to spoil this evening, it was concern that Gina would criticise or belittle some aspect of his development - not that she would fail to notice his work altogether.

Outside, with the hubbub behind him, it was refreshingly quiet. The night was cool, with a clear sky and only the susurrations of the waves against the shore to break the stillness. From being someone who'd once baulked at the peace of the countryside, he'd come a long way. He liked to lie in bed now, and watch the slow spread of the rising sun through the open curtains as it bathed the fields in soft rosy light. Or, at night, to pick out the constellations in the silent starry skies unbroken by the distress calls of the city.

Given enough time, would this neglected and forgotten part of the world work its magic on Gina too? She was a woman whose heart beat to the rhythm of the capital; waves of tourists parted for her, closed doors opened for her, fully booked restaurants found a table for her and sold-out gigs came up with a VIP pass. Would she give any of it up for this?

Although he made a great deal of money, Matthew had lost count of the number of hours he'd spent ankle-deep in mud, waiting for contractors and battling with budgets. Gina's ephemeral, shifting and superficial world had been a novelty for him at first, but now he needed something to bridge the gulf between them before it tore them apart.

Across the creek, the swoosh of a heavy door sliding open made him look up. A single lamp in the room behind backlit the figure standing on the balcony. To anyone else Harry,

dressed in a short white robe tied at the waist, would have looked small and defenceless in the dark. But Matthew knew better; even though he had a document in his possession which would give him such an advantage over her, he knew he could expect a fight. Yes, Harry Watling could take care of herself. Proud, principled and capable: in a funny sort of way Harry had many of the qualities he admired. She stood for several minutes staring out over the water and, when at last she went back in, Matthew was suddenly aware that he could almost hear the pounding of his heart.

Shaken, he turned to cross the threshold and return to the crazy world behind him, then heard footsteps on the gravel as a woman walked out of the shadows towards him.

'Penny for them?' A flicker of light showed him that Gina was much too curious.

'Just taking a breather,' Matthew said.

Gina ran a hand up his thigh. 'Who was the girl on the balcony?'

'No one special,' he lied. 'Come on, let's go in.'

She blocked his path. 'I could probably get away for a while, if you like?'

What was wrong with him? Most blokes wouldn't have needed a second invitation. 'How much longer is this going to take, Gina? This is not supposed to be a party. I don't want to be closed down before I've even opened for business.'

'Small town. Small thinking, Matthew,' she said, and he could see the expression on her face. 'I'll get it wrapped up.'

Oh, what the hell? He couldn't feel any worse, could he? Maybe Gina *was* what he needed. He reached out, cupped her head in his hand and kissed her roughly. 'Be patient. Duty first, pleasure after.'

Gina's laugh was soft and enticing in the dark and Matthew told himself that soon he'd feel much better.

Frankie was singing as he ambled along the silent town's streets, with Trevor beside him wondering tipsily where on earth he was. Ah bless, thought Frankie, Trevor was such a lightweight when it came to alcohol. Although he could understand his confusion: it *was* difficult to reconcile the glittering images from the evening with the drab and neglected town. He really wanted to believe that this was the birth of a new modern identity for Little Spitmarsh. He and Trevor had received terrific feedback about their work. The table centrepieces had been photographed and praised, journalists had taken phone numbers and potential customers had taken business cards. It all looked really exciting, but they would just have to wait and hope that Matthew's castle wasn't built on shifting sand.

As they rounded the corner, The Flowerpot Men's decrepit and weathered shop front seemed symptomatic of everything that was backward looking and sleazy about the town. The sooner both were dragged into the present the better. To complete the picture of decay, Bitsa, the dishevelled fleabag of a dog who everyone in the town seemed to know but no one owned, was pressing his great ugly nose against the window.

'Away, you dirty mongrel,' Frankie said, waving his hand.

'But I live here!' Trevor protested.

'Not you, you fool,' Frankie giggled.

Once they were both busy trying to find the right combination of key and lock, Bitsa lifted his leg and generously sprayed the peeling paintwork before bounding up the road looking pleased with himself.

Only one more set of stairs to negotiate, Frankie thought with relief, having successfully manoeuvred Trevor into the bathroom, and then they could get to their pristine attic bedroom and have sweet dreams about the evening.

‘Oh, Phil, you fool, have you missed us?’ he said to the little dog who was madly dancing round the room. ‘Calm down, then you can have a cuddle.’ He patted his lap, but Phil refused to settle; instead, he kept jumping up and down the first three steps to the bedroom. When he started yapping, Frankie had had enough. He got up and made a grab for Phil, who scampered up another step out of reach - until eventually they arrived upstairs and Frankie finally saw what all the fuss was about.

‘Trevor, have you finished in the loo?’ he called. ‘You might want to come and have a look at this.’

Gina had been pretty scathing about the faded country style of his rented cottage, with its vintage floral curtains at the windows and the whimsical collections of old wicker baskets and mismatched china. Given that he hadn’t brought her back to admire the decor, Matthew was a little disappointed that she’d noticed. He thought about trying to explain to her that even Little Spitmarsh had its share of British Summer Timers, families with enough time and money to decamp to the coast for the summer. Except that the BSTs in this case had decided that Little Spitmarsh was every bit as dreary as its first appearance suggested and, unable to face returning even to collect their belongings, they’d at least struck lucky with a lucrative let. In the circumstances, Matthew decided to save his breath. There were better things to do.

Sometime in the small hours, as his hands travelled across the crumpled bed linen in vain, Matthew opened his eyes to find that Gina had taken her beautiful body and upped and left him. Whilst he’d been vaguely aware of her muttering something about heading back to G Mag House, he still felt dreadfully let down. She’d used and consumed him without even hanging around long enough for them to have breakfast

together. Well, never mind, he thought, rolling onto his back, the feeling was entirely mutual; if that's what she was offering, that's what he'd take. All the same, it would have been nice if she could at least have bothered to wake him up to say goodbye. Staring at the ceiling, Matthew felt hollowed out and worn. As he reoriented himself, he slowly began to appreciate that the pounding that had disturbed him was not just going on inside his head; someone was at the front door.

Berating himself for being so quick to think the worst of her, Matthew threw back the covers and grabbed his boxers. Whilst Gina would be more than happy for him to open the door stark naked, he didn't especially want to flash any early morning passers-by.

'All right, I'm coming!' he bellowed, happily anticipating what delights she'd brought back with her. Hey! Cooked breakfast – now that was a thought, not that he could recall Gina ever keeping anything but champagne in her own fridge. Running through a mental checklist of what he had in store, Matthew opened the door.

'Mr Corrigan?' asked the police officer, whilst his female colleague, after a sly downwards peep, kept her eyes above his waist. Matthew stared from one to the other, his heart racing. Oh God! Gina! She couldn't even have been fit to drive when she left. If only he'd woken up, he might have stopped her leaving.

Harry went out to buy a paper, hoping that those who had gone to romp at Samphire were bearing the bumps of their rude encounter with the realities of Little Spitmarsh the next day. A maniac woman in a top-of-the-range silver Mercedes nearly sent her flying on the pedestrian crossing, which didn't make her look any more favourably on the strangers in town. She tried consoling herself with the thought that the karma

police would be waiting round the corner with a breathalyser. The Flowerpot Men was firmly closed, as Frankie and Trevor's mouths had been on the subject of Samphire, therefore confirming that Bill and Ben had indeed gone out to play as she suspected. Coming back along the creek, she also noticed that *Bella Vista* was missing its usual washing line of oversized kinky underwear, which made her wonder if Roy and Carmen had had a late night waiting for Lola to return.

At least George, contentedly sipping his tea, was unaffected by the previous evening. Harry waited until he was sufficiently distracted by a shortbread finger not to notice the thrust of her question.

'You know Roy Moulton, don't you, George? How does he feel about Lola going out with Matthew?'

Hopefully the answer would be that they'd skinned Matthew alive, then she wouldn't have to worry about him being her feudal lord. George spat out biscuit crumbs and laughed. 'Lola Moulton? No one's good enough for Lola Moulton, not even Matthew Corrigan!'

Privately Harry felt she had evidence to the contrary, but George had more to say. 'Nah, she works for him. Going to be doin' a bit of waitressing up at Samphire. Mind you, the Commodore's right put out. Got his mate at the Frigate 'otel up at Great Spitmarsh to train her up, and now she reckons she's too good to work at the new yacht club.'

Harry felt a nice warm glow wash over her. It was bad enough Matthew laying claim to all the land in Little Spitmarsh without him exercising any privileges in respect of local maidens.

'Besides, Matthew Corrigan wouldn't look at a kid like Lola. Not when he's got a real woman.'

Harry felt the nice warm glow turn cold. 'What woman?'

'The one I saw sneaking out his 'ouse first thing this

morning. Now she was a cracker. You name it, she 'ad it; legs, hair ...' George's voice trailed off as he struggled to find the words to describe this Venus among women.

'Her own teeth?'

'And a very nice silver car,' he decided.

Nothing wrong with a white van, sniffed Harry to herself.

## Chapter Thirteen

Matthew was elated when he discovered that the two police officers standing at his door were *not* there to tell him that Gina's car had been found piled up on the motorway. Which meant it took a moment for the bad news they were trying to deliver to sink in. Even now, standing outside Samphire's kitchen door where the air was still acrid with the stink of melted plastic, and the charred cladding and blackened glass defaced his pristine building, he was still finding it hard to believe what his senses were telling him. It was when he thought of how many people could have been hurt that Matthew started to feel really ill. 'There's no way this could have been an accident?'

'Not unless that petrol poured itself in there and set fire to itself deliberately.'

'I see what you mean.' It was terrifying to think that someone had been lying in wait; then, once there were no witnesses, had pushed the wheelie bin at the back of the premises towards the building and set fire to it. Most of the damage was to the exterior; although one of the kitchen windows had also been affected, which had set off the sprinkling systems. Water ran off every surface, but Matthew was just thankful it hadn't been worse.

'Do you have any idea who might have wanted to cause damage to the premises, sir?'

Matthew shook his head. 'No, of course not. Why would anyone want to? I mean, someone would have to really dislike me to intentionally do this.' Someone who wanted to send a powerful signal that his presence was deeply unwelcome. Someone who was determined to put him out of business.



Someone who was desperate enough to take drastic measures to save their own skin. No. Surely not?

By the time he got back to the cottage, Matthew was bone-weary. He could have done with Gina being there to give him a hug or listen to his troubles; but then Gina, he had to admit, wasn't exactly the sort to fuss over him or coo. As for rolling up her sleeves and helping him to clear up - forget it. Her reaction would be one of relief that she'd managed to get her photos before some joker tried to burn Samphire down. It wasn't, he tried to tell himself, that she didn't care; it was just that she had different priorities. She was ambitious, always hungry for the next opportunity, and she hated any attempts to tie her down. Sometimes he wondered if he could carry on the way they were. At least Harry understood what it was like to feel your back against the wall. But surely even Harry wouldn't go that far to protect herself?

As he pushed open the door he noticed a scruffy piece of lined paper lying untidily on the mat and picked it up, feeling irritated that he'd missed the window cleaner again. Flicking it open to see how much he owed, Matthew peered at a scrawled message.

'No Yuppies or else. L.S.L.F. (Little Spitmarsh Liberation Front).' This time he picked up the phone.

Halfway through a cafetière of her favourite coffee and the Sunday papers, Harry was disappointed to have to get up to answer the door. For a couple of Jehovah's Witnesses they were pretty flash, she thought, glancing through the glass; in fact they looked more like estate agents. He was in his thirties with receding mousy hair, sharp suit and lilac silk tie; whilst her sensible chain-store outfit was offset by dyed blonde hair wrenched into a high ponytail and too much make-up. Harry was on the point of telling them where to go when the man

waved an impressive badge at her.

Detective Sergeant Silk Tie and Detective Constable Croydon Facelift asked a lot of questions, all suggesting that Harry might have some useful information about a fire in a rubbish bin round the back of Samphire. She thought it was probably wise not to say that, assuming no loss of life was involved, she would have been very happy to see the entire place razed to the ground.

‘I really don’t have anything else to tell you,’ she said, finally. ‘By the time I’d finished all the work on the moorings and put the dinghy away I was exhausted. I had a soak in the bath and went to bed - alone. Sorry, but that’s all I can say.’

The two police officers exchanged a glance and Harry, catching it, felt exasperated. All this effort for Matthew Corrigan. Would anyone else in the area get a couple of detectives investigating what had probably been a stupid prank by a couple of bored yobs?

‘Ms Watling, what do you know about the Little Spitmarsh Liberation Front?’ Croydon Facelift asked.

‘Wha-at?’ Harry hooted with laughter. Bored yobs with a crass sense of humour. ‘Somebody’s pulling your leg. There’s no such organisation, believe me. I’ve lived here all my life and this is the first I’ve heard about it. Little Spitmarsh Liberation Front! That’s marvellous! Where can I join?’

‘Ms Watling,’ Silk Tie warned her, ‘we’re talking about a very serious incident here; a pre-planned attack on a commercial premises which appears to be politically motivated. I don’t find that very amusing.’

‘Ms Watling,’ Croydon Facelift joined in, ‘a young couple down by the creek think they caught sight of an elderly gentleman close to the scene. Not much of a description to go on, dark coat, unkempt greyish hair. We’d like to talk to this gentleman to eliminate him from our enquiries. You didn’t

happen to notice anyone like that when you were working yesterday evening, did you?’

*The one I saw sneaking out his 'ouse first thing this morning.* What had George been doing outside Matthew’s house at that time of day anyway?

‘Sorry, Officer, but in case you hadn’t noticed that description could apply to half the men in Little Spitmarsh. Maybe, instead of standing here talking to me, you should start rounding up all the male pensioners?’

George slunk back into the shadows of his shed as the couple got into their Vauxhall Astra. Coppers. You could tell ’em a mile off, plain clothes or not. As the car shot off out of sight, he fumbled for his chair and sat down. What had he started?

As the extent of the damage to the restaurant sank in, Matthew became thoroughly depressed. He tried to call Gina, but received only the brief crumb of a text telling him she’d speak to him later when she was less busy. Jimi’s phone was switched off too. Oh well, it would take his mind off the tinned tomatoes, throbbing on the breakfast plates at The Admiral like sacrificial hearts, when the police turned up there this morning to run through his recollections of last night.

Trying not to be paranoid about the fact that neither of the two people he was trying to get hold of would speak to him, Matthew headed to the secluded coil in the creek that was now, so it appeared, part of his feudal estate. The water shimmered in the heat and the dry tips of the long grasses whispered as he passed, sending unwary birds flapping into the still blue sky. Then he noticed a small figure hunched up by the water’s edge, hugging her knees to her chest. This, as he remembered too late, was the place where he’d first come across Harry Watling, but right now Matthew didn’t feel too

sentimental about that; she was the last person he wanted to see. The velvet hours of the night with Gina had chased off any strange notions that catching sight of Harry on her balcony the previous evening had created. That and the small matter that she, or someone she knew, might just have been responsible for trying to burn his development to the ground. Just his luck that she had chosen to escape from the boat yard when he needed to find some space too.

Catching her off guard and seeing her look so small and defenceless, Matthew could almost feel sorry for her. But, if Harry Watling had problems, he didn't really want to know – especially when they were probably to do with him. Any conversation between them now was going to be unpleasant. Maybe he could just pretend he hadn't seen her and go back the way he'd come? Harry didn't have a very high opinion of him anyway, so at least she wouldn't be expecting him to offer her a shoulder to cry on. But why was she crying? Perhaps she did have a guilty conscience? Someone had set his restaurant on fire – what did Harry know about it?

Before he could decide what to do, her head snapped up and his stomach lurched at the sheer misery in her eyes. Then she pulled herself together and remembered to glare at him with a ferocity guaranteed to send most men packing. Ah, that was better. He was used to dealing with Harry's hostility; it was familiar ground. Lowering himself beside her, Matthew felt he was dealing with a small, scared and potentially ferocious animal.

'Oh, great! Just who I needed to see – my lord and master.'

Matthew doubted that anyone would ever be that.

'Problems?' he asked gently.

'Well, what do you think?' she spat out.

Someone really ought to get a muzzle on her, he thought, shaking his head.

‘You knew I would never willingly part with any land so that you could make a killing from your upmarket housing estate, so you had to find an underhand method to force me. Do you really think you can take the boat yard from me on the basis of a piece of outdated legislation?’ she said, angry tears thickening her voice.

Matthew decided, not for the first time, that, if everyone he had to deal with in his professional life was like Harry, his liver might not be able to take the pace. ‘You haven’t got a leg to stand on, Harry,’ he warned, in no mood to humour her. ‘I could put you out of business tomorrow if I chose. You’ve got six weeks to get your head around the idea and come to your senses, which is a lot more than most people would have given you, quite frankly. It gives you plenty of time to do your research about how much you can ask for your land. I’m not trying to cheat you out of anything. I’m willing to pay the market price, although why I’m bothering, I don’t know.’

‘The boat yard is all I’ve got,’ she pleaded, the catch in her throat making him feel like a pantomime villain. He took a deep breath before he lost his temper completely and lived up to her expectations of him.

‘For God’s sake, Harry. I’m only trying to buy some land. I’m not putting you out of a job – you’re quite capable of doing that for yourself. You’re following your dreams over there, but I love my work too and I can see how this space could be improved and work better for everyone. I do have some good qualities.’

‘Yeah? Well, you keep them very well hidden,’ she grunted.

Matthew smiled despite himself. That was Harry; always determined to think the worst of him. ‘Come on, Harry, look at me.’

Harry squinted round at him and his heart bled. With her

little button nose all pink and thick black lashes brimming with tears, she looked like a twelve-year-old and he wanted to ruffle her hair and tell her everything was going to be all right. Except, of course, that would make him a complete shit. And there was also the small matter, he thought with a heavy heart, that, if what he feared was true, Harry Watling was facing a custodial sentence.

‘Harry?’ Might as well get it out in the open. ‘What’s upsetting you? Is there something you want to tell me?’

It all went a bit quiet whilst Harry fumbled in her pockets for a tissue and couldn’t find one. Then her shoulders stiffened.

‘Just a minute,’ she said, wiping her nose with the back of her hand and glaring at him. ‘This isn’t about manorial rights, is it? This is about more than just your pathetic attempt to bully me into selling my land, isn’t it?’

Looking at her indignant expression, he felt very much as if someone had trickled ice-cold water down his back. Whoever had tried to set fire to his restaurant it wasn’t Harry. Big mistake, Matthew, he thought as he saw the realisation of just what he was suggesting dawn on her.

‘You think I had something to do with the fire, don’t you? No wonder I had the police knocking down my door this morning!’

All the colour had drained from her face and her voice shook with emotion. ‘It wasn’t enough for you to threaten me with solicitor’s letters, was it? A lengthy legal battle would have slowed everything down so you decided to move things along quicker. *You* suggested to the police that I was somehow implicated in the fire. You even threw in a vague description that could fit George, to stitch him up too! Some vandal with nothing better to do than set light to a bin and you used it to your advantage!’

‘You’re jumping to conclusions. Trust me, I didn’t really believe you meant anything serious to happen, but it did occur to me that you might have invented some extremist group to try to scare me off.’

‘You know,’ she said, pulling herself up and dealing him a look of deep contempt, ‘with the kind of tactics you employ, I wouldn’t put it past you to have started that fire yourself.’

With Harry in this mood, Matthew almost felt like pleading guilty – just to show her how sorry he was and stop her feeling so bad. Except that part of the reason she’d taken it so hard was that there was no helping the person who had deliberately set out to harm the business. Harry wasn’t guilty of arson, but she knew the police had got a description of a suspect. That’s why she’d been crying.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

The early morning clouds had been chased away by the sun and it was promising to shape up into what Harry might previously have called a scorcher. Since the days had rolled by and no one had been arrested yet for the attempted arson at Samphire, she preferred to avoid such language – just in case anyone was listening to accuse her, or George, of being a pyromaniac.

Little Spitmarsh was basking in sunshine, but Harry certainly couldn't enjoy it. Maybe she was afraid. Having desperately scrutinized every piece of paper in her possession – and even unearthed a couple of mislaid receipts and the instructions to her DVD recorder, which would have saved her many hours of frustration several months ago – there was nothing to contradict Matthew's rights to stop her crossing his land.

When there was only the bank to fight, Harry had been optimistic about tackling the ordinary financial problems of running the yard. She could always console herself with the fact that, if she took on two paper rounds and gave up food, she might avoid bankruptcy. Now she was beginning to wonder how much fight she had left in her. She was one week into her six-week stay of execution and, unless someone came up with a useful document fast, her fate rested entirely with Matthew. To think that, not so very long ago, she'd mistaken him for a sympathetic soul in a gorgeous body who might ... Well, never mind that, it just proved that you couldn't trust first impressions.

Generating some interest from all the adverts for the boat yard would have cheered her up a bit and stopped her



worrying about how she could afford to pay her legal fees; but the flood of publicity had produced only a trickle of enquiries. A few cruising sailors had been curious enough to nose their vessels through the marshes and wind their way to Watling's, but no one seemed keen to stay.

'Well, what do you expect?' snapped George, after one couple had taken fright because the nearest supermarket was a taxi ride away. 'They're not going to pay through the nose for a bottle of wine at the General Store when they can just wheel it down to the boat a crate at a time from Tesco's up at the marina. No one cooks no more, leastways no more than heating up a ready meal, and where can they get the choice they're after round here? They can't even eat out at the moment, can they?'

'There's the Paradise Café,' offered Harry, who rather liked the ambience of glass vinegar bottles, plastic tomato-shaped ketchup containers and the boot-faced waitress, frilly hat clamped on shampooed and concrete-set hair, who sullenly served the food there.

George shot her a look. 'Exactly. Damn shame about Mr Corrigan 'aving to do all that extra work. You'll notice the difference 'ere when that restaurant opens, Miss Harriet, you wait and see. That was a damn shame, that was, that bin catching fire.'

She had a good mind to tell George that his sainted Mr Corrigan (a) suspected him of being an arsonist and (b) was about to snatch his home and income away; but, given that George had been looking so peaky, she decided to keep her thoughts to herself. 'George,' she said patiently, 'it didn't just catch fire – someone helped.'

He pursed his lips. 'Bah! Kids, that's what it was. That's what 'appens when there's nothing to do. Anti-social behaviour, that's what 'appens. Then no one'll never keep a

boat 'ere.'

Harry took this as a good sign. Surely George wouldn't be lamenting the lack of opportunities for the youth of Little Spitmarsh if he'd started the fire himself? Well, not unless he was on some kind of warped crusade to persuade the council to install skateboard parks for ASBO candidates, which she rather doubted. A niggling suspicion that George might have been the man the police were looking for had been bothering her in the middle of the night. Although, if they brought in everyone fitting the vague description they'd been given, half the town would have been banged up in their cells. Including some of the women. No, as keen as George was to protect her, he had far too much respect for life to set fires. Besides, he was still firmly of the opinion that Matthew Corrigan was A Good Thing. But it still didn't explain what he'd been doing when he'd seen Matthew's mystery woman leaving his house.

Harry's brow furrowed as she recalled George's comments about Matthew's guest; somehow it didn't sound very much as if Matthew had been entertaining his sister. Had she been the only person blamelessly sleeping whilst all kinds of mischief was going on that night? Far from falling exhausted into bed after their evening at Samphire, it seemed as if Frankie and Trevor had had a bit of shock too. Harry cheered up briefly, remembering the look on Trevor's face when she'd bumped into him the next day and he'd described how he and Frankie had come home to find that Kirstie had chosen to give birth on their bed. Fortunately Kirstie and the four puppies were fine, although Frankie had to throw away their duvet with its expensive Egyptian cotton cover, and it was now clear that Kirstie hadn't been too fussy when she'd picked a father for the litter.

Casting her gaze across the rippling water sparkling under a blue sky and the bright colours of the bobbing boats in the

sunshine, Harry decided she needed to get out and feel the wind in her hair. What was the point of moping round the place looking for something that didn't exist, when it would only remind her of everything she had to lose?

George shook his head as Harry coaxed *Calypso* through the tidal gate and out to the winding channel through the backwaters. He watched as the sails filled and could almost feel the little craft respond to Harry's expert touch on the tiller. But he didn't like it. The sea made its own rules. And it made you ill. George had got much better at hiding his suffering since, as a puny fifteen-year-old deck boy and feeling particularly green around the gills, he'd sought a cure for seasickness from one of the sailors and found himself with a mop and bucket clearing up after everyone else. But he was never really happy on a boat and couldn't believe that anyone else ever was either.

Not that Miss Harriet would have taken him anyway and that's what he particularly didn't like. He recognised that obstinate look in her eye of old; she got it from someone else who was equally pig-headed.

Come to think of it, it was Harry senior's fault. If he hadn't bought that damn boat for Maeve, that child wouldn't be out there now. George scowled up at the clouds scooting across the sky. It wasn't the North Atlantic, right enough, but he'd warned her there'd be a good old blow out there today and she hadn't listened. Now he'd damn well be fretting until she was back in sight.

A little wooden yacht, her timbers glowing gold against the spray, was edging into the wind with a solitary figure on deck furling the mainsail. Without knowing exactly what sort of boat it was, Matthew could see that it was a traditional design

which couldn't have been more different from the sleek plastic racing yachts of his experience. The slim figure on deck who, with her dishevelled, short dark hair, might have been mistaken for a boy at a quick glance, was, he ruefully acknowledged, also way outside his usual experience.

'That's Harry Watling, isn't it?' Jimi piped up. Having had enough of cleaning the kitchen, he'd suggested they sample a fruity Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon on the terrace. Lounging back in his chair, he was watching with interest.

Matthew had another look at what was happening on the water. Even Harry's choice of boat demonstrated that she didn't believe in making things easy for herself. Those heavy old yachts could be tricky and demanding. Furling the sail in such a stiff breeze without modern reefing gear required concentration if you wanted to avoid being pitched overboard. With the pick of any number of newer boats right under her nose and the ability to fix most of their problems, why on earth hadn't she chosen something a bit more up to date? Yet Harry didn't look like a martyr or even the slightest bit anxious; in fact, she looked totally in her element.

By Harry's standards she was positively glamorous in a faded striped polo shirt and denim shorts, showing off a really shapely pair of legs. He glanced at Jimi to see if he'd noticed, but his expression was unreadable behind his habitual dark glasses. Harry and her yacht made a bright summer snapshot – the kind that, when the restaurant opened, would enhance everyone's enjoyment of eating by the creek and make them all feel that they were participating in a healthy outdoor lifestyle.

Now that Samphire's opening had been postponed until the end of August, all hopes rested on generating more publicity and an influx of late holidaymakers. Nevertheless, Matthew felt aggrieved that he was the one with all the worry when

Harry seemed totally carefree. He took another swig of wine. His initial suspicions were that Harry knew more about who started that fire than she would admit. Coming out and all but accusing her of setting fire to the place hadn't been his shrewdest move; but something had been on her mind that day and he was pretty certain he knew what it was, although the police had remained tight-lipped about their enquiries.

It wasn't just the restaurant on his mind. With Gina showing no signs of finding more time for them, he was constantly wondering what she was up to and increasingly losing track of what he was meant to be doing. Yet, as Harry settled herself back at the tiller to take the boat home, he couldn't help thinking that Gina wouldn't have been at all comfortable in Harry's place. She was a long-legged girl with the kind of self-assured stride that turned pavements into catwalks. Provided the right guests were in attendance, she might be persuaded onto a party cruiser on the Thames, but it would be a very long time before he saw her folded into a tiny cockpit, teeth gritted against the lash of a gale.

'Does she have a boyfriend or a partner?'

'Harry?' Matthew shot him a look. 'She's married to the boat yard.'

Jimi relaxed back in his chair. 'She must get lonely sometimes, though.'

'Oh?' said Matthew. 'Thinking of keeping her company, were you?'

Jimi shrugged. 'Maybe I'd like to get to know her.'

Now why didn't that make him feel any better? Matthew tried to catch a glimpse of what was going on behind the dark glasses. Jimi was a pretty shrewd operator; maybe he had an eye on Harry's assets too?

'Good luck with that, mate,' Matthew snorted, knowing that Harry would spot any threat to the business a mile off.

Jimi shrugged. 'Harry could make life difficult for you if she put her mind to it. Imagine, after waiting so long for the restaurant to open, everyone sitting out here happily enjoying themselves – then Harry decides to start dredging the channel! It'll be a bit of an anticlimax if they can't even hear themselves think.'

'Believe me,' Matthew assured him, 'I can make life very much harder for Harry.'

An eyebrow rose above the dark glasses. 'I still think my approach is preferable. I bet I could get her eating out my hand in no time.'

'Really? Watch she doesn't bite it off.'

'I'm good with girls,' Jimi smiled, showing even white teeth. He gave a lazy stretch of his arms and added, 'Gina's article came out really well, didn't it?'

'Hmm, she was really pleased.' Pity she hadn't exactly rushed up to show her gratitude. At least Jimi had been busy at the restaurant where Matthew could keep an eye on him. He didn't like to think of him and Gina spending too much time together.

'We ought to capitalise on the publicity,' Jimi suggested, pulling himself up straight again.

'Remind me, just why have we been working our balls off here? We're not exactly in a position to exploit the publicity at the moment.'

'C'mon, that was just a prank that got out of hand.' Jimi's right leg jiggled impatiently.

'A very expensive prank! If someone was hoping to stop Samphire becoming a profitable business, they've made a very good start. Look how much we lost in potential revenue through missing the best part of the school holidays. At least the police are taking it more seriously than you seem to be.'

'Well, that's because it's the most exciting thing to happen

round here in years! Someone sets a bin on fire and they're racing round as if it was a major terrorist incident! C'mon, Matthew, if someone had really wanted to finish off the business they'd have burned the restaurant to the ground. You must admit that the Little Spitmarsh Liberation Front, whoever they are, don't seem to be the most active brigade in the world. Or maybe the police have assigned a close personal protection officer to you and you're just not telling me? Had any more death threats recently?"

'It was hardly a death threat,' said Matthew, beginning to hope Jimi would jiggle himself off his chair. Except he might get hurt and then he'd have to look for a new chef.

'Well then, just forget about it! Think of this as an unexpected opportunity to attract more punters. If we can draw enough attention to the town, by the time the restaurant's ready to open everyone will be desperate to eat there.'

Matthew shook his head. 'Yeah well, if you can think of something and do all the work, then you get on with it – because I've got enough to do here.'

'Great, because I have actually. I ran it past Gina and she's interested too. What do you know about the Little Spitmarsh Film Festival?'

George was cross. Harry could see that as she nipped through the tidal gate at the last minute. It wouldn't have mattered very much if she *had* been too late; she would have just picked up a deep-water mooring further upstream and waited for the next tide. Except then she would have had George pacing up and down, wondering where she was.

Despite, or because of, his merchant navy service, George didn't trust the sea. Even though she'd only gone as far as Spithead Buoy and back, to clear her head, there was too much sea in the equation as far as he was concerned. It was

kind of him to worry about her, but she wasn't a little girl any more; so why couldn't he just relax and accept that she knew these waters better than anyone? She gave him a little wave as she passed, but he was pretending to be busy closing the gate. Nothing that a packet of chocolate HobNobs wouldn't cure, she decided.

There was, of course, another reason for George's concern; given what had happened to her father, she couldn't blame him. But, if she allowed her thoughts to dwell too much on that, *she* wouldn't go to sea either, and then where would she be?



## *Chapter Fifteen*

Was it summer or Samphire bringing Little Spitmarsh alive? Frankie couldn't say; but, with more visitors in the streets and fresh faces in the town, he was simply glad that the refit was complete and the shop ready to open at last. News of the fire had been unsettling; but, rather than putting him off, it seemed to have convinced Trevor that improving the shop was the right thing to do.

'If it's not an isolated incident, if this is the start of a campaign against change and innovation in the town, then whoever is doing it will have to take us on as well,' he'd insisted. 'Matthew Corrigan didn't deserve that after all the hard work he's put in.'

Other traders in the town seemed to feel the same as, one by one, drab little businesses washed off years of grime and applied new paint. When Trevor had trailed home with organic dairy ice creams, a new line he'd spotted at the General Store, and claimed to see a notice in the window announcing that a tapas bar would be opening in the back room there at the weekend, Frankie couldn't help wondering if the notice was real, or if they would wake up any time soon.

And some people, Frankie guessed, would have said anyone opening a shop called Jetsam, that only sold what appeared to be absolutely useless decorative items, was dreaming too. But at the rate cushion covers in boat prints, striped drawstring bags for who-knew-what purpose, eye-wateringly expensive glassware, and pebbles printed with shiny black letters which read 'by the sea', were walking out of Jetsam, the woman running it would soon be able to buy an Aston Martin.

Then there was the young couple who had arrived in the area and taken on Walton House. The six-bedroomed Victorian villa had been given a total facelift and kitted out in cool colours, crisp white sheets and sleek, restful bathrooms before the couple realised there was no market for a luxury retreat in Little Spitmarsh. It was rumoured that they were close to losing everything until the news of Samphire's opening had brought a new breed of gourmets looking for fashionable accommodation a short walk away.

The fire could have been a disaster for them; but the couple had cleverly distracted some potentially very dissatisfied customers with mini-bars offering all kinds of temptations, and provided good, plain evening meals so that their guests completely forgot about what they might have missed.

So if anyone in Little Spitmarsh lay awake listening for strange noises outside, they didn't mention it, and if anyone blamed Matthew Corrigan for drawing unwelcome attention to the place it certainly wasn't apparent from all the support he'd received. Turning such an inauspicious beginning round and taking advantage of the annual film festival had been a masterstroke.

The Little Spitmarsh Film Society had been a half-hearted effort by a small bunch of film buffs to make up for the loss of the town's cinema. Like so many other ventures typical of the town, it had begun with high hopes – but, in a very short space of time, had become the preserve of a few diehards who revelled in select screenings of worthy and obscure foreign language titles. Quite how Matthew's chef had persuaded them all to allow the culmination of their year to be dumbed down into something so unashamedly populist as a favourite film competition, Frankie couldn't begin to speculate, although he was willing to bet that free meals at Samphire were involved. If whoever started the fire at the restaurant had

planned for Little Spitmarsh to fade back into obscurity, their plan had spectacularly failed. Even Trevor, forgetting to voice his usual concerns when he'd heard that Frankie had organised some publicity for the unveiling, was caught up in the excitement.

'You wouldn't think the local rags would be so interested, would you?' Trevor said, looking round in amazement as they posed in their Black Narcissus tee shirts outside the newly painted shop to a strobe-like accompaniment of flashes.

'Just smile and think of the money we're going to be taking,' said Frankie, not mentioning that he had called in a few favours and a couple of ex-boyfriends with the right connections. 'There,' he said, pressing vouchers on reporters and public alike. 'Ten percent off your first order. Treat your granny to an exotic arrangement today.'

'She sees one of them every night when the old man takes his clothes off!' some passing wag observed. 'I'll send her some roses to commiserate.'

Gina Weston's article for *What's Hot* had created quite a stir too. 'Kiss Me Quick', her cheeky article about the joys of slipping off for a passionate weekend, wasn't entirely complimentary about Little Spitmarsh. 'Britain's last resort – but at least you won't bump into anyone you know,' she'd written. The accompanying photos taken in Samphire were sensational, however, and Black Narcissus had received several enquiries since being credited for the floral arrangements.

'So what do you think of the idea of this film festival?' one of the reporters asked.

Frankie was impressed. It looked as if Jimi had also been working the media. 'Great idea. Great fun. It's a real opportunity for everyone in the town to work together,' he said.

‘And what film will you be voting for?’

Frankie laughed, showing off his newly whitened teeth. ‘Hmm, well, there’s a lot to be said for *An Officer and a Gentleman* but there’s really only one choice at the end of the day. For visual sumptuousness and breathtaking colour’ – he stepped back and pointed with a flourish at the new shop – ‘you have to pick *Black Narcissus*.’

Taking a five-minute break from the engine she was trying to lever back in place, Harry looked up to cries of ‘Cool!’ and saw a gaggle of thirty-somethings who might once have posed in a Jamie Oliver recipe book and thought they still could.

‘Awesome!’ nodded one of the men, sporting chunky retro-framed glasses. ‘Just the kind of contrast we need.’

‘Big skies, open waters, little boats scattered against the bleak landscape. You can almost feel the modern world recede,’ agreed his Gul-clad, would-be-surfer-dude colleague.

‘Yuk! It certainly has in there!’ complained a skinny blonde in a lemon camisole, as she emerged from the loos. ‘I’ve seen better facilities on French campsites. Talk about primitive.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ a pretty black girl mused. ‘It’s kind of a romantic place to sail from.’

‘Don’t even think about it, Corinne,’ said Specs. ‘I refuse to trek up here every Friday night to spend two nights on a boat if I can’t even have a decent shower at the end of it.’

‘How about a speedboat at the marina then?’

‘Throw in a luxury hotel and you might be getting close,’ someone joked.

Probably safe to assume that they weren’t there because of one of her adverts then, thought Harry, watching them laugh, take their photos and walk off along the creek. Before Matthew, she would have taken only the briefest look at the occasional group of visitors wandering round the boat yard,

out of curiosity; now she couldn't help but wonder if they were the vanguard for a sustained invasion of wealthy incomers.

'You can't stop them, Harry,' said a voice beside her.

Harry acknowledged Jimi Tan with a tentative smile. He ought to know – he was one of them, standing there in his skinny jeans, white tee shirt and a black scarf slung round his neck. There was nothing about him Harry could relate to either. He bore her gaze with tolerant amusement as someone who was used to being the object of naked speculation. Harry realised, with a jolt of embarrassment, that Jimi was different from all of them. The blend of his dual heritage both distinguished and separated him from the pack. How soon in his life had he become aware that almost every encounter would begin with a curious glance and an unframed question about his identity?

She was sorry that her reaction could have been misinterpreted. Besides, did it sound any better if she tried to explain that, to her, he was just part of the new wave of visitors who were threatening to change forever the town she loved?

'Congratulations. You got the job.'

Jimi returned her smile. 'Never any doubt about it. The only problem at the moment is that I don't have a kitchen to work in. Someone tried to burn the place down.'

Harry dabbed at the engine with a greasy rag.

'You know, they'll keep coming; the whiz kids, the young families, the GBGs.'

'The what?'

'Grey but Groovy,' he grinned. 'Everyone's looking for their own piece of paradise.'

Harry stretched her aching back. 'Yes, well this is my piece of paradise and, if the Spitmarsh Yacht Club hadn't sold out to

a property developer, it might have stood half a chance of staying that way.'

Jimi shook his head. 'If it hadn't been Matthew Corrigan it would have been someone else. Everyone's on the lookout for the next big thing; the next Watergate Bay, the next Padstow, the next Burnham Market.'

'Just my luck to get Matthew Corrigan then,' said Harry. 'And just his luck to come across the one thing that will probably put me out of business.'

He removed his sunglasses and blinked at her.

Harry wasn't in the mood to play games. 'Oh, come on!' she said. 'Don't pretend you don't know – he *must* have told you! Isn't that why you're here? To check out phase two of the development?'

Jimi took a step back and Harry frowned, annoyed with herself for lashing out so quickly.

'I'm sorry,' she said, letting out a long breath. 'That was a bit unfair of me, it's not your fault you work for a money-making machine. I just don't know what I'm going to do. You can understand that this manorial rights thing is worrying me sick.'

'*What* manorial rights thing?'

She shook her head. 'You really don't know?'

'Tell me.'

She looked up at him and saw that the dark eyes were serious. For a moment she saw past the flashy clothes and carefully presented image and caught a glimpse of something that made her think of the past when she was still a child and her dad was there to take care of her. She shrugged. What did it matter if she told him or not? He'd find out soon enough anyway.

When she'd finished Jimi whistled softly. 'So the business your father founded and which you've spent five years

building up could be valueless?’

‘Well, it certainly looks that way. Unless I can find evidence to the contrary, Matthew Corrigan owns the access to the boat yard; he could take the lot away from me at a stroke. God, I’m glad Dad’s not here to see this mess.’

‘Sounds to me as if your dad was responsible for the mess. Isn’t that something he ought to have known about?’

Had he known about it? Was this yet another unwelcome discovery? Harry shivered, picturing the unnerving calm of an empty boat. Of *Calypso* tethered and fretful on her mooring, the dinghy hanging uselessly at her side. No, that was a crazy idea. Everyone knew her father’s death had been an accident. She rubbed in vain at a new oil stain on her dungarees. ‘Dad built this place out of nothing,’ she insisted. ‘The boat yard meant everything to him.’

‘So you say, but would he have wanted you to be burdened with the price you’re having to pay to keep it going? Doesn’t it make sense to get the best price you can for the land Matthew wants to buy, before he puts the screws on you and gets the whole business for nothing?’

She glanced up to find his dark eyes watching her intently. Was it worth it? Okay, so she worked really long hours and had weathered ups and downs like any other business. But she did have a really lovely home and it didn’t matter if not many people ever got to see it, because she liked her privacy. George was around to keep an eye on the boat yard; all right, she had to check up on everything he did these days and she was beginning to worry about his health. She had friends in the town, and if Trevor and Frankie had been too busy with their refit to tell her anything about it before they reopened, well, she quite understood. Of course it was worth it. As soon as she could swallow the huge lump in her throat, she would tell Jimi just that.

‘No, I’m not going to give up something he worked so hard to make a success. I can’t do it,’ she croaked, shaking her head. ‘I’m not going to let Matthew Corrigan walk all over me *and* I’ll find a way to make the boat yard a success. I’ve done it before and I’ll do it again.’

‘It’s no good talking the talk now,’ Jimi persisted. ‘You might as well try to get the best deal you can – unless there’s a way out.’

Would he run back to Matthew and report their conversation? Harry hadn’t missed the swift flicker of anger cross his face as Jimi realised Matthew had been holding out on him. On the other hand Jimi was a chef, wasn’t he? Did it really make any difference to him whether or not Matthew went on to develop the site further, when his reputation rested on the success or failure of the restaurant?

Because she had nothing else to lose, Harry decided she did feel inclined to confide in Jimi. Besides, she’d already warned Matthew she would do all she could to stop him - surely he would have worked out she would be trying to find a way to do just that?

‘It depends if I can find anything to repudiate Matthew’s claim,’ she volunteered. ‘If I can lay my hands on any documents to prove that the manorial rights were relinquished by a previous owner, I might just have a chance of staying in business.’

Jimi wasn’t impressed. ‘You might as well give up now if you’re relying on that to bail you out. I mean, where do you start looking?’

‘I know, I know.’ She threw up her hands. ‘My mother made it clear that she certainly wouldn’t have kept anything to do with the boat yard and, whilst George has a few bits and pieces of sentimental value, the chances of uncovering something as useful as Matthew managed to put his hands on



are looking pretty thin.'

Jimi touched her arm lightly. 'I'm a great chef, Harry. The restaurant could bring in more business than you think. It could make all the difference to the boat yard's future prosperity.'

Harry looked up at the sky. 'Customers I need. But not like that,' she said, nodding at her trendy visitors who, having taken their photographs, were wandering back again. 'I need people who love this landscape for itself, not because it's flavour of the month, the kind of people who want to preserve the beauty of the backwaters for future generations. The trouble is, I really don't know if they're out there any more. You know, even before Matthew Corrigan came along I sometimes worried that I was fighting a losing battle.'

'Look around you; the place is buzzing and it's not just because a few food tourists are visiting. People in the town have started to believe in themselves again. Surely you don't want all that energy to be wasted?'

She shook her head. 'It's just another false dawn. Everyone's putting so much effort in but it won't last, will it? Once the novelty of Samphire has worn off, it will be back to normal. Worse really, because everyone will have lost so much – especially me.'

'Just think about how it could be for a moment; what the town would be like if it could get people to return, if there was a focus to attract them. Gradually, other organisations will come on board; arts, schools, local producers – and soon there'll be fewer reasons for young people to leave. Surely you'd want to be part of that?'

'I hope you've got some good ideas, because you're going to need them to achieve that little lot.'

Jimi looked pleased with himself. 'Well, for starters what do you think of the idea of boosting up the local film festival?'

I know it's not Cannes - well, not yet anyway - but it would certainly offer another attraction to people who might not otherwise be drawn to the town. We're carrying out a poll to see what everyone's favourite films are, showing one runner-up each week and having a grand finale at Samphire where everyone can dress up, have a meal and watch the winner.'

'Lovely. Enjoy that, won't you? Unfortunately it looks as if I won't be able to hold on to my business long enough to see it.'

'Harry,' he told her softly, 'you're not in a position to be picky, are you? Listen, this film festival might be a good thing; if Matthew gets involved, it will take his mind off his claim for a while. Besides, when did you last do anything that felt like fun?'

Albeit a somewhat masochistic form of fun, she thought. Just then she noticed the pretty black girl from the young and trendies hovering on the edge of her vision.

'Miss Watling?'

Harry nodded.

'Sorry to interrupt. My name's Corinne Akoley from *Cruising Monthly*. I wondered if you could spare a few moments to help us with an article we're preparing for the magazine. This is such a beautiful, quiet spot I can't believe it isn't better known. Is it always this easy to get a mooring here?'

Harry started opening and closing her mouth and Jimi gave her a little shove.

'Go on,' he whispered close to her ear. 'It's started to happen. The tide's turning in your favour.'

## *Chapter Sixteen*

The way Jimi was pacing up and down the room you had to feel sorry for him, thought Matthew. One thing was for sure; neither of them would starve. Jimi's catering had been a little on the ambitious side, to say the least. Who in Little Spitmarsh could be bothered to listen to the plans for a film festival, let alone get behind the idea? It was generous of the couple from Walton House to donate the use of their large dining room. Just a shame the gesture was wasted.

Matthew looked at his watch and was about to suggest they get back to Samphire, when the double doors swung open and everyone started piling in. Frankie and Trevor, the arty woman from Jetsam, Paradise Café's owner, and a few faces less well known to him helloed and waved at Jimi before grabbing a seat. His new best friends, Carmen and Roy Moulton, barely glanced at him because they were so busy beaming at Jimi. Even George, with a wary-looking Harry, shuffled in at the back of the pack. Matthew had to blink when Jimi smiled at Harry and caught her eye briefly before she hurriedly tucked herself beside George; but he could still see enough of her to notice that she had ditched the dungarees and put on a clean tee shirt. What was that about?

How the hell had Jimi charmed Harry into turning up today? How, come to think of it, had he persuaded any of these busy people to come and listen to his half-baked plans? Snapping out of his reverie, Matthew found everyone waiting for Jimi to begin.

'There's wine and mineral water on the table, so do help yourselves and, because I didn't want us to make decisions on empty stomachs, I've created some light snacks to keep us

going.'

On cue Fabian, one of the applicants he and Jimi were trying out for a waiting job at Samphire, arrived with some tempura dishes to start them off. One look at all the eager faces showed Matthew that Jimi's popularity stakes had soared still further; he literally had them eating out of his hand! The group drooled over delicately battered morsels of shellfish, baby courgettes, sweet potatoes and spring onions; or, in Frankie and Trevor's case, Fabian. Only when the collective oohs, aahs and few orgasmic hmms abated was Jimi able to make himself heard.

Matthew shook his head. The guy certainly had charisma, but he'd feel a lot more comfortable about him if Gina didn't spend half her rare phone calls talking about him. Nevertheless he'd put his finger on something important; if revitalisation of the town wasn't to mean Little Spitmarsh becoming an anonymous clone or losing its salty brand of charm, then the people who actually lived there needed some sort of ownership of the direction the town was heading in. The only possible effect of building a strong sense of community that Matthew could foresee was that Little Spitmarsh might shake off its permanent sense of melancholy. And if that was the worst that happened, he for one would welcome the change.

Considering that few of those assembled had experience of making action plans or strategies, they proved themselves a willing bunch united by a common hope to raise Little Spitmarsh's profile. Little time was wasted, even Harry didn't argue and nearly everyone was able to help in some way.

'Well done,' said Jimi, closing the meeting. 'Okay, so that's the week leading up to the bank holiday with the first screening at Walton House, thanks to Fiona and Paul. And thanks to them, too, for so generously allowing us to use the

excellent facilities here.'

The young couple running the new hotel smiled and acknowledged a ripple of spontaneous applause.

'The week after, the Palace on the Pier will accommodate us and screen the second choice on their regular film night.'

At least there was no chance, thought Matthew, of that particular concrete carbuncle being washed away. The Palace on the Pier was an especially unlovely slab of a theatre built in anticipation of Little Spitmarsh becoming the next Las Vegas. There was a rumour that Elvis himself had once played a gig there incognito. One of the cleaners had claimed to have seen his ghost warming up on stage; but, since that same cleaner had later confessed to a problem with substance misuse, no one else liked to admit that the strains of 'Suspicious Minds' could sometimes be heard on the wind.

'The grand finale will take place at Samphire, with an early screening and a buffet afterwards. Roy, have you got enough people to help you deliver questionnaires? Good. And we'll have collection points at Jetsam, Crimps and the newsagent. Yes, Trevor?'

Trevor stood up to a look of sheer adoration from Frankie. A new sense of responsibility was doing them good. 'Sorry we can't help with the collection, but we don't want Kirstie and the pups to be disturbed. Speaking of which, do you mind if we head off? We need to check on them and we've also got to put the finishing touches to some special orders for a wedding. We've been rushed off our feet since that article in *What's Hot*.'

Jimi waved them off. 'No problem, guys. And everyone, keep spreading the word about Frankie and Trevor's great work. They deserve some recognition at last. All right, folks, we're done here. Thanks for turning up.'

As people began to drain their glasses and collect their

belongings, Matthew was not going to let one person escape without a word. 'Hello, Harry,' he said, noting that both she and George had stuck to mineral water. 'I didn't expect to see you here.'

Matthew found himself wishing Harry didn't always look so tense when he spoke to her, but then again her instincts were probably sound. At least she didn't look as if she was about to yell and George, hovering behind her, wasn't scowling, so Matthew felt fairly safe.

'Can I get you a drink or something?' he said, really wanting to talk to her but, at the same time, feeling a bit shabby about offering her an olive branch in one hand when he still had the charter that could finish her business off in the other.

Harry turned her troubled face up to him. 'Matthew, I can't think why you would possibly buy a drink for someone you suspect of being an arsonist, so don't even try to kid yourself that I'm here on your account. If this was just your idea, I would have found something more enjoyable to do, like having a root canal filling. Oh, and it hasn't escaped my notice that the highlight of the film festival coincides with the end of your six-week deadline. But we're not through yet, so don't bank on making it a double celebration, will you?'

Nice timing. Thanks for that Jimi. He was tempted to point out that he could have made it much harder for her. With a stay of execution, he hoped she could work out that what was really best for Watling's was for her to take the money he would offer for the land he needed. That would leave her with sufficient funds to operate a smaller outfit, if she still wanted to play at running a boat yard. He was thinking of throwing caution to the winds and telling her her fortune, when he saw a glimmer of light in her cloudy grey eyes.

'Hi, Harry,' said Jimi, 'it's good to see you here. What do

you think?’

Harry sighed. ‘It doesn’t really matter what I think, does it? You only had to look round the room to see how much support you’ve got. As for the finale at Samphire, I’m sure it will be amazing and your food’s terrific, but I can’t afford to eat there and I bet not many of the others who came today can either.’

No surprises there, thought Matthew, just the usual Harry line. But then she raised a hint of a smile and held up her arms to Jimi in a gesture of surrender.

‘It’s all right. Even I could use a little froth sometimes, so when I’m not too busy at the yard I’ll try to do what I can for the film festival. Is that okay?’

Jimi grinned, took the small hand she was offering and dropped a kiss on her head.

Well, fuck me, thought Matthew, who would have believed it? What was it about Jimi Tan which made him so popular with women? Then he noticed George looking very green around the gills. Jimi might have won a few fans, but George certainly wasn’t one of them.

After an absolutely manic Saturday, Frankie had left Trevor in bed whilst he rushed out early to buy the Sunday papers. Fortunately Trevor slept like a log, so Frankie had even been able to prepare a breakfast tray to take up to him without waking him up. To avoid further distractions he’d also fed Kirstie and left her contentedly tending to the pups, whilst Phil was in seventh heaven with a Duchy Original sausage. The less Trevor had to worry about the better.

Setting down a tray of perfectly scrambled egg, sausage and some granary toast, he poured black coffee for both of them and sat beside Trevor, still half-asleep, to peruse the supplements. Satisfied that they contained nothing to raise

Trevor's blood pressure, Frankie could contain his excitement no longer.

'Look, Trevor, it's you!' he said triumphantly, waving the photo of a pensive-looking Trevor outside the shop. 'And just listen to this! "With its high-gloss black-painted exterior and a window display where the rich, saturated colours of exotic blooms mingle artfully with the muted tones of *objets trouvés*, you might expect Black Narcissus to be at the core of London's cutting edge. But step inside and you quickly realise that this is a place which is driven by quality and service and not the fickleness of trends. Run by Trevor Dillon and Frankie Heath, Black Narcissus is a colourful and extravagant affair in one of the east coast's best-kept-secret towns.'" Trevor?'

Thrilled that the coverage was so much better than he'd anticipated, Frankie glanced across to see that his partner had gone as white as the sheets. This was no time for Trevor to panic. 'Come on now, Trevor,' he said firmly. 'Don't just sit there, eat your egg. You know you won't like it if it gets cold. You're worrying too much. It's time to start enjoying ourselves. Stop worrying, start celebrating.'

As Trevor's worried expression was replaced by a smile of genuine happiness, Frankie felt a huge burden lift away.

'Why not? Yes, you're right, Frankie. We've worked for this, we deserve our success. Let's make the most of it. What harm can it do?' Trevor lifted his coffee cup, then paused before taking a sip. 'We haven't seen Harry for ages; I think it's time we asked her round.'

Harry shook her head and made a rapid adjustment to the glossy makeover which had transformed the seedy shop formerly known as The Flowerpot Men into a celebrity florist's.

Along with the dispirited old shop front Trevor and Frankie



had shed their anonymity, emerging flamboyantly from their previously low-key existence.

‘We’re liberating Little Spitmarsh from the tyranny of clichéd carnations,’ Frankie had told her with great delight when, to her pleased surprise, he’d dropped by to invite her to the celebration they had planned for the pups. ‘And talking of liberation,’ he’d quipped, almost blowing the new spirit of reconciliation between them, ‘you didn’t send George round to the restaurant with a can of petrol, did you? Oh, don’t look like that, Harry. Half the reason we’ve been frightened to ring you is because we knew you’d give us another tongue-lashing about Matthew Corrigan. He really is only trying to improve the area. Think about what all those celebrity chefs have done for Cornwall.’

‘Yep,’ Harry shot back, having had plenty of time to do just that. ‘Pushed the property prices sky high so that even their own staff can’t afford to live there.’

‘And given a boost to all the local suppliers, the food and drink industry, tourism and disadvantaged young people,’ Frankie went on. ‘Come on, Harry,’ he pleaded, ‘Little Spitmarsh needed a champion. I thought that’s why you turned up to the film festival meeting, because you were coming round to the idea. If Matthew and his chef are helping to reinvent the place, that’s got to be good. Being on the coast alone isn’t good enough any more; no one’s ever coming to Little Spitmarsh just to sit on the beach.’

Harry didn’t interrupt, not when they’d just started talking again. And, standing outside Trevor and Frankie’s front door, now painted a highly-polished black like the glossy shop, she could see Frankie’s point. *You’re more worried about keeping this lot to yourself than promoting the town’s well-being.* That’s what Matthew had said. He’d accused her of acting selfishly; but was it so wrong to want the place where she had

grown up, where all her memories were, to remain the same?

When an excited Frankie welcomed her in, smiling broadly, she was unexpectedly relieved that they hadn't become too smart to include her in their fun. For a horrible moment she felt quite tearful, realising how much she'd been looking forward to time out and having a play with the puppies.

The couple's home, in contrast to the previously shabby shop front, had always been streamlined, calm and orderly. Today, however, the cool, tasteful interior of the airy upstairs living room was hung with jaunty bunting. A tea table, complete with embroidered linen tablecloth, was set with gilt-edged old-rose china, a legacy courtesy of Frankie's aunt. Once stowed away on the grounds of taste, it now had pride of place. Along with plates of dainty sandwiches and bite-sized sausage rolls, an antique-glass cake stand was arranged with pink and blue iced cup cakes sitting on doilies. Enticing as the food looked, it was only a side act to the main event and Harry couldn't wait to get a peek.

Despite Trevor's worries about her extreme youth, Kirstie showed every sign of being an excellent mum, lying back contentedly as the stars of the show, oblivious to all the celebrations in their honour, nuzzled into her side. Only the odd short warning growl, when the occasional overeager claw scratched her soft tummy, revealed anything of the old Kirstie. Anxious for Phil not to feel too left out, Harry had bought him a dog chew, which she slipped to him quickly before either of the boys made a fuss about the sisal flooring.

'Oh, they're adorable, aren't they?' said Harry, sinking to her knees to admire the puppies. 'What a clever girl you are, Kirstie!'

'I suppose if you were being picky you could say they were a right bunch of misfits and mutts, but we think they're rather gorgeous, don't we, Trev?'

Kirstie threw them a look which suggested that, for any less than total worship of her offspring, there'd be hell to pay once she was up and about.

'So what are you going to do with them all?'

'Well, Matthew's keen to have the little one with the eyepatch,' said Trevor.

Pirate for a pirate, thought Harry, feeling slightly disappointed that Matthew had been allowed to see them already.

'But other than that we don't really know yet.'

'Don't let's worry about that now,' said Frankie, popping open the champagne. 'Let's celebrate. To Kirstie and the pups!'

'Kirstie and the pups!' they chorused.

'Now do help yourself to eats. Trevor's been cooking and preparing food all morning.'

When the doorknocker rattled again, Harry was thankful that she'd made an effort and had put on her best jeans and a soft-blue wrapped top. The boys hadn't mentioned inviting anyone else, but maybe Matthew had come to check on his puppy? Well, this would show him that she wasn't ready to curl up in a ball and die just yet. She might not compare with Teeth and Hair, but for once she didn't look like a boy either.

Although she had decided against the idea of letting Carmen loose on her - after all, no one would ever confuse her with someone who'd just stepped out of the pages of *Vogue*, no matter what she did - she had to concede that it wouldn't hurt to scrub up occasionally. George had been ready to cut her hair, but Harry had put him off. For some reason she didn't mind wearing it a little longer and the dark spikes had formed more manageable curls. Harry ruffled them discreetly whilst Frankie, looking genuinely curious, headed downstairs to see who was there.

When he reappeared with a young girl in pink sandals and a peppermint dress, Harry's hand, which was poised to select a feather-light fairy cake, aborted its flight. Meanwhile Trevor looked as if the mouthful he'd already taken had turned into a bath sponge in his throat.

'Sophie!'

'You didn't tell me you had puppies, Daddy,' said the girl, dropping to the basket.

Daddy probably hadn't told her he had kittens either, observed Harry, but it looked as though he was going to.

'Sophie, darling. Is Mummy with you?' he asked weakly.

'Don't be silly, Daddy. You know she doesn't like you. I decided to come by myself.'

A phone rang ominously. Trevor blanched, Frankie went red and Harry took action. 'I'd better get on with that elusive bilge leak I was dealing with,' she said quickly. 'Lovely party, adorable pups ... I'll see myself out, then.'

## *Chapter Seventeen*

Harry walked back to the boat yard wondering which of them had been most surprised. Trevor had always been a bit soppy about the dogs, but she'd never imagined him as a father. He'd never so much as hinted that he had a daughter. People had all kinds of reasons for keeping secrets; perhaps it was too painful for Trevor to discuss?

On the other hand, she had the distinct impression that Trevor's daughter was a plucky little soul who wasn't prepared to fade into the background any longer. Perhaps this was yet another new beginning for them all? Harry smiled to herself; a little later she'd phone Frankie and Trevor to ask how they were coping with their unexpected guest; but she had the feeling that, once they'd all got over their initial shock, they'd be fine.

Turning back down the lane towards the boat yard, Harry stopped smiling at the sight of a police car speeding out of Watling's. As it hurtled past as fast as the bumpy road would allow, she caught a glimpse of Johnny MacManus's dazed face staring blankly out at her.

Breaking into a run, she cantered into the yard and found a stricken George standing next to Johnny's abandoned boat.

'George, whatever's happened?'

He wrung his hands. 'They've only gone and taken him away, that's what.'

'But why?'

'Attempted arson. The empty petrol can 'e used was in the cockpit.'

'Well, that's no proof. He might have been using it to top up an outboard. Johnny's too drunk to know whether he's

coming or going. He only moves when he's run out of lager. What on earth must have got into his head for him to try to burn down the restaurant?'

George made a choking sound. Harry had never believed he cared much for Johnny, but the pair of them must have been closer than she'd thought.

'That's not all,' he added. 'He managed to find 'is way to Mr Corrigan's house and deliver a letter from the Little Spitmarsh Liberation Front claiming responsibility.'

Harry shook her head; who would have thought that Little Spitmarsh would produce its own extremist organisation? 'Gosh! You mean it really does exist? In that case there must be some Mr Big behind all this.'

'Not quite,' said George. 'There ain't no Little Spitmarsh Liberation Front. The stupid bugger invented them to scare Mr Corrigan.'

'But that's dreadful! Poor Johnny! The booze must have finally taken its toll for him to start showing these signs of paranoia.'

George stood with his head bent, staring at the ground, clearly too upset to speak. Harry still wasn't convinced that there wasn't some underlying illness making him look so strained; she'd have to find out what was bothering him.

'Come on, George.' Harry patted him on the arm. 'Don't distress yourself. One way or another, Johnny is ill. Hopefully he'll get the treatment he needs – he must have been a desperate man to have got to this stage.'

Harry's fleeting party mood had been chased away by deeper concerns, so she headed back to her house to change. Finding Matthew standing at the front entrance wasn't something she'd planned for. She'd attended the meeting about the film festival for Jimi's sake and had even tried to work up some

enthusiasm for something that would take her mind off the threat hanging over her. But, although she managed to wriggle out of talking to Matthew that day, there was no escape now.

Looking at him watching her, she was struck by just how easily she could forget the threat he represented. There was gentleness in the hazel eyes and a latent strength in his lean frame that made it hard not to ask him just to hold her and make everything better. Strange what you could make yourself believe if you wanted to; soon she'd turn into the kind of woman who thought the TV weathermen were sending secret messages just for her.

Breathe, you idiot, she told herself, realising that she couldn't just stand there any longer. This, after all – she willed the anger to well up inside her – was the man responsible for the changes that had bothered frail Johnny MacManus so much that he'd actually set the restaurant on fire.

'I wondered if I could have a word?' he said, softly. 'I can come back if it's not convenient.'

'What do you want?' she snarled, wishing she was wearing her dungarees – where her keys would be to hand in her pocket, instead of hiding themselves in the bottom of her useless and unfamiliar handbag.

'I've heard about Johnny.'

'Well, congratulations!' Her fingers closed on the keys; a couple of seconds and she could escape. 'You must be feeling pretty proud of yourself. Not only did you falsely accuse me of arson, but now you also have the satisfaction of knowing that a harmless old live-aboard who's never hurt a fly is in serious trouble because of you!'

As she wrenched the keys out the bag they snagged on the zip and flew out of her hand. Matthew bent and picked them up for her.

'Come on, Harry,' he urged, holding them out to her.

‘That’s not strictly true, is it?’

There was no triumph in his voice; in fact, he sounded tired and concerned. The sea-green shirt he was wearing was a little more crumpled than usual and he hadn’t had a chance to shave. About time he used his bed for sleeping, not that it was any concern of hers; although anyone passing looking at the pair of them, heads bowed and awkward, might be wondering if they were looking at a lovers’ tiff.

‘Oh, this is stupid, standing on the doorstep like this. Would you like to come in for a coffee?’ Now, where had that come from?

He looked as surprised as Harry felt.

‘This is a vast area,’ he said, following her through to the main living space. ‘You could so easily have fallen into the trap of making it feel like a waiting room, but the way you’ve used the space to create smaller sections is really clever.’

Even knowing that his praise was purely professional, Harry was pleased that he’d been so quick to see the difficulties the conversion had presented and the solutions she’d found to overcome them. Whilst she put the kettle on and fetched cups, she tried not to watch him as he looked around, smiling and nodding his approval at the sitting area. Two ample sofas flanked a salvaged wooden table; and a handsome old steamer chair which, like everything else, she’d picked up for next to nothing, offered a quiet corner to enjoy the view across the creek from a different angle. Beyond the sitting room, she had created a kitchen and dining area. By sticking to a palette of neutral and aqua tones, she’d ensured that the main decorative feature of the space was the waterscape beyond. She didn’t need Matthew’s good opinion of her achievements, but it was still gratifying to see it in his admiring expression.

Feigning indifference to his presence wouldn’t work if her



hands shook, Harry thought, filling the cafetière. She placed the tray on the table between them and took the seat opposite, in case he got the wrong idea; then realised how stupid she was being and ticked herself off. Who was she trying to kid? She could have served coffee naked in her bedroom, and the only move he was going to make on her any time soon was entirely to do with her land. She sighed and passed him a cup.

‘I have to admit that it did cross my mind George might have had something to do with the fire,’ he said. ‘But common sense told me that was completely out of character. I never really believed either of you were involved, but as for Johnny – well, that’s a different matter.’

Harry opened her mouth to protest, then thought better of it. Deep down, wasn’t she relieved that it was Johnny, not George, who had been responsible?

‘Mmm, good coffee, and very welcome,’ Matthew said, looking a bit surprised. ‘The thing is, Johnny’s admitted the offence and on paper it doesn’t look good; a pre-planned, politically motivated attack on a public building, using an accelerant to get the fire going.’

Harry let out the breath she’d been holding. ‘But that’s not really how it is; Johnny isn’t a political animal.’

‘I’m sorry, but I can’t help him, Harry – it’s out of my hands. I’m not pressing charges, but he won’t be coming back to his boat any time soon. He’ll be detained and there’ll be a psychiatric assessment.’

She ran her hand through her hair, appalled at the consequences of Johnny’s action, saddened at what lay ahead for him.

‘He needs professional help. He needed it before when he was a malnourished, neglected man with a serious drink problem, but now he’s crossed the line. At least this way someone will make sure he’s not a danger to himself – or to

anyone else.' Suddenly he broke off and eyed her over his cup. 'Harry, you look worn out. All of this must have come as a nasty shock to you. I'll drink up and leave you in peace.'

She picked up a piece of flapjack she didn't really want. Peace? Everything Matthew said about Johnny was true and, if she'd been a bit more alert about the state he was in, she might have averted a crisis.

He put down his cup and leaned forward. 'It was sweet of you to invite me in. I know we're not the best of friends so I really appreciate it. Will you be all right?'

She dragged her gaze up to meet his and wished she hadn't. Of course, he'd just said something nice to her, which didn't help. Men fell for good looks, women fell for good lines. That had to be why she was staring into the velvet depths of his eyes for far longer than was polite, wishing he didn't have to go. *Are you crazy?* a voice in her head was screaming.

Maybe Matthew had heard it too; a small frown creased his brow and he leaned back in his chair looking dazed. 'I'd better go,' he muttered.

Harry heard the door from a long way off. At least they agreed about something.

George had been sitting in his caravan, wondering what to do about the suitcase tucked away under his bunk, when the phone rang. Damn thing. It was only there because Miss Harriet had insisted he had to have one. As it was, he didn't phone no one and no one phoned him. No point in having the damn thing. George sat still for a moment, hoping the caller would just go away. He could sense trouble; Miss Harriet had been lifting so many stones in her quest to uncover the past, there was no telling where the search would take her and no telling who would scuttle out. Feigning utter indifference would only put her off the scent for so long, and he was

beginning to feel the strain of the burden he was carrying.

George had a nasty feeling that whoever was ringing could tell he was there. Eventually he picked up the phone to hear a voice he'd been half expecting, as if he'd summoned an unquiet spirit. George didn't know how much more his nerves could stand. Maeve Watling - no, Kendall, he reminded himself - was still resentful about the past and longing to have her say.

He'd always had mixed feelings about Harriet's mother. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine her slender frame touched by middle age, and silver threads glimmering in her dark hair. She had once been a beautiful woman and, for a while, until the spell was broken, Harry senior had worshipped her and had been a happier, more stable man for loving her. Of course, she'd been very young and very much in love; but, however hard Maeve had tried to lock Harry to her side with a wedding ring and a child, there was always a fugitive aspect to his personality which escaped her. Even after all these years, George's own bond with the man who had been her husband still rankled.

For her daughter's sake and to try to break the chain of grief, George was prepared to give her the time of day.

'How are you, George?' she asked.

'Not getting any younger,' he said.

'None of us are!' she laughed.

'Oh, I don't know, Maeve. That girl who turned up here all those years ago don't seem too far away to me.' He hadn't missed the emotion thickening her voice and guessed she was treading a thin line between laughter and tears.

'Ah, she does to me, George. That girl existed in another time, when life was a great big adventure.' There was a pause for a moment. 'I still miss him, George.'

George ran a hand across his eyes for a moment to shut out

all the pain.

‘And Harry’s still angry with me,’ he heard her say.

‘Well, what did you expect?’ he snapped. ‘Don’t you think she misses him too? We all do – but we didn’t run away. Who d’yer think cleared up all the mess once you’d scarpered? Of course she’s angry, she’s put her whole life on hold to keep the business together whilst you were off with yer fancy man.’ He held up a hand as she began to protest. ‘All right, all right, Maeve. I’m sorry. I know you’re married to ’im now, but you’ll always be Harry’s wife to me.’

He heard her let out a long, unsteady breath. ‘That’s the problem, isn’t it, George? Harry dominated my life when he was alive and he’s still doing it even though he’s been dead for fifteen years. Everyone forgets how long I ran the boat yard by myself and that I was trying to bring up a child at the same time; a very difficult, angry child who couldn’t understand why her daddy had left her.’

George couldn’t let that one pass. Anyone would think he’d been twiddling his thumbs all that time. ‘Who’s everyone, Maeve? Dammit, you weren’t quite alone.’

‘Oh yes, George, you were there and you were piddled half the bloody time because the only person you would listen to had gone. I can’t win, can I? No matter how hard I try, everything I do now is measured against my old life with Harry, as if he was some paragon.’

He shook his head. Blaming Maeve was the simple solution. The truth was that Harry had been as much to blame as Maeve. Kidding himself that he could settle down and forget about the past was a complete delusion. With parents who were so ill at ease with each other, it was small wonder that Miss Harriet pretended she didn’t need anyone. She’d had years of practice trailing round the boat yard in her father’s shadow, vying for his attention when his every waking

thought was for someone else. Sometimes you could love too much.

‘You know, sometimes I’ve a good mind to tell Harry exactly what her precious father was like.’

‘Don’t, Maeve,’ he pleaded.

‘Well, why not, George? I’ve had enough of being held responsible for everything that went wrong, always getting the blame for letting the yard go. God knows I’ve been tempted. You know she’s been asking me if I’ve got any old documents?’

Her forced laughter made George feel even more uncomfortable.

‘I don’t know what’s stopped me telling her exactly where her father’s money went.’

‘Maeve,’ he warned, ‘you’d break her heart.’

‘What about *my* heart? Why didn’t you do anything to stop my heart being broken in two? You could have warned me, George. You could have told me not to get involved.’

‘He loved you,’ he insisted. ‘And anyway, you was expecting Miss Harriet and it’s her you’ve got to think of now.’ He took a deep breath and tried not to panic about why Maeve was being pestered about the past too. What had happened the day Jimi Tan turned up at the yard to make Miss Harriet so curious?

‘She’s just thrown because there’s a new restaurant opening where the old clubhouse used to be, and she’s convinced it means the end for the boat yard. She’s got it all wrong, though; this is the opportunity she needs to find new customers. The young feller developing the site isn’t going to put her out of business, Maeve, he’s not the type.’

‘And we all know what a fine judge of character you are, George. It would be much kinder if she knew exactly what her father was like, and then she could decide how much she

really wants to keep the boat yard.'

'You don't mean that, Maeve. Don't take away everything she's got – she certainly won't thank you for it.'

He let the silence draw out until Maeve felt compelled to break it.

'I know,' she said, barely above a whisper. 'I just wish she didn't blame me for everything.'

'Yeah, well, rubbing her nose in the mess won't help. You've got to be patient and, if she comes on the phone again asking about paperwork, just keep telling 'er you 'aven't got anything. Miss Harriet don't realise it yet, but Matthew Corrigan's probably the best person to save the boat yard, and once she feels secure about that I'm sure things'll get better between the pair of you. Just leave the past where it is.'

'George? I've offered her money but she refuses to take it. I'm only trying to help; if there's any way you can manage to persuade her to accept something from me, I'd feel a lot better.'

'I'll try, Maeve,' he told her, wearily, 'but I'm not promising.'

'Just do what you can.'

George put the phone down, feeling drawn and exhausted. If Maeve could be persuaded to keep her thoughts to herself, he might be able to keep Harry safe for a bit longer. And then he remembered Jimi Tan and felt uneasy all over again. When he tried to stand up, his legs were shaking. A good strong cup of tea ought to help.

Dragging himself to his kitchenette, George put the kettle on; but, as he took the last of his milk out of the fridge, his trembling fingers misjudged the cup and the remaining dregs of milk went all over the draining board. It wasn't his day.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

The walk into town helped settle George's nerves. Especially when he threw his mobile phone in a bin along the way. Damn thing. Now if someone wanted to talk to him, they'd 'ave to damn well knock on his door, wouldn't they?

It was a beautiful day, the sort that couldn't help but perk you up. Privately, he thought that some of the changes to Little Spitmarsh were no bad thing, although he wouldn't share his thoughts with Harry. And it was clear, he thought, his lip curling at the Tapas Night poster in the General Store, that some people, like the old bastard inside who'd been robbing everyone blind for years, were getting a bit above themselves.

There was a neglected upright piano at the back of the shop, presumably for want of a Spanish guitar. George wandered in, ignoring po-faced looks from behind the counter, and gave the sad old instrument a try. Expecting to hit a few bum notes, he was pleasantly surprised that it was just like getting back on a bike; a few wobbles, then you were off and freewheeling. As the last note of 'A Walk in the Black Forest' faded, George left his reverie to find all the customers in the shop staring at him with open mouths. Then Matthew, with a box of cereal in his hand and a newspaper tucked under his arm, broke the silence.

'Terrific, George. That was unbelievable!'

George bowed his head modestly.

'You couldn't spare me a moment, could you?'

No reason why not, thought George. He had some time for the younger man, whatever Miss Harriet thought of him. 'I'm sort of without portfolio at the minute, you could say,

Matthew.'

'Excellent! Come over to the restaurant with me, would you, please? I'd be most grateful if we could have a chat.'

George liked the sound of that. Respectful. There wasn't enough respect in the world, especially with Miss Harriet yapping away and forgetting he'd been on this earth a damn sight longer than she had.

And it made a change to have some male company, he thought, as they strolled companionably to the converted clubhouse. He was tired of listening to that little nagging voice. Not the one that belonged to Miss Harriet; the other one, the one that kept telling him he'd been jolly lucky that Johnny MacManus was such a blundering fool or else he, George, would have felt partly responsible for the place burning down. If he got a chance to see the true picture, his imagination would stop running riot and his conscience would be eased. If he could do all that without worrying about what Miss Harriet might say or do, then so much the better.

'You've done a good job on this place, Matthew,' he said, feeling relieved that, thanks to a lot of hard work, the place was in much better shape than he'd feared. He turned his back on the bar and looked out at the stunning views across Campion's Creek. 'When I 'eard about your ideas, I thought you was stark raving bonkers – but you've gone and pulled it off.'

'I think so, George,' Matthew said, his dimple lighting up his lazy grin. 'Time will tell, of course. But it will only be sustained if I can introduce a complementary housing development as well. It's all right, George, don't look so worried. I haven't asked you here to talk about twisting Harry's arm.'

In fact, George's main worry was that Harry wouldn't wake up in time to see that she had to change the way she did



business. He was about to say as much, when Matthew threw him completely.

‘I’m sorry, George, the kitchen isn’t stocked up yet. I’d love to have found you a nice piece of fish.’

George managed not to grimace. There wasn’t such a thing as a nice piece of fish in his book; they all came out of the sea for a start. ‘Er, never mind, Matthew, I’m going to cook when I get home.’

‘Ah well, a drink then?’

He straightened up. ‘Just a glass of water, thank you.’

Matthew grinned and went away. A few minutes later he came back and placed a glass on the table. A scent so heady and familiar wafted up to George that it almost brought tears to his eyes.

‘I thought you might have worked up a thirst with all that piano playing, so I took the liberty of bringing you a G&T. Is that all right with you?’

George looked at the glass and at the clear spirit so pure and innocent within. Even the smell of it was contentment. Realising that Matthew was talking to him, he thought at first he might have misheard.

‘You got the wrong person,’ he chuckled.

Matthew looked indignant. ‘Why? You’ve proved yourself more than capable.’

‘It’s me – salty old George. Not some sophisticated cabaret artiste! You can’t imagine me dressed in an evening suit sitting at a baby grand piano now, can you?’

Matthew laughed. ‘Perhaps not, but that’s not what I want. If I wanted some camp entertainment, I’d have got Trevor and Frankie to do a Hinge and Bracket act.’ He leaned forward. ‘It’s only three nights, George, just to give a bit of extra flavour to the film festival. Just warm the audiences up with a few old film scores and they’ll love it. Come on, everyone

knows you round here, but they associate you with Harry and the boat yard. Let everyone see another side of you.'

George scratched his head. Would be nice to do something different for a change. Nice to take his mind off things for a few hours.

'Well, why not?' he said at last.

'Great,' said Matthew, slapping him on the back. 'Let's drink to it!'

George looked down into the seductive depths of his glass. One drink never harmed anyone.

George meandered towards Watling's feeling at one with the world. What a damn nice feller that Matthew Corrigan was. What a damn nice change it made to have a man-to-man talk, to be a person in his own right instead of a servant to the Watling family. A bit of piano playing at the film festival would be a contrast to wearing himself out chasing round the boat yard. What a fine evening it was; the light dying away, the first of the stars peeping out across the water and a couple of gins coursing through his veins.

The cough, just behind him, took him by surprise and George berated himself under his breath for being so dull that he hadn't noticed he wasn't alone.

'Who's there?' he spluttered.

'It's all right, George. Remember me? Jimi Tan.'

George dearly wished he didn't. He'd much prefer it if Jimi Tan disappeared and they could all forget they'd ever seen him. The gin made him braver than he felt.

'Should be ashamed of yerself, sneaking up on an old man, at this time of night.'

Jimi laughed softly. 'If you weren't half cut, George, you'd have heard me. I was just keeping an eye on you to make sure you got back all right. You've been with Harry a long time

now, haven't you? Must be a bit of a father figure to her, mustn't you? Being as she was so young when she lost her dad.'

Jimi's quiet voice insinuated its way into his head, making it spin.

'Are you threatening me, young feller?'

'Why would I threaten someone who's been such a good friend to the Watling family?'

George tried to concentrate on seeing where Jimi was heading, and wished he could have another drink to sort it out.

'You're pretty thick with Matthew Corrigan.'

'Ain't no 'arm in that. 'E's a nice feller. Wants me to do a bit of piano playing at the film festival.'

'Well, of course, it suits him to keep you on his side.'

George wanted to swat him. Just wait until Jimi heard him play – then he'd know why Matthew was keen for him to take part.

'Just be careful what you say, George. The boat yard could be worth a lot of money when the restaurant takes off. I've got a lot of admiration for Matthew, but he's a property developer, isn't he? I mean, that's how the guy makes his money. Now I'm not suggesting for one minute that he would cheat Harry, but, let's face it, if he can find a way to get hold of the land he wants more cheaply, then he will.'

George didn't enjoy feeling like a booby. 'I didn't even mention the boat yard.'

Jimi's voice was soothing. 'No one's saying you did, but I bet what you don't know about the boat yard isn't worth knowing. I bet you're a mine of information about the past. We must have a little chat sometime, don't you think?'

George couldn't think of anything he'd like less. His head was swimming and he just wanted to get away. Then Jimi leaned a little closer and produced a surprise.

‘George, my friend, I hate the thought that we might have got off on the wrong foot. I’d like to offer you this, from me. A gesture of goodwill.’

Well, well, well. It was his lucky night and no mistake. George was pleased to see his hand had stopped shaking. It wouldn’t do to lose a bottle of gin now, would it?

With silence from Frankie and Trevor, Harry had decided to make a quick phone call to Frankie – who’d set her mind at ease even if he hadn’t been able to elaborate.

‘It could have been *awful!*’ he’d confided. ‘I mean it was me who created all the publicity. I gather there was a bit of a scene when Sophie’s mum read the supplement. She couldn’t eat her grapefruit, apparently. Anyway, Sophie fished the magazine out of the recycling to see what all the fuss was about and there we were! It looked a bit dicey at first, but I think everything’s going to be fine.’

Poor old Trevor. Imagine having to keep the two halves of his life apart for so long. It would be nice to think that his daughter’s intrepid journey would mean the end of his torment, but some people refused to accept any change to the status quo.

Harry put down her empty mug and set off to carry out her final inspection, hoping her hands would remember its warmth when they met the hostile night air. After a brilliant spell of hot weather, storm clouds were threatening. Ducking into her oilskins as the wind buffeted the outside stairs, she looked at the uninviting darkness yawning below her and considered the possibility that life didn’t have to be this way. A little extra business, and she could hire someone to share the load. If she sold out to Matthew she could pay someone to do the lot, but her dad wouldn’t have gone down that route. On balance, she’d still rather do the rounds night after night,

in all weathers, than surrender a footprint of land to someone who would change the character of the boat yard forever.

Harry crossed the floodlit yard to the shadowy corners where the last boats were still laid up. *Maid of Mersea*, standing on props and looking out to the marshes, was unlikely to feel the waves this season and probably not next, whilst her owner waited for a hospital bed. *Evening Star*'s fate depended on the outcome of a messy divorce, and the unfinished catamaran languishing at the back, purchased by an overeager DIY enthusiast, was now dying from lack of attention. They were a sorry bunch. Turning away, she jumped as the blood-curdling cry of a cat limbering up for a mating session caught her off guard. No matter how many times she heard it, it wasn't a sound she could get used to. As the cat started yowling again, she listened harder. There was a horrible human edge to the sound and, come to think of it, wasn't it a tad deep and growly for a cat?

Screwing up her courage, Harry followed the noise, tracking it down to the direction of George's shed where, she was now convinced, something – or someone – was trapped. Stealing up quietly, although the roar was so loud she probably needn't have bothered, she pressed her face to the crack between the planks to see an ugly shape silhouetted against the flickering lamplight.

'Goodnight and adieu to you bold Spanish ladies,  
Goodnight and adieu to you ladies of Spain.  
For we've received orders for to sail to old England  
And 'ope very soon we will see you again!'

George rounded off the chorus with another swig from his gin bottle, which he kissed lovingly then raised in a toast. All was well; his suspicions about Jimi Tan were just the

wanderings of a foolish old man. He didn't like the idea that the boy had taken a bit of a shine to Miss Harriet: he was far too flash for George's taste, not like Matthew Corrigan. Dammit, if that Matthew Corrigan wasn't a fine, fine fellow.

'A fine, fine fellow!' he roared. 'Bless your 'eart, Matthew Corrigan.'

Dammit if there wasn't a terrible draught all of a sudden. Had the blasted door blown open? Since it was beginning to feel as if someone was pressing a large weight on it, George lifted his head very carefully, then allowed his eyes a few minutes to decide on a joint approach.

'Aah!' he breathed, very slowly, suddenly aware that every signal he was receiving seemed to be on red for danger. 'Ah, Miss Harriet. Fancy seeing you here.'

## *Chapter Nineteen*

In the boathouse George frowned, utterly perplexed at the bundle of notes stacked on the coffee table in front of him. To his immense bewilderment, he'd woken up in his shed, then stumbled outside to try and get his thinking up to speed. That was when Miss Harriet had found him wandering round the boat yard and had told him to go to the house. But, instead of being given a lecture or compelled to drink gallons of black coffee, it appeared that he was getting paid for his moment of madness.

He turned, blinking, towards the light. 'What's this then, Miss Harriet?'

She finally stopped staring at the creek and turned round and looked at him. 'Payment in lieu of notice and outstanding leave.'

George was struggling; he was hot, his head was throbbing and he still couldn't make out why Miss Harriet had called him into the house to talk about money. 'Leave?'

'Holiday.'

Miss Harriet's hands didn't look too steady either and her nose was red, like she'd been having trouble with a spot of hay fever. 'But I don't want a holiday. You know I never go away; I like it here.'

She crossed her arms and avoided his gaze. 'Let me put it another way then, George. You're sacked.'

This time her words even managed to penetrate the mire of self-pity and regret George was wallowing in. 'What?' he asked, in a very quiet voice.

'What choice do I have, George?' Meeting his eyes at last, she placed herself on the sofa opposite and looked at him with

real desperation. George shivered inside; he couldn't bear to think how many different people had looked at him that way over the years. It was never a good sign.

'You promised me, remember? Just like the time before and the time before that. I really thought you'd beaten it, George, but old habits die hard, don't they?'

What defence could he possibly give?

'Oh, George, I just don't understand why you gave in after all this time. You must have known that even one drink, just to be polite, would be catastrophic?' She buried her face in her hands for a moment, before coming up to wish that Matthew Corrigan had never set foot in Little Spitmarsh.

'It weren't Matthew's fault,' George started to protest. 'It were ...'

The explanation died on his tongue. Nothing he could say would make her think any better of him or Matthew; and she certainly wouldn't believe that the previous night had been a solitary slip-up, once the pressure of his ungrounded fears had been lifted.

'The last thing I need is a drunk wandering round the yard. It's not only bad for business, it's bad for you,' she explained. 'I simply haven't got time to make sure you don't slip off a pontoon when you're the worse for wear.'

Funny how he wanted to comfort her; she was finding it harder and harder to control the tears.

'It's over, George,' she said, flopping back on the sofa, looking distraught and drained. 'No more chances.'

George's hand was shaking as he picked up the biscuit tin he'd brought up with him as a peace offering; and if she saw it and thought it was the drink – well, he no longer cared. And if she thought it was the drink making his eyes red and watery, he didn't care about that either. Better that than letting her see what he really felt.



‘Goodbye, Miss Harriet,’ he said gruffly. ‘It’s been an honour working for you.’

‘George, wait.’

He turned to her hopefully.

‘The caravan’s yours; you know that, don’t you? Nothing else has changed, it’s just that I can’t take the risk of you coming to harm. And if you’re short of money, for God’s sake come and see me.’

George waited a minute until he could speak. ‘Miss Harriet,’ he said gently, ‘it was never about the money. Take care of yerself now.’

Only weeks ago, the house had felt like a hermitage with him and Trevor going about their business like two monks in a cell. Well, maybe not like two monks, thought Frankie, but it had been rather staid and quiet. Now it felt as if someone had thrown open the doors and let in the light. The weatherman might have promised storms ahead, but for now the room was flooded with sunshine and it promised to be the most fantastic day. So much had happened since Harry Watling had turned up in the shop predicting the downfall of Little Spitmarsh – all because a stranger had had the effrontery to arrive with a new vision of what the town could be. Frankie shook his head; Harry couldn’t have been more wrong about Matthew Corrigan.

The measure of how different life felt was that, instead of wanting to slope off somewhere quiet to top up his tan, he had rediscovered domestic bliss. Here was Sophie in one of Trevor’s tee shirts, eating the sickliest, most sugar-coated and unnatural looking cereal she could find, whilst nodding her head to some bling-bedecked artiste on MTV and feeding selected morsels to Phil. And Trevor, on the floor with a J-cloth, was clearing up puppy poo whilst Kirstie snatched a

few minutes away from her brood to give herself a thorough grooming. Remembering the croissants just in time, Frankie grabbed the oven gloves and a serving plate.

‘Plain for me, please,’ said Trevor, from the floor.

‘Has something put you off the chocolate ones, Trev?’ Frankie said, winking at Sophie, who was giggling so much that she was having trouble containing her mouthful of cereal.

‘Oof!’ said Trevor, cracking his head as he came up underneath the table. ‘Still fancy a puppy, young lady?’ he waved his Marigolds at Sophie, who wrinkled her nose.

‘Yes, I do!’

Trevor smiled. ‘We’ll have to speak to Mummy first to see what she thinks. You can always keep him here, though, if Mummy doesn’t want him to stay with her.’

‘Okay,’ Sophie nodded. ‘But I will have to come and stay with you lots. And I can text you to see how he is in between.’

Frankie, silenced by a mouthful of jam, butter and croissant, could only marvel. It was amazing what kids knew these days. There was a lot of talk about children reclaiming their childhood by skipping or playing marbles, but the fact that Sophie had been able to negotiate her way up to them from North London seemed to be largely due to her impressive computer skills. Sod the marbles!

Trevor put his arm round Sophie and kissed the top of her head. ‘Eat up, then we’ll find you something to wear and you can choose some flowers to take back to Mummy.’

Frankie pressed his lips together before he was tempted to make a suggestion.

Thunder boomed along the creek. After the heat of the day, with pressure building up unbearably, the rain was a relief. Lightning bolted across the black sky and flashed across the room. Matthew switched off the lights to watch the show. His

gran would have been ordering him to cover all the mirrors by now, he thought, sitting himself at the bar. Tough old bird she'd been, entrenched in her council flat until the very last, with her budgie and her rogues' gallery of orthodontically-challenged grandchildren. The photo of him and his brother, Si, made them look as if they'd just been nominated for an ASBO. His mum still complained about the school not combing their hair first. Matthew ran his fingers over the polished granite surface; he'd come a long way since then.

The thunder sounded again, practically overhead. Behind him the door opened and someone walked in. Matthew looked into the mirrored wall lining the back of the bar as the figure dropped the hood of the yellow oilskin. It wasn't the sexiest sight he'd ever seen, yet he felt a warm frisson of pleasure at seeing her.

'Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine.'

Harry, her small face splashed with raindrops and her fringe plastered to her forehead, did not return his smile. Wintry-grey eyes accused him beneath the wet black lashes. Matthew turned round to face her.

'I hope you're proud of yourself,' she spat, looking at him balefully.

Must have been a shiver of dread rather than delight. Just as well, there had been a nasty moment that day over coffee in her house, when he had looked into her unguarded face turned up at him and thought the unthinkable. He guessed why she had come, but was far too weary to deal with a Harry Watling tantrum now. 'What's the big deal, Harry? Surely you're not getting your knickers in a twist about George playing the piano, are you? Poor old boy deserves some time out with all the running around he does for you, doesn't he?'

Harry shook her head. 'You don't have the slightest idea of

what you've done, do you? George is an alcoholic. Hasn't touched a drop for three years but, thanks to you, he's not only fallen off the wagon, he's set fire to it and is doing a war dance round it too.'

Matthew looked up at the ceiling and blew out slowly. 'Ah,' he said. 'I see.'

'Oh, I doubt that very much,' said Harry, sourly. 'What on earth did I do to you that you had to interfere with every aspect of my life? You took over the old clubhouse, you're turning the town into a place I don't recognise, and now you're just counting down the days until you can stop me trading.'

He kept silent.

'But even that's not enough for you, is it? You couldn't bear to think that I had one loyal member of staff, someone who's chosen to be there for me. Oh no, you thought he was under my thumb and to prove it you took him out and did the worst thing you could possibly do – you bought him a drink.'

It was more than a Harry tantrum and it was beginning to hurt, because he had gloated slightly at the thought that he and the old boy were getting one over on her. Why hadn't he put two and two together? Why had he never seen George touch alcohol?

But Harry hadn't finished. 'Well, I hope you're proud because here's what you've done; you see, I can't have an alcoholic wandering round the place. It's not safe for him, it's not safe for anyone else, and, hey, although you've probably worked this out for yourself, it's not all that great for business. So, well done, Matthew. Thanks to you, I've had to let George go.'

'What?' Matthew fought to control the anger that coursed through his body.

'You heard,' she said, with contempt. 'I can't let George

work for me any more – unless, of course, you'd rather I fished his dead body out from under a pontoon one day?'

She was right, of course, but that didn't mean he liked her very much for spelling the danger out to him. But if he didn't feel much warmth towards Harry, he positively loathed himself. George hadn't even wanted a drink; he, good old Matthew, had forced one on him. That must have been the start of some bender; once he'd got a taste of gin, the old boy clearly hadn't been able to stop.

The doors closed behind Harry, and there was only a puddle of rainwater on the polished floor and his own deep sense of shame and self-recrimination to show she'd even been there. Matthew groaned. He'd promised to attend some awards ceremony with Gina in London the next day and wouldn't even be able to catch up with the old boy. Poor old sod must be feeling pretty low. But he was a tough old bird. Yep, thought Matthew, crossing the empty room. Torpedoed twice by Jerry and blown up countless times by Harry, George would come through this crisis, too.

As the last of the lightning flickered across the creek, Harry sat in the dark and turned the glass slowly in her hand, hoping that, by placing her fingers where her father had once touched the cut patterns of its surface, she could bring him back to her in some small way. Within the glass a hefty measure of malt whisky revolved and gleamed in the fading light. But not even the familiar notes of sea spray, peat smoke and tar that rose into the air brought back anything but memories of the man who had once savoured them.

Closing her eyes, Harry took a sip and drew some comfort from the fire which burned her throat and warmed her body. She ached with loss. If she had acted harshly, it was for George's own good. Her father, even though he and George

went back such a long way, would have done the same. She was almost sure of it. This time she really thought George had beaten the bottle; she really had believed him when he promised he wouldn't touch a drop ever again. It was easy to blame Matthew, but maybe a relapse was inevitable? And George had been acting pretty strangely, with minor accidents and careless incidents seeming to follow him all round the yard.

She was desperately sorry she'd had to sack him, but he was a danger to himself and everyone else. And then there was the business. You had to stop the rot, she knew that for certain. She hadn't been able to save her father, but she would do everything in her power, whatever it took, to make sure he lived on in the business he had founded. Even if that meant not having George at her side.

## *Chapter Twenty*

Matthew walked up to the caravan and immediately felt a little less ashamed of himself and a lot more critical of Harry. He'd assumed, when George waved airily in the direction of his house, that he'd meant a modern mobile home. Screened as it was by trees and shrubs, with only a glimpse of the cream roof to show it was there, Matthew was rather shocked to discover that the place was little more than a tin shack squatting beside the creek. If Harry cared that much about the old man, what on earth was he doing living here? The poor old sod wasn't getting any younger; you'd have thought the very least he deserved was a comfortable home.

There was no response to his knock, and Matthew was about to walk away when a weak voice called, 'Just let yerself in, dammit. It's open.'

His disappointment in Harry increased as he stepped inside. The place was immaculate - especially the galley, with its yellow Formica cupboards scrubbed and original sink gleaming - but, Christ, it was bleak and bare. A sliding plastic door separated the galley from a second meagre living area. Here George was stretched out on a narrow berth, which to Matthew's eyes afforded little space even to turn over comfortably.

'Ah, it's you, Matthew,' George said, struggling to push back a heavy grey wool blanket and very white, but darned, cotton sheets. 'I thought it might be Miss Harriet.' The strain of sitting up provoked a spasm of coughing in the old man. Matthew looked around for a glass for water, but George waved for him not to bother.

'Sit down,' he wheezed, pointing to a wooden-framed

armchair, the only comfortable place that Matthew had seen so far. 'It'll clear when I've had a roll-up. Thing is,' he said, pushing back fine, yellow-tinged hair which waved like a faded seed head, 'I don't much feel like a smoke at the moment. Mind you, I don't much feel like a drink either.' He gave Matthew a rueful smile. 'That's not why I'm still lying here though. I just don't seem to have had the energy to rouse meself. Tell you what. A good strong cup of coffee might do the trick. Would you mind?'

Matthew got to his feet, feeling so churned up that he was unable to speak. How could Harry just turn her back on George?

'There is a spare cup,' George said proudly, 'though if you want milk you'll 'ave to 'ave it powdered. Oh, and help yerself to biscuits.'

Poor old bugger, he really had struggled to get that last sentence out. Matthew made coffee and, since George was still looking peaky, helped him to sit up. Through his striped pyjamas the old man's shoulders were still strong and muscular, but his hand shook as he tried to drink his coffee and there were twin spots of vivid colour on his cheeks. Another fit of coughing made him wince.

'How long have you been lying here, George?'

'Couple of days mebbe, since ... since you know when. Oh, I've got up to do the necessary, you know, clean meself, take a leak.'

Matthew felt wretched. If only he hadn't been so keen to win the old man over with a couple of drinks, this would never have happened.

'I'm sorry, George. This is all my fault.'

George lifted his hand in a feeble protest. 'No, Matthew,' he gasped, fighting for breath. 'It were - '

Matthew took the old man's hand, with its translucent,



papery skin and icy purple veins, and gently laid it down.

‘Don’t blame yourself, George. We’re going to sort this out. Once I’ve had a talk to Ms Watling, you’ll soon be back at the yard.’

A look of despair crossed George’s tired face. ‘No, Matthew, Miss Harriet did the right thing.’

‘Come on. Anyone can make a mistake.’

‘True, but I’ve caused Miss Harriet real harm.’

The colour in George’s cheeks seem to grow more florid, in contrast to the rest of his face which was grey. To Matthew’s distress, there were tears in the old man’s eyes as he turned to him. ‘I was only trying to help, Matthew, I really was. What with trying to make her see that she needed new customers and ’elping some of the old ones on their way ... I never thought old Johnny would react like that. What with that and all the worries with that boy sniffin’ round.’

Matthew frowned. ‘What boy, George?’

‘That chef feller. The one I’ve been trying to tell you about.’ Another fit of coughing racked the old man’s body, causing him obvious pain.

Matthew touched his arm. ‘Don’t worry about it now, George. I’m sure you haven’t done anything wrong, so stop tormenting yourself. There are more important things to concentrate on right now, like getting yourself better. Now I’m going to make you as comfortable as I can and then I’m going to fetch a doctor. Right?’

George nodded feebly. ‘Right, Matthew.’

Harry’s back was killing her. Her shoulders were a Gordian knot of tension and her hands, which were burning with all the extra pulling on ropes she’d been doing, were shaking as she poured petrol into the outboard. She’d give George a couple of days to think about what he’d done, then she’d go over to

the caravan and see if he felt like giving her a hand. There was an engine that needed to be dumped in oil quickly, before the salt water that had got to it caused any more damage. Hang on - Harry rubbed greasy hands through her hair - that wasn't possible, was it? George had been given many chances over the years and blown every one. This time, he'd reached the point of no return.

'Why don't you get George to do that?'

Resplendent in his trendy black cardigan and white vest top, Jimi clearly wasn't in the mood to get his hands dirty, Harry thought ruefully.

'George doesn't work here any more,' she told him crisply.

Jimi's eyebrows rose. 'So, what about the manorial rights stuff? Did you get anything useful out of him about that before he left?'

Harry bent to tighten the lid of the petrol can. 'George wasn't making much sense about anything when I saw him last,' she bit out. 'And he didn't leave. He was sacked. You see, unfortunately, George is an alcoholic. And I was stupid enough to think he wouldn't relapse ... so that's it.'

Jimi whistled softly. 'I didn't realise.'

Harry straightened up and pushed her hair off her face. 'Well, why should you? It's not as if you can tell by looking. Besides, it was Matthew who started him off. Nice guy, your boss.'

'In the circumstances you didn't have a choice,' he said, taking off his sunglasses to reveal dark eyes hard with resolve. 'I've seen it all before; I've worked with one or two. They can stay dry for months, years even, and then something pushes them over the edge and the whole cycle starts again.'

'Something or someone,' Harry said with feeling. 'If Matthew Corrigan hadn't been so keen to make George one of the lads, this wouldn't have happened.' She examined her split

nails and battered hands. 'I've lost George and, unless my solicitor comes up with something fast, I'm in danger of losing the yard too.'

'What about all the publicity the town's had? And that sailing article? Won't that help the business?'

Harry looked round for her life jacket. 'I'm not counting on that. It could be months before that's published. Besides, it could be all over by then. Let's face it, the sort of people who'll be coming up to dine at Samphire aren't really the sort who sail from Watling's. They want CCTV to keep an eye on the valuable boats they never sail, and locked gates and all that malarkey.'

'But not everyone wants that, surely?' Jimi mused, looking round at the straggly array of yachts lining the bowl of the creek. 'I can't believe you haven't had a single enquiry; it's such a beautiful spot.'

'Until Matthew builds a block of flats here.'

Harry thought about Matthew sitting on her sofa, talking about Johnny. Listening to that intimate sexy murmur, she'd found it so easy to be seduced into believing that he cared – not only about Johnny but also, and she felt stupid just thinking it, about her.

'You know, it's at times like this that I really wish Dad was here.' Harry shoved her hands in her pockets. 'He would have been able to tell me what to do, he always trusted his instincts.'

Jimi tried to mask his expression, but not before Harry had seen the hunger there. 'It's all right,' he said, giving a tight, thin smile. 'Listening to you makes me realise what I've lost. You grew up with a father who loved you. I had a stepfather who resented me all his life for not being his real son. How old were you when you lost your dad?'

'Eleven.' Maybe she got a few sympathy points for being

so young?

Jimi's eyes looked past her at the silver water and the boat yard. 'At least you've got all of this to remember your father by – I've got nothing.'

'Well, we'll have something in common, won't we?' said Harry, trying to lighten the mood.

He turned to her sharply. 'What?'

'I won't have anything either. Not if Matthew takes this lot away.'

Jimi smiled grimly. 'Don't worry, Harry. I'm not going to give him the chance. Anyway,' he went on, before she could ask him what he was going to do, 'where's George now?'

Harry thought sadly of George's shed. The door had blown ajar during the night and she'd tentatively pushed it open, half hoping that there'd been a terrible mistake and George would be sitting there, making tea. But there was no whistling kettle, just the sound of the hinges creaking in the wind.

'He'll be at the caravan,' Harry said with certainty. Where else was there for him to be?

'Do you want me to look in on him? Make sure he's okay?'

'Would you?'

Jimi unfolded his sunglasses. 'Sure. I'm due at the restaurant, but if there's anything you should know, I'll be right back. Okay?'

Harry felt tears prick her eyes and tried to blink them away, but not before Jimi had seen.

'Aw, c'mon, kid,' he said gently. 'You've done the right thing.' He held out his arms and Harry stepped towards him.

If the thought of what Harry might be like in bed had ever crossed Matthew's mind, he'd tried to let it get away pretty quickly. But he would really, *really* like to know what she was doing with her face buried in his chef's chest. He'd heard

about Jimi's reputation, did the guy have no self-restraint? Whilst he was standing there trying to frame a sentence from something other than 'hell', 'fuck' and 'playing at', the happy couple split apart. Jimi disappeared up one of the paths behind the boat yard, but he wasn't about to let Harry get away.

It was a nice hug, Harry thought, wandering over to the pontoon to prepare the dinghy for her inspections. Not creepy, not sexy, but strangely comforting. She clamped the outboard motor on the back of the dinghy. How long had it been since anyone had given her a simple, straightforward hug? Noticing movement along the shore, Harry was startled into action. Here was one person who wouldn't be giving her a hug any time soon. Giving the starter a tug, she prepared to cast off the dinghy, eager to escape Matthew who was bearing down on her fast.

'Harry, wait!'

Fortunately the motor was loud enough for her to pretend not to hear; now was not the time to be answering questions about why she'd been embracing his chef. Collecting the lines in quickly, she was starting to power away when the dinghy rocked and Matthew climbed in opposite her, hooded hazel eyes glittering green in the shaft of light that sliced across his face.

'Cut the engine,' he ordered.

'It's too late now,' Harry told him. 'You know what they say about time and tide and I've got work to do. There's a spare life jacket under your seat, I suggest you put it on. And, since you've got no waterproofs, you're going to find the ride rather wet.'

She was just going to hit the throttle when Matthew calmly leaned across and turned off the engine.

'What the hell are you playing at, you idiot?' she bellowed.

'I could ask the same of you,' Matthew said coldly.

'Get out, Matthew. Haven't you caused enough grief? I haven't got time to play stupid games with you.'

'You don't have time for anyone. Period,' he accused. 'Like the poor old sod who's given up most of his life to wait hand and foot on your ungrateful family.'

'What! Now let me see – who's in the wrong here? My family, who've given George chance after chance where most employers would have thrown him out long ago? Or you, Mr Magnanimous, throwing drink down George's throat until he was absolutely senseless?'

Harry knew she was lashing out, but she didn't care; as far as she was concerned, the mess she was in was entirely due to the man sitting opposite her. His sheer good looks still made her legs go weak, but like everyone else she'd been completely taken in by his casual charm. She'd just made another grab for the starter, when Matthew leaned across and held her firmly by the shoulders.

'Let me go!'

Matthew's fingers dug in even tighter. 'Will you get off your high horse for just two minutes and listen to me! George is ill - something you might have found out for yourself, if you'd been a little less high-minded and had had the decency to see how he was doing.'

Harry felt as if the breath had been knocked out of her body. Matthew, glaring at her, seemed to fade away and she could hear the sound of her own blood pulsing through her head, before she found the strength to pull herself together. 'How bad is he?'

Matthew gave a snort of disgust. 'Not as bad as he would have been if he'd spent another night in that caravan.' He shook his head and gave her a withering look. 'I wonder at you, Harry, I really do. It must have been very convenient for

you having George on the doorstep like that, in the cheapest, meanest accommodation your so-called caring family could put him up in.'

'But ...' Harry shut up. How could she protest that George liked living in his caravan, that he'd rejected any offers of anywhere more comfortable? It didn't ring true, especially when she looked into her heart and asked herself how long it was since she'd actually been in there to see the state of the place.

Matthew sat back, his mouth in a hard line of disapproval. 'He'll be all right,' he said slowly. 'His lungs aren't in great shape, that's the legacy of his wartime service and all the smoking over the years. Fortunately he's only got a chest infection, though I dread to think where it might have led if he'd been left to fend for himself much longer.'

A mental picture of what might have been made Harry wince. Poor old George, lying there wondering when help would come. She'd bought him a mobile phone, but she knew full well that he never used it. He probably didn't even know how to use it, though nothing would have enticed him to admit it. If he'd died, she would only have had herself to blame. 'Which hospital is he in?' she said, at last.

Matthew shook his head. 'It's not serious enough for that, thank God. And anyway, he made it clear to the doctor that if an ambulance was summoned he wouldn't get in it. Said he didn't want no hospital, as if the doctor and I were trying to finish him off.' He gave a short wry smile and looked at Harry. 'No, George is at my place, resting up in the spare room. Very nice he looks too, surrounded by all the chintz wallpaper. You'll see for yourself when you come up.'

'No.' She felt herself shrinking back.

'What do you mean – "no"?'

How could she explain that every fibre of her body was

screaming at her not to go anywhere near the old man? Matthew was right; she had harmed him enough already. She should have insisted on better accommodation for him, she should have been up to check on him sooner, she should have taken better care of him the way he'd always taken care of her. But she couldn't visit him, because it would only remind her of what she'd tried so hard to forget.

She'd been insistent on seeing her father, even though Maeve had done everything to prevent her. But Harry knew better, refusing to eat until she was allowed to see him one last time, convinced that when he saw her he would sit up in bed and ask for a mug of tea and they would talk about the next job to do at the boat yard. So Harry had demanded to be let in; only Daddy didn't even open his eyes. They'd hidden the worst of the damage, of course; but one glance at his dear, strong face, ravaged by the sea, and she knew he was lost to her forever. It wasn't a memory she shared with anyone and she wasn't about to start now.

'No, I won't come up to the house, thanks. I'll wait until George is up and about and catch up with him then.'

Her voice sounded stiff and distant even to her own ears. She sat hunched up with misery, as Matthew pulled the dinghy to the shore and angrily lifted himself out. He looked down at her as if he could barely bring himself to speak.

'I've met some cold people in my time, but you are one heartless little cow, Harry Watling. Did you ever care about George, or was he just a useful bit of kit to be discarded once he'd served his purpose?' He flung the line to her and kicked the dinghy savagely away. 'Well, go on. Hurry up before you miss the tide. Got to get your priorities right, haven't you?'

Harry and the dinghy started to drift away, but Matthew turned round for a parting shot. 'And another thing!' he yelled. 'Don't you think you've got enough trouble without



messing with my chef as well?’

## Chapter Twenty-One

The floppy cotton hat she'd been wearing had once been white; it wasn't the most flattering garment, but it stopped her getting sunstroke. If she keeled over now, there'd be no one around to pick her up; so it was only prudent, in the circumstances, to be careful. Of course, if she was being really sensible, she'd sell the boat yard, put a deposit on a little flat and get a steady job in an office. Maybe she could even get a steady man and live happily ever after?

Harry plonked herself down at the edge of the pontoon, pulled off her shoes and used her hat to wipe her forehead as she dangled her feet in the cool water. Late August and the boat yard was more like a graveyard, with the sad pale husks of once blithely coloured and polished vessels now spectral in the shadows. One or two of her most independent skippers had slipped their moorings in shimmering pink dawns to set off on summer passages. The remaining boats, even fewer now, moved only in the turn of the tide.

A little wave rolled across the creek and lapped up at her shins, a rope creaked and strained close by and a solitary seabird cried as it crossed the lonely sky. Harry let her shoulders drop and ran a hand across her stiff neck. Now that she had given herself permission to stop for a break, her eyelids felt heavy in the soporific heat; but sleep had become fleeting and elusive as her restless conscience demanded attention. For almost a week she'd got up every day and told herself that today she *would* see George; but each day there would be another pressing job, another payment to negotiate – and then she'd feel too drained to look George in the eye, knowing that she should have taken more care of him.

Her immediate reaction had been to lash out at Matthew, but now she was ashamed of that too. After all, he hadn't known that George was ill when he'd bought him a drink; it had been George's decision alone to take the first sip. And Matthew had done everything he could since then to make it up to the old man. The best she'd managed, and she could just imagine Matthew's opinion of the gesture, was to slope up to Matthew's front door very early one morning and post a get-well card, before anyone hauled her in to face more recriminations.

Without George the days seemed longer. Tea did not magically appear when she thought her tongue was about to stick to the roof of her mouth. Biscuits, which had flashed before her in brief tantalising glimpses when George was feeling particularly generous, were non-existent. She didn't only miss him for what he did for her, but for all the habits she'd previously found so annoying. Where was the sense of danger in any knots she had secured herself? These days she could walk past any load in perfect safety, only to find herself listening for the crash that signified George was back at work. She could even forgive his penchant for coming out with a pithy comment when she least needed it, to have life back to the way it was. 'Ah, Miss Harriet, misery loves company,' he would often tell her when she moaned about everything going wrong at once. Well, she was pretty miserable right now, and she felt like the loneliest person in the world.

Harry swung round and rested her back against the warm wood of a mooring timber whilst she waited for her feet to dry. George also said that the first step was the hardest. Watling's quivered in the heat haze; was it destined to become a place of wraiths and sad memories? Without evidence to show that the manorial rights had been relinquished long ago, she was looking at a dead end. As for her chances of coming

to an arrangement with Matthew, she stood more chance of winning the lottery. One step at a time. Some things she couldn't do, like working any harder, but there was one thing she couldn't put off any longer. She scrambled to her feet; it was time to see George.

A big box of family favourites - that might cheer him up. Or some chocolate shortbread. Or both? Harry deliberated as she headed into town, determined to do the right thing. In the summer heat the grass was dry and withered. Just like me, she thought; I'm crying out for a break in a long barren spell to perk me up and make me feel alive again.

The further she got from the boat yard, the more uncomfortable she felt. Convinced that everyone would blame her for what had happened to George, Harry pleaded pressure of work as an excuse for not joining in more of the preparations for the film festival. George was one of Little Spitmarsh's treasures, well-known and well-loved. The news of how badly she had let him down would be all round town. What justification could she give for not visiting a frail old man? Harry began to drag her feet. How could she explain her own irrational fear that seeing her would only make him worse?

Laughter and the sound of conversation from the General Store stopped her in her tracks, before she remembered that the first screening of the film festival was due to take place. In anticipation of the main event, the store was in full tapas bar mode, keen to soak up any tourists and encourage them to part with their cash. Harry wondered what to do next. Stroll in? Order a drink? Pretend she just happened to be passing? Before she could make up her mind, she found herself standing opposite the open door where the sound of someone playing 'These Foolish Things' floated out to her.

Harry had to look twice to register that it was George, suited and booted, sitting at the piano, with Phil asleep under the piano stool. Harry grinned with relief and delight. You had to hand it to George, he was a man of many talents, constantly surprising her with skills he had picked up during his naval service. He looked great, a bit thinner in the cheeks and paler than usual, but very much the George she knew and loved. She had to take a deep breath for a moment to quell her grateful tears and stop herself rushing in and flinging her arms around him.

Scanning the room, she could see Frankie and Trevor sharing a joke. Harry was puzzled. From the brief conversations she'd had with Frankie, she'd understood that the boys were up to their eyes with a combination of the new business and looking after all the new additions to their family, both human and canine; yet they'd clearly taken time out for the festival. Uncomfortable as it made her feel to think of them blaming her for George's predicament, she couldn't help but think that it was payback time. Remembering how she'd thrown her toys around when they'd been so quick to seize the business opportunity offered by Samphire, it was a wonder they'd stuck with her this long. Now, justifiably, she knew what it was like to be the one left out in the cold.

Despite strict instructions from her brain to the contrary, she still got the same quivery feeling of excitement in her stomach at the sight of Matthew, sexy in a pink shirt and faded jeans. Before Matthew, she'd been queen of her inherited domain, ruling like a benevolent despot, giving praise when it was due and coming down faster than one of George's loads on anyone who transgressed. From their first meeting, when she'd found he'd invaded her favourite sanctuary, Matthew had challenged her view of the world, and in the process had turned it upside down. Now here he was

again, with his back set against her; only this time there was no chance that he would turn to her and smile.

Maybe she could slip unnoticed into the crowd? She'd never seen the room so full; there were smartly dressed couples, young people who looked like students from Great Spitmarsh, ordinary families on holiday or a day trip, all enjoying the preliminaries to the film festival and having fun. Smells of chorizo, garlic and bread drifted towards her in the warm air and glasses clinked toasts to new friendships.

Harry swayed from foot to foot, planning a course of action before someone noticed her standing there like a spare part. But nobody looked up. Nobody noticed her. Nobody gave her any kind of cue to come on stage. She was firmly on the outside and the more she thought about crossing the threshold, the more difficult it was to imagine joining the happy, lively throng inside. Whilst she'd been manning the barricades against Matthew, a new Little Spitmarsh had emerged; warm, friendly, bustling with people, the kind of town she'd hoped it could be, but a place she no longer felt part of. Those who knew her wouldn't be particularly pleased to see her, and those who didn't know her wouldn't care.

As much as she yearned to talk to George and join in, it was beyond Harry to face the thought of so many cold shoulders. As for the tears spilling down her cheeks, they were completely wasteful, a pointless gesture, when no one was there to see or care. Harry found a crumpled tissue and blew her nose and told herself to stop feeling so bloody sorry for herself. She was hardly a cocktail party girl, was she? It wasn't as if she normally gave up her afternoons to swan around in bars? But something good had come out of her trip; she had seen George, he was well. That was the best outcome she could have hoped for. With Matthew doing a much better job of looking after him than she had, she could at least take

some comfort from the fact that George was in the right place.

When George looked up, the street was empty; but for a moment he thought he'd caught a glimpse of a small figure standing quite alone outside. He shifted uncomfortably. Maybe it was his guilty conscience playing tricks on him? He felt wretched about how he'd let her down and was still trying to pluck up the courage to go and see how she was doing. She was such a brittle little thing; the only security she'd ever had was in the black-timbered building hugging the creek and that small cluster of moorings – and George had done his best to jeopardise that for her.

Miss Harriet could quite justifiably sack him for some of the strokes he had pulled, and now he was wondering how to put things right. He'd wanted to confess to Matthew and hand the whole burden over to him; but, thanks to the blasted chest infection, Matthew had shut him up every time he'd tried to broach the subject, telling him to concentrate on getting better. Trouble was, now Matthew had so high an opinion of him that George dreaded losing it. It was a mess and no mistake.

George corrected himself as his fingers wandered off key. Truth was, hardly anyone could hear him now over the din. Not that it mattered. Everyone was enjoying themselves and he was certain that, if Miss Harriet could see the difference Matthew had made to the town, she would be more accepting of the changes. George shook his head. Lying there, in his caravan, drenched in sweat and weak as a kitten, he had cursed himself over and over again for succumbing to his inner demons. What if he'd gone toes up? What would Miss Harriet have done then? Instead of helping Miss Harriet, he'd only made life worse for her. What if the same was true of everything else he'd tried to protect her from? It was a horrible thought. Now all he had to do was find the courage to

put things right.

Harry stumbled away straight into the next person heading for the party. Jimi caught her by the shoulders and kissed the top of her head.

‘What’s up, kid?’

In return, Harry managed a weak smile. Without Jimi dropping by to see if she was making any progress on the legal front, she wouldn’t have spoken to anyone for days. Somehow he always managed a few moments, even though he was so tied up with the preparations for the film festival and with Samphire’s forthcoming opening.

Harry shook her head. ‘I came to try and think of a way to see George, but I don’t fancy going in there.’

Jimi peered inside and frowned. ‘Yeah, I see what you mean. Matthew’s keeping a very close eye on George. I’d like to see how he’s doing myself, let him know you’re thinking of him, but with Matthew there all the time ...’

Harry hung her head. It was awkward for Jimi; she was grateful for his concern and touched that he was taking such an interest in George. ‘Look, I can’t criticise Matthew for what he’s done for George, I suppose I shouldn’t really blame him for encouraging him to have a drink in the first place.’

‘Oh?’

She looked up to find Jimi watching her closely.

‘Well, given George’s history ... and Matthew has been marvellous the way he’s taken care of him.’

Jimi snorted. ‘Hasn’t it crossed your mind that it’s in Matthew’s interest to have George on his side? Suppose George has got something that would stop his claim across your land? Have you thought of that?’

Harry brushed a hand across her face. ‘I’m almost too tired to think of anything. It’s not very likely, is it?’



‘George must know more about what’s gone on here than anybody.’

She smiled ruefully. ‘The trouble is, he’s what’s known as an unreliable witness. Most of the time George was so tanked up he wouldn’t have been able to separate truth from fiction. Besides, it’s almost too late. Unless my solicitor strikes gold - and I’m certainly sweating blood to pay him - it’s over. Matthew Corrigan’s got me right where he wants me and I can kiss goodbye to everything I’ve worked for.’

‘And you’re just going to throw away your legacy? Everything that was sacrificed for you? Come on, Harry! How do you think that makes me feel? I got nothing - you’ve had a head start.’

So now she was fighting for Jimi, and everything he hadn’t had, as well as herself? Harry sighed and tried to suppress the tiniest flicker of impatience before Jimi sensed it. Everyone had their own problems, but she was beginning to get tired of hearing what a raw deal Jimi thought he’d had. Given the way the tide was turning against her, no doubt that would prove to be her fault too.

‘All right, George? You look a bit pale, time to give it a break, don’t you think?’

Matthew thought the old man was looking quite peaky as he accepted a glass of water.

‘Ain’t no gin in this, is there?’

‘No, George,’ Matthew assured him, pointing to a table a couple had just vacated.

‘Pity,’ the old man said, winking, as he got to his feet, trailing Phil, who seemed to have adopted him, in his wake.

‘I take it Ms Watling hasn’t got in touch to see how you’re doing?’ said Matthew, as they sat down.

‘I’m not so sure I didn’t catch sight of her just now,’ said

George. 'Standing outside.'

Matthew had to bite his tongue. The poor old sod even now was so loyal that he'd spin any line rather than fuel criticism of Harry. 'If it was her, then surely she would have come in and spoken to you?'

George gave him an old-fashioned look. 'That's not Miss Harriet's way.'

Matthew gulped his beer. 'What? Behaving like a decent human being?' Then, seeing George's face darken, he added, 'Come on George, if she saw you she had no excuse not to see how you're doing.'

'It's not her way,' George repeated. 'She's too shy.'

Matthew thought of her wrapped up in Jimi's arms for anyone to see, and laughed out loud.

'With respect, Matthew, you don't know her like I do. Away from the yard she's like a fish out of water. That's her world, over there, waking up to the waves breaking on the shore, watching the weather in all its moods, preferring the isolation of her work to the company of strangers. You don't know how uncomfortable she'd be in a place like this.'

Matthew took a quick look round the room at bright blonde highlights, glossy brunettes, girls in tight tops with flat stomachs, others - not so toned - revealing tanned rolls of midriff adorned with belly bars. He tried to imagine Harry in her dungarees, crashing in and scowling at everyone. But then he was willing to bet that none of them, even the young cocky blokes with their artfully tousled hair and slim chains round their necks, would be up to the job of going out night after night, whatever the weather, on a precarious stretch of water.

Tough as old boots, that was Harry. And then he thought about the other Harry, the part she kept hidden, but which he sometimes glimpsed. Harry, tearful and unsettled. Harry in her home, watchful and wary. Harry's overworked small hands,

with their clipped and broken nails, in his. Matthew sighed. Then he remembered the caravan and Harry's point-blank refusal to visit the old man – and his heart hardened.

His gaze returned to George's sad, apologetic face. There was no point in upsetting him even more. No point in telling George that it was Harry's callous treatment of her loyal odd-job man that had finally made him stop putting sentiment before business. No point in letting George know that, since Harry had cast the old man off without a second thought and he was effectively in his care, Matthew was no longer troubled by qualms about what would happen to him if Harry went out of business. No point in saying that he'd had a bellyful of Harry, and Little Spitmarsh too.

Move in, make a killing and move on. That's what he should have done all along. Gina was right. Harry Watling had not only run out of chances, she'd also run out of luck.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

‘What do you mean, it’s not *convenient*?’ Gina had her Snow Queen voice on and Matthew could see why so many of her subjects at G Mag were regularly frozen into submission. When he’d rolled over in bed to answer the phone, his irritation at being woken up in the middle of a dream – just when things were about to get interesting – quickly dissipated. Never mind Kylie, this was beyond fantasy; here was Gina, telling him they should catch up and was it all right if she came and stayed for a few days? Matthew had been so surprised it had taken him several minutes to realise that, actually, with George in the next room the idea was rapidly losing its initial appeal.

He ran his hands through his hair and groaned. Now Harry Watling was ruining his sex life! It must have cost Gina to admit that she wanted to see him; he knew how much she hated to show her feelings and would have dearly loved to see her face on the other end of the phone. No wonder she wasn’t happy to be turned away.

‘This Harry Watling character is really becoming quite a pest, isn’t he?’ she complained, less than impressed with Matthew’s rather skimpy explanation of why he had a visitor. ‘Isn’t it about time you drove a steamroller over his miserable little boat yard?’

It probably wasn’t the best time to tell Gina that Harry was of the female variety; Matthew didn’t think it would add anything to the debate.

‘That would work, I grant you, but I think there are laws against it.’ He stared at the empty space beside him, a space that wouldn’t be filled any time soon. Across the landing,

George flung his bedroom door open. Matthew heard him clump to the bathroom, lift the loo seat and pee like a horse.

‘I promise you that having George listening in whilst we’re making love isn’t my idea of a good time.’ He shuddered. ‘Maybe I could book you into Walton House and pop over for conjugal rights?’

‘I don’t think so, Matthew,’ Gina said, still frosty. ‘I can stay in a hotel any time; it’s not really what I was hoping for.’

The glacial silence was almost certainly down to poor reception, but was it Gina or a bad signal causing it? Matthew walked towards the window to try to hear more clearly as the shower gurgled into life next door. George must have had the window open too, because a prolonged and horribly frothy bout of coughing split the air before being brought to a full stop by an angry-sounding fart.

Gina gave an irritated sigh. ‘Not much of a lady, whoever she is, darling.’

At Rose & Son’s, the estate agents, Sandra was beginning to wonder if her eyes had been closed when all the flying pigs went past. When the scruffily sexy guy had walked into the office all those weeks ago and taken out a six-month rental on Sea Shanty, she’d never expected it to be the start of a trend. No one could have predicted such a dramatic change in Little Spitmarsh’s fortunes, certainly not Mr Rose who had been forced to pay her an unprecedented bonus. To be fair to him, the hurdle hadn’t been very high and almost any viewings, not to mention a steady increase in sales, had meant she’d easily exceeded her targets. Either Mr Rose simply couldn’t believe that the boom would continue or he’d been in such a state of shock that it had slipped his mind, but one way or another he’d forgotten to review her targets and Sandra had every intention of ensuring a similarly good pay day this month.

Small houses that had been on the market for years were starting to sell, evidence of a small but significant wave of second-homers, with their seaside-coloured makeovers, pebble gardens and touches such as copper weathervanes in the shape of schooners appearing on newly tiled roofs. Sandra pressed herself against the window to stick up a 'Similar Properties Wanted' notice above a selection of neglected old cottages which, to her amazement, had sold or gone under offer. Looking across the street, she thought with satisfaction of the new highlights and de luxe pampering package she had promised herself when her next bonus came in. In the meantime, she was looking forward to being very well-beehived at tonight's film screening, and unleashing her inner sixties siren with big hair, big eyelashes and a foxy little frock.

Since the salon had been redecorated, her mother had been in a permanently good mood, thought Lola, watching Carmen display an endearingly childlike delight in the new mirrors and the imported sleek Italian furniture. Lola was still finding it hard to believe that her parents had listened when she'd informed them that the business was in dire need of a facelift. It had taken a huge row, following the photo shoot at Samphire, for them to clear the air. Even then Lola had had to bite her lip to refrain from adding that what was true for the salon also applied to most of the existing clients. Hopefully, the shiny modern makeover would take care of that as well.

Lola blew out a breath. The night of the photo shoot had proved to be quite a watershed. Having watched the woman who looked like a liquorice stick with a bob slink off with Matthew Corrigan, she'd had to admit to herself that he was never going to be her very own handsome prince, but there was a sense in which he had woken her out of her reverie. It

wasn't good enough to hang around waiting for something to turn up any more. Nor could she sit back and allow her parents to dictate the course of her life. Watching all those glamorous models allow the Liquorice Stick and a photographer to tell them what to do had given her a glimpse of another life.

The funny thing was – as soon as she'd broken the news about her plans and told Matthew that he'd be a waitress down, she'd been able to meet his mesmeric hazel eyes without a blush. Looking closer, she'd noticed fine lines at the corners of his eyes and the first scattering of grey just beginning to peep through the dishevelled tawny curls. He looked good from a distance, but close up he was really quite crusty. Well, too crusty for her anyway. What a narrow escape! If she'd pinned her hopes on Matthew, she might have ended up like her mother; although, now that she and Carmen had spent some time talking to each other, Lola understood the reasons why her mother kept her family so close.

'So, a foundation course in Business Studies, eh?' Matthew had said. 'Good for you. How are your mum and dad? Are they all right about it?'

'They've been great.' Lola couldn't resist a last flirty smile. 'Thanks to you.'

'How come?' Matthew frowned, wondering what was coming next.

'Well, if you hadn't bought the old clubhouse I'd still be sitting on the houseboat wondering what to do. It's not surprising that Mum and Dad treated me like a kid. I was certainly behaving like one. You made us all see each other in a new light.'

She hadn't seen his face when she walked away, but she knew – just knew – that for once she'd got his full attention, so she couldn't resist adding a bit of oomph to her seductive

sway.

It had been a golden summer and now, thanks to a bit of give and take on both sides, even her parents supported her. Poor Carmen. Five miscarriages before Lola had arrived. No wonder they were protective of her.

Whilst Little Spitmarsh was on the up, property prices were comparatively low and rental accommodation plentiful. They'd had no trouble attracting a couple of good young hairdressers and, to Carmen's immense satisfaction, a manicurist with her own nail bar. She watched the woman juggle several hands' worth of nail extensions and French manicures, whilst another satisfied customer waved scarlet-tipped toes separated by squashy pink foam under a heat lamp to dry.

There were enough regular clients still requesting perms to keep Carmen happy and, whilst there was no doubt about the demand for good quality modern cuts in the newly awakened town, today had seen a call for big barnets that vindicated Carmen's insistence on retaining a couple of the hideous hood driers. The other fixture Carmen had refused to budge on was the salon's name, ignoring Lola's pleas to rechristen it something fresh and upmarket. Crimps it remained; fortunately, a different font meant you'd have to really try to mistake it for Chimps.

No one was being made a monkey of today; but a surprising number of decidedly sixties hairdos were being welded into place, in honour of the film festival's next screening. Looking round the salon now, it seemed that everyone was getting in the mood for a lot of audience participation at the Palace on the Pier tonight. What a sentimental bunch they were, Lola thought, shaking her head. *Dirty Dancing* indeed; she only hoped that both the pier and Roy's back were prepared for the moment when Carmen



started shaking her booty.

Suddenly a blast of cold air was blown down her neck.

‘Hey, slacker!’ said Carmen, brandishing a hairdryer. ‘Get back to work or I give you a poodle perm!’

Lola looked at her mother and smiled. Yes, she was certainly pleased that Matthew had come along. The outcome wasn’t exactly what she’d anticipated - it was better. First Crimps, then college, then a second salon and then even a chain. With the Moulton family using their knowledge and experience as a team, who knew what lay ahead for them?

‘Ooh, we’re well out of it tonight, Trev,’ said Frankie, adding some lime-green foliage as a last-minute touch to the huge arrangements of blood-red roses and orange Asiatic lilies that stood either side of the stage. ‘I don’t feel safe with some of those women out there.’

‘Oh, I think they’ll leave us alone,’ Trevor replied confidently, stepping back to run a critical eye over the flowers.

‘Look! A stripper!’ came the cry from one of the over-excited audience. ‘Get your kit off!’

Scuttling back into the wings to yells of ‘Off! Off! Off!’, Frankie and Trevor ran into a nervous-looking George.

‘What did you do to them?’ Frankie asked, casting an eye over his shoulder to make sure everyone was still seated.

‘I was s’posed to get everyone in the mood with a few songs,’ George explained, mopping his brow with a hankie. ‘But halfway through “She’s Like the Wind” these ’it me in the face.’ He pulled a pink thong complete with tiny diamanté heart out of his top pocket. ‘An’ I decided to cut me set short.’

‘Very wise,’ Frankie agreed. ‘Matthew will be lucky to escape. They’ll want to eat him alive. And you can take that

look off your face right now, Trevor.'

'Ark at that lot!' George said, nodding towards the auditorium.

Frankie decided to risk another peep. The Palace on the Pier was proving to be wildly successful as a venue for *Dirty Dancing*, though it had to be said that guys were thin on the ground. Roy Moulton could probably look after himself, but Carmen would frighten off anyone who might, God forbid, be tempted to take liberties with him.

'It's the ultimate chick flick, isn't it?' said Trevor.

'Or hen porn,' Frankie observed, ducking back behind cover. 'There aren't too many spring chickens out there. Oh God, here comes Matthew. Get ready to wade in if they decide to pounce.'

A great roar went up as Matthew, pressed into the role of compère whilst Jimi was on food duties, introduced the film accompanied by wolf whistles and foot stomping.

'I suppose when you think about it, it is the perfect film,' Frankie whispered. 'I mean it's about being young and waiting for romance to happen, being on holiday, when you might fall for someone you'd never normally meet; the kind of situation everyone can reminisce about and identify with.'

Just under two hours later there was pandemonium. Tables were pushed back and the women of Little Spitmarsh and beyond rushed to the floor to relive the youth they wished they'd had.

'I 'ad a girl in every port when I was at sea,' George confided. 'Best place for 'em, on the other side of the ocean. This lot are a bit too close for comfort.'

As George retreated to the piano, Trevor was torn from Frankie's side by Sandra from Rose & Son.

'I do love a man with a hairy chest!' Frankie heard her exclaim, whilst Trevor hastily buttoned up his shirt. But the

laughter died in Frankie's throat at the sight of the boot-faced waitress from the Paradise Café bearing down on him. Finding Lola Moulton on his other side, Frankie grabbed her hand and rushed towards the nearest space, but not before he caught sight of Matthew's raised eyebrows and amused glance.

'I'm sorry, I can only dance the man's steps,' said Lola, as they launched into a jive. 'We didn't have enough boys in my class.'

'That's all right,' Frankie assured her, 'I'm quite happy being a girl.'

As beehives collapsed in the heat and false eyelashes rained to the floor like dead earwigs, Matthew sidled out of a fire exit to cool off. The film festival had been even more successful than he'd hoped. They would have to pull out all the stops for the finale at Samphire if it wasn't to prove an anticlimax after the fun everyone had had tonight. Matthew looked around with satisfaction; there was a lot of charm about the little town and, with the neon lights blazing behind him, it was even possible to pretend the sea slapping up against the pier wasn't dirty grey. No wonder Harry had been so protective of the place.

A hint of breeze lifted his curls as Matthew leaned against the rails and tried to see the stars. Harry, it seemed, would do anything to prevent change, but wouldn't lift a finger to help George. Somewhere along the line she'd got her wires very crossed. If only she'd unbent a little, what would she have made of this evening, all the laughter, the fun, people enjoying themselves, George dashing through his set for fear of being lynched? What would he have done if she'd made up with George and turned up tonight? For a second, Matthew contemplated a parallel universe where he'd walk across the dance floor, pull Harry to her feet and make her smile.

He shook his head; he still couldn't see the stars, there was

too much light pollution where he was standing. As for seeing Harry smile? That was never going to happen; she was about to get what she deserved, so why did it make him feel so bad?

Matthew shuffled further along the rail. It was hard to believe there were so many people close by. The noise from the Palace was muted and lost in the sound of the sea and, through the gaps between the wooden boards, he could see the black water sucking eerily at the pier.

‘Are you lonesome tonight?’

The lyric sounded faintly from the shadows, making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He’d heard the rumours, but couldn’t think why the ghost of Elvis would want to visit Little Spitmarsh. Unless, like all the best ghosts, it had come to rebuke him for the harm he was about to cause Harry. Surely there were more pressing cases for Elvis to deal with?

A headlight lit the gloomy walls of the Palace and Matthew jumped as a familiar silhouette detached itself from the building, black hair swept up into a quiff, white shirt glowing in the artificial light and a medallion gleaming on his silvery skin.

‘Aw right, mate?’

‘Roy!’ Matthew gibbered.

‘Just come out for a smoke, mate,’ said Roy, swivelling his hips. ‘I think the missus has done me back in.’

Declining Roy’s offer of a cigarette, as he always did, Matthew decided that the long hours had got to him. It occurred to him that, whilst he’d been worrying about Harry Watling, he hadn’t given Gina a second thought. ‘Houston,’ he muttered guiltily under his breath, ‘we have a problem.’

‘I’ve had the time of my life,’ said Frankie, turning up his collar and twirling on his toes, as he passed Trevor throwing

Sandra from Rose & Son through his legs.

‘What a great evening!’ said Trevor, who looked thrilled to show off his dancing skills. ‘You wouldn’t think Little Spitmarsh could rise to the occasion.’

Sandra came up for air and Trevor spun her across the room. Frankie, having coped magnificently with Lola Moulton, was finding Carmen more of a challenge. ‘When’s Sophie coming up next? Have you managed to sort anything out with Jane?’ he yelled, grasping Carmen firmly by the waist so he could keep the twins firmly at bay.

‘The week before she’s due back to school,’ said Trevor, preparing himself to throw Sandra in the air. ‘I’m glad she likes the revamped website.’

Frankie noted Roy Moulton returning to the fray. ‘It looks fab, doesn’t it? Blacknarcissus.com: beautiful, sophisticated and extortionately expensive designs.’

‘Frankie! You didn’t say that, did you?’ said a shocked Trevor, reaching out only just in time to catch Sandra.

‘Don’t be a fool, Trev. Besides, anyone who can afford to order these won’t think about the money. We’re not an online supermarket, Trev, we’re offering exclusivity. All yours,’ he said, spinning Carmen back to Roy. ‘Hey, Trev. I *am* having the time of my life! It’s been a great summer, hasn’t it?’

He almost added that it was shame Harry wasn’t there to enjoy the evening, but didn’t want to spoil Trevor’s mood. Sacking George had felt like a step too far – but who was brave enough to tell Harry? No, she’d have to work it out for herself.

## *Chapter Twenty-Three*

Matthew had been looking right troubled. Fish and guests, they both stank after three days so there had to be quite a pong after his prolonged stay. George had made up his mind to address both issues. Despite the heatwave he had rustled up some nice lamb chops, which he served with mashed potatoes and some slightly overcooked cabbage liberally doused in rich gravy. That would make up for all that there salad and seafood nonsense Matthew was so fond of.

‘There we are, Matthew, get that down you.’ He opened the bottle of good red wine he’d bought in the off-licence and poured a glass for Matthew and some water for himself.

Matthew frowned at the label. ‘Some kind of occasion, George?’

George shook his head. ‘Bit of a thank you. For putting me up. Couple more over there,’ he said, waving his knife. He cleared his throat. ‘The fact is, Matthew, it’s time I moved back. I’m getting a bit soft here; I’m not used to all this luxury and modern whatnots.’ He was a nice feller, Matthew, thought George – polite enough to look quite shocked as he absorbed what he’d been told.

‘George, you’re not going back to that place, surely? You’ve only just recovered from a really nasty infection. No, George, you stay here as long as you like.’ Matthew raised his glass.

George looked him in the eye. ‘I know you don’t reckon the caravan’s much, Matthew, but it’s home to me.’

Matthew’s frown deepened and George winced as a hefty measure of good red disappeared. ‘It’s a total disgrace,’ Matthew snapped. ‘It’s bare, it’s cold and I don’t know how

Harry Watling had the nerve to let you live there.'

George tutted; that wasn't the way to treat a decent wine, he thought, piously. 'Don't go blaming Miss Harriet, now. I've lost count of the number of times she's offered me an alternative.'

Matthew deflated visibly. 'She has?'

There was a little flicker of hope in his eyes that George noted with satisfaction. Thinking the worst of Miss Harriet hadn't done Matthew much good either; maybe it would all turn out for the best in the end. In the meantime, it was George's duty to make a clean breast of it.

'Definitely. She don't 'ave a lot of cash, Miss Harriet, but she's full of ideas. She's offered to convert one of the workshops for me, asked if I'd like one of the 'ouseboats if one came up.' He chuckled softly. 'She's all bark, Miss Harriet, you should know that by now. Yes, I could live somewhere you would call comfortable, and I've even got a bit of money put by, and when the time comes I'll find meself a little bedsit somewhere, mebbe.' He leaned back to make sure he was getting his point across. 'But the thing is, Matthew, I've chosen to live there because I like it. There's no palace that's in a better spot than that caravan: I can watch the water and the sky, I can lie in bed and listen to the rain on the roof, or hear it creaking in the sun. Now how bad is that?' He paused to let it sink in, then added, 'And I likes to keep an eye on Miss Harriet.'

Matthew snorted. 'How can you say that after the way she's treated you?'

George took a deep breath. The first step, that was the hardest. He'd tell Matthew what he'd done and take the consequences after. 'It's more how I've treated her ...' he began.

Matthew waited whilst George found the keys to the caravan. An oystercatcher rebuked them with a sharp 'kip, kip' for disturbing the peace of the evening. A bit like Harry, he thought wistfully, always warning everyone off. Although George had done his best to do that, too. No wonder Harry had struggled. In a misguided attempt to bring the boat yard to a state where Harry would have to turn to Matthew for help, George had seen off just about everybody.

'Miss Harriet was working 'erself to the bone,' he'd said sadly. 'The boat yard was already in trouble when you turned up, with so many part-time sailors preferring the easy life of the marina. Oh, the order book is full all right, but there's always plenty of nothing jobs.'

'Nothing jobs?'

'Meaning Miss Harriet gets paid bugger all for taking on jobs that most people would be too scared of. No wonder there's nothing of her. Thing is, Matthew, that boat yard is the last link to the man she idolised. She wasn't going to give any of it away willingly; it would be like giving up on him. So I thought a bit of pressure would make her see that a tidy sum from the sale of a parcel of land would at least give her the option to share the load. Besides,' George added furtively, 'it's better that Miss Harriet gets what she can for that land now, before anyone else gets their hands on it.' He shook his head. 'And that's all I'm saying.'

To that end, George had set about driving away anything that might drip some lifeblood into the business. He'd hinted to any of Samphire's customers who made enquiries about keeping their yachts there that Harry was about to give the land to eco-villagers who would shun modern conveniences for eco-friendly loos. 'Told 'em it would be like a sewage farm!' George recounted, shaking his head. 'With a wind farm spreading the fumes about.' The motorboat owners had been



redirected to Great Spitmarsh marina. 'Do a nice steak and chips at the bar there! None of yer fancy muck.' And Harry's regulars were all warned of an impending price hike.

George had certainly screwed things up for Harry, but he'd nearly paid very dearly for his well-intended meddling. Matthew sighed and followed him inside. However hard George protested that he wanted to be in the caravan, Matthew still felt Harry could have made more effort to make the place more comfortable.

But, to his surprise, the caravan – warmed by long hours of sunshine, with views of a barely rippling creek and a sky like amethyst shot through with pewter greys and liquid amber – didn't seem as stark and uninviting as he'd remembered. He could suddenly see why George was happy with the minimum of fuss and clutter. Anything more elaborate would look horribly contrived against a backdrop of water and sky. So who cared if the interior wasn't tastefully decorated in Farrow and Ball colours? It was simple, clean and, Matthew realised as he looked around more closely, had everything George needed close to hand.

'Might be a bit old-fashioned to your eyes, Matthew,' George said, reading his mind. 'But this place suits me fine. I know I can't stay here forever. One day I'm going to have to forgo waking to the sound of the waves whipping up or taking me tea outside and watching the birds of an evening, but I'm not there yet. Nearly was right enough, but there's life in this old dog yet.'

'Plenty, I hope,' said Matthew, setting George's holdall down.

The pleasure on George's face at being home abruptly disappeared behind a cloud. 'I've got to put things right with Miss Harriet first,' he said, sadly.

Matthew patted him lightly on the back, feeling shabby that

George had been the only one to make a clean breast of things. Somehow he hadn't been able to bring himself to tell George about the charter. He justified the omission by telling himself it was because he didn't want to jeopardise George's full recovery; but the truth was he'd just got too fond of the old boy and didn't want to lose his good opinion.

'She's hurting, that girl,' George nodded.

Loyal to the last, thought Matthew, reluctantly leaving him to it. He couldn't say he was sorry to get his rented house to himself; living in such a cosy space, he was now more familiar with George's personal habits than he would have liked. The early morning coughing fits had been particularly alarming. Hearing one for the first time, Matthew had raced into the spare room clad only in his boxers, ready to call an ambulance – only to find a surprised-looking George happily sitting up in bed and, very much against doctor's orders, smoking a roll-up.

George's cooking was equally memorable. Unforgettable, you might say. Matthew doubted if he would ever get rid of the smell of cabbage that now pervaded every nook and cranny. Even so, part of him would miss George. Needing to be convinced that the old boy was settled and comfortable before he left, he looked back over his shoulder at the yellow lights of the windows twinkling against the black of the silhouetted caravan and the Byzantine blue of the sky. George's patch of paradise. Who was he to disagree?

And Harry? Sometimes he had the feeling that George wasn't quite telling him the full story, as if he alone knew what lay behind the face she presented to the world. Given the way George had been sabotaging operations at Watling's, it was a miracle she was still in business at all. She had guts, certainly, guts to hang on when the tide was turning against her and, although he'd been mad at her at the time for doing it,

guts to fire George, the most enduring presence in her life.

Poor Harry, she'd really had a rough time when he thought about it; no father, an absent mother and George! Hadn't he been a bit quick to judge her? It hurt him to think of her battling away against hopeless odds, not one person by her side; she must have loved her father very deeply to find the inner strength to keep going. He was also feeling pretty bad about all the times he'd scoffed at the way she dressed – those dreaded dungarees! Jesus, she wasn't a footballer's wife, was she? What chance did Harry Watling have to pamper and preen – she was always too busy doing her job. Given those beautiful eyes and that wide sensual mouth, he was willing to bet that she'd knock spots off the competition if she relaxed just enough to smile. What a pity he wasn't the one who could make that happen.

Walking back across the yard, Matthew thought he saw a flicker of light at the periphery of his vision. He hesitated, and the light flashed again in a brief sweeping movement. Harry didn't need to go around with a torch on her own property, so who was sneaking around in George's shed?

Why hadn't the security light gone on? Harry backed away from the glass door and huddled on the stairs in the dark, cursing the instinct that kicked in whenever there was a problem in the yard. Why couldn't she have just carried on sleeping, oblivious to whatever disasters were waiting to happen? It was, she supposed, some kind of primitive maternal response. Only in her case, her vulnerable infant was the boat yard. But, whereas other women saw their children grow up and leave, she would always be responsible for her charge. And there were times, like now, with a possible prowler just feet away from her, when she was beginning to think what a relief it would be to hand the responsibility to

someone else.

Right now, if this was a creepy film, thought Harry, slowly reaching for the substantial hand torch she kept by the door, everyone would be screaming for her not to do it. Or at least to put some proper clothes on first.

Despite her best efforts to move as quietly as possible, there was a sharp click as the door opened. She paused, straining her ears for the slightest sound or movement and trying not to think about someone in the shadows doing the same. When she was as certain as she could be that no one was lying in wait, she inched one bare foot across the threshold and, with her back to the building and her eyes peeled, edged bit by bit along the perimeter of the yard and into a warm and solid wall.

A hand went round her mouth to gag her at the same time as the other snaked round her waist, pinning her so close that Harry really wished there was more than an oversized tee shirt between her backside and someone's crotch. More angry at herself for walking into such an obvious trap than afraid, Harry eyes darted round the yard, looking for the best escape route whilst she gathered her strength to fight back.

'What the fuck do you think you're doing?' Matthew hissed. 'Are you trying to get yourself killed?'

Harry longed to tell him that she was doing just fine until he started playing fright night with her, but his hand was still clamped around her face.

'Harry, shut up,' he said in a low voice. 'There's someone in George's shed. And no, it's not George, because I've just taken him back to the caravan.'

Harry would have slumped against him with relief had it not been for the sound of a door banging open and Matthew pushing her aside to go racing towards the noise. She shrugged and ran after him. It was too cold to be standing

around.

The door to George's shed creaked on its hinges, but there was no sign of anyone inside.

'Nice try, Matthew,' said Harry. 'What are you really doing here?'

'Just put the light on, will you?'

Harry groped for the light switch and wished she hadn't nagged George about using low-energy bulbs, remembering that he'd fitted something a lot of small children demanded in their bedrooms to keep the bogey man away. She found the switch and flicked it. Either way, George must have bought a dud; the shed was still almost dark and Matthew was still there.

'Jesus!' Matthew said, peering through the gloom. 'Is it always like this?'

'George always seems to know where everything is.'

He shook his head. 'Well, unless anyone's looking for old brushes, bits of rope or dead tubes of filler, there isn't much of value here, is there?'

'Quite. No one's been in here. It must have been the wind.'

Matthew opened his mouth, then closed it again and shook his head. 'For fuck's sake, Harry, look at you!'

Harry looked – at her bare feet, her bare legs and a tee shirt that barely covered her modesty.

'How the bloody hell did you think you were going to take anyone on dressed like that?'

'Element of surprise, maybe? Flash them and then hit them over the head with my torch.'

'You're telling me that's *all* you're wearing?'

Harry laughed weakly. 'Don't make me prove it.'

Matthew leaned closer. The low light glanced off the sharp planes of his face. A wayward dark curl beckoned to be stroked back into place. Suddenly, sharing a couple of feet of

space with him with practically no clothes on seemed more dangerous than tackling an army of intruders. He lifted his head to stare into her eyes and Harry felt her legs go weak with anticipation. *Do something!* a voice in her head was begging. Her mouth was dry, her heart was racing. She moved forwards, holding his gaze, open, willing, waiting.

‘Harry,’ Matthew ordered. ‘Go home – *now*.’

There was nothing like your own bed, thought George, happy to be back in the familiar comfort of his soft old sheets and blankets. None of your cabbage roses plastered all over the walls neither. And as for them duvets? They were the devil’s own work, for sure. ‘Alf the time you was cooked to death with the bleedin’ contraption wrapped round your neck like someone was trying to suffocate you. Or you tried to cool down and woke up like a block of ice where it had somehow worked its way onto the floor.

Still, he mustn’t moan. Matthew had been right good to him. He’d be back home now, but on the way he would have had time to think about everything George had told him about Miss Harriet. Well, everything he needed to know anyway.

George lay in the welcoming darkness and felt sleep embrace him. He could hear only the faint lapping of the water, punctuated by the odd creak as the caravan cooled after the heat of the day. Come to think of it, that was a very odd creak indeed. George sat up and felt for the switch above his head. Before he could get to it, he was blinded by a torch shining into his face.

‘George,’ said an amused voice. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘What the fuck?’ Matthew flicked on the nearest light and was mystified by what he saw. The night was descending into

madness. Doubling back past the caravan, to cool his head and walk off some very disturbing feelings about Harry, he noticed that, whereas the narrow windows should have been in darkness, a single light was bobbing wildly from within. Bursting in, he'd found a pyjama-clad George twisting Jimi's arm halfway up his back.

'Caught this blighter tryin' to rob me!' George announced.

'I didn't know you were here,' Jimi whimpered.

'Oh, I suppose that makes it better, does it?' George said, giving his arm another tug and causing beads of sweat to appear on the younger man's brow. Another minute, thought Matthew, and he'd be a chef down as well as a waitress.

'It's all right, George. You can let go now. No one's leaving yet.'

He waited until George had reluctantly released Jimi before speaking.

'Okay, now would someone tell me what's going on?' Both men turned to him and started talking at once. 'One at time. George?'

'This thieving so-and-so just crept into my house when 'e thought I was asleep!'

'I didn't know you were here!' Jimi protested.

'So that makes it all right then, does it?' snarled George. 'I knew you was trouble the first time you showed up at the yard, I knew you was after somethin'. That's why you wanted a little chat, wasn't it? An' that's why you showed up with a bottle of gin at just the right time?'

'You?' Matthew looked at him in amazement. 'How come I'm the one who's been getting all the blame?'

'Ain't nobody's fault but mine,' George told him, irritably. 'It were me who drank it. Thing is, I'd like to know what this fellow-me-lad 'ere thinks 'e was going to get out of it?'

Freed from George's grasp, Jimi seemed to rally. 'It's not

me you should be cross-examining. I'm only trying to help. It's Matthew you should talk to – he's the one who's going to cheat Harry out of her land. I bet you haven't told George about that, have you?

'Told me what?' All the bravado abruptly left George's demeanour and Matthew was face to face with a frail, puzzled old man.

'Nothing to say? Looks like I'll have to tell George for you.'

Did Jimi have to sound so elated?

'When Matthew bought the clubhouse, he also acquired some ancient rights that went with the ownership. The rights mean that Matthew owns the strip of land, and the seabed, between the boat yard and the clubhouse. Unless Harry can come up with some evidence to prove that the rights were relinquished by a subsequent owner, she has no right of access across Matthew's land. That's what I've been trying to find, only I haven't been able to ask because ...'

Matthew winced.

'He's made sure that no one else has been able to get near you. Unless anyone can produce that evidence soon, you see, it's all over for Harry. Matthew can put her out of business, just like that.'

Matthew felt sick as George's face creased with anguish. The old man didn't need any more shocks; God knows what this would do to him. He hovered, uncertain of what to do, whilst George struggled for breath and at last found his voice.

'You bastard!'



## *Chapter Twenty-Four*

‘Stupid, stupid, stupid!’ Harry could feel her face flaming, even though no one was in the room to witness her embarrassment. Sheesh! That Matthew was a bastard and no mistake; it wasn’t enough that he’d been mentally building all over her boat yard ever since he’d set eyes on it, nor that he’d successfully driven a wedge between her and George. Oh no, he hadn’t been able to rest until he’d finally brought about her complete and utter humiliation! He’d actually believed that she’d been ready and willing to make a total idiot of herself and had calmly rejected her. How bowel-curdlingly shaming was that?

Okay, she might have been panting just a bit, but only because she’d had to run to keep up with him; it was preferable to being alone in the dark with a prowler on the loose. And maybe she had gazed up at him with big eyes, but it was so dark in George’s shed she’d barely been able to see her own hand. He’d got it all wrong! Just because he was standing there looking mean and moody – as if the only thing on his mind was sweeping the table clear of ashtrays, old newspapers and clogged paint brushes soaking in pots of white spirit, and taking her on it there and then – didn’t mean she was fooled. Absolutely not! How dare he order her to run along as if she was some love-struck teenager in the throes of her first crush! Huh! He really thought he was something, didn’t he?

She felt like simply throwing herself on her bed and crying for the rest of eternity. Only the thought that, if she stayed at home, she was vulnerable to all kinds of attack prompted her to do something more constructive. With her luck, the entire

pent-up demand of would-be sailors would arrive on her doorstep any minute now. All waving credit cards and begging for moorings, only for her to have to turn them all away – because what use was a mooring if you couldn't actually sail your boat across Matthew Bloody Corrigan's seabed?

Harry stopped and took a deep breath. According to the charter, Matthew owned the beach and the seabed. Until he made a claim for the sea as well, she was bloody well going to use it - she looked at her watch - starting *now*. The best place for her to be was on the boat, where no one could find her until she was feeling more like her old self and had decided what to do next. She gave a hollow laugh. The way she was feeling she could be gone some time.

With no time to waste if she was going to catch the tide, Harry hastily showered and changed. Gathering her bags together, she took a last look round the house to make sure everything that needed to be switched off was. Andrew Lawrence, her solicitor, had sent her another billet-doux the day before which, at a quick scan, was another 'nothing doing' letter. Her attention was more focused on the invoice that accompanied it; she was paying a huge amount for nothing.

'Yeah, thanks for that!' she muttered, tossing both the letter and the bill in the bin. What was the point? She couldn't save the boat yard and she didn't have any money. Maybe she'd declare herself bankrupt as well? For a moment she looked at her phone and wondered if she should call anyone; but, then again, who was there to call? Usually she'd tell George she was going, but he had Matthew to take care of him now. No, she thought, shoving her phone in her bag, the explanations could wait – but the tide couldn't.

An early-morning mist was still rolling across the water as

Harry slipped *Calypso*'s moorings and motored through the tide gate and into the channel, keeping the engine revs down as low as she dared. Samphire rose out of the mist above her, its great glass panels blank and sightless in the pale dawn. She waited until she was safely past, before raising the sails and killing the engine; the last thing she wanted was to be caught fiddling around with the boat where someone could see her.

At last she was on her way, gliding with the currents through the marshes and inlets, and sending small groups of indignant seabirds flocking and scolding into the air. Although there was a fresh breeze, the sun was slowly gathering strength. By mid-morning it would be pleasantly warm and she would be far away from Watling's, from Little Spitmarsh and from Matthew. Perching on the little wooden seat beside the tiller to take a long last look at the town before it disappeared from sight, Harry gazed at the lonely, lovely sky and the secretive water and watched as Samphire and her realm, surrounded by its imperfect guard of thinning masts, slowly slipped away from her.

All the late nights, the long hours of pushing herself to the limit every day, hadn't been enough to stop the boat yard's decline. Bigger operations could carry out the maintenance work and the refits more cheaply and quickly than she could. Harry reluctantly accepted that. She'd known it all the time, really, but had battled on, wanting to be a success for the sake of the father who had meant everything to her.

'I'm so sorry,' she whispered. 'I tried so hard, but I just wasn't strong enough for you.' A half-sob caught in her throat, but Harry was determined not to waste any more tears; it was all behind her now.

Except for the bit in front of her. As she was thrown off her perch she knew there was a problem. By the time she lay winded in the cockpit, she had worked out that *Calypso* had

run aground. The temptation to just lie there, wondering what exactly she had done in a previous life to deserve quite such a bad day, was strong; but with every passing second escape became more difficult. And the sails, filling merrily with another gust of wind, were all set to drive her further into the mud.

Screaming expletives, Harry dragged herself to her feet and dashed round trying to persuade the top half of the boat to stop sailing and the bottom half to start. The only deep water she was sure of was behind her, the way she'd come. Starting the engine, she put it into reverse gear, gave it some serious throttle and tried to back off. Nothing. No point in going on unless she wanted to ruin the rudder too. Well done, Harry, she congratulated herself; she hadn't just run aground – she'd made a really good job of embedding in it. *Calypso* wasn't budging.

Grabbing a can of Coke from the galley, Harry made herself sit down and plan her next move. Looking at the state of the tide, she would have to be quick; the water was already beginning to drop. And then a deeply unwelcome thought occurred to her: she had run aground at the top of one of the highest tides of the year. *Calypso* was firmly wedged on a mudbank which usually only saw a few inches of water. From now on, the chances of refloating were about to get slimmer with every tide. Bloody great, thought Harry. Talk about being careful what you wished for. She'd wanted to get away all right, but a tide this high wasn't due again for, oh, months. Harry sighed. At least she had something to take her mind off Matthew Corrigan.

That Matthew, George thought murderously, now he was a right so-and-so. Why, he'd never have allowed himself to stay under the same roof as him if he'd known how he'd duped

them all. All except Miss Harriet - she'd been right all along. What a pity that it was Johnny MacManus who'd tried to burn the restaurant down, he thought, feeling even more miffed. Couldn't trust that drunken fool to get anything right. If he hadn't made such a piss-poor job of it and done it properly, it would have served Matthew Corrigan right.

Nevertheless, it was a beautiful morning: the sun dancing on the blue-green waves, the seagulls calling and a fresh breeze whipping the water into foam-flecked peaks and tugging at George's hair. Any other day, he thought, walking into the yard with a lump in his throat, he would have been happy to be home; but first he needed to talk to Miss Harriet. Assuming he could find her. Having stood outside her door for five minutes, he tentatively tried the handle and found it locked. Unusual. But after the events of the previous night he couldn't blame her. Where else had Jimi Tan's search for evidence to protect the yard taken him?

George's eyes narrowed as he reached in his pocket for his tobacco tin and made a roll-up. 'Don't think you've fooled me, neither, Mr Jimi Butter-Wouldn't-Melt-In-Yer-Mouth Tan!' After a therapeutic drag on his cigarette, he became aware of the silence all around him. Normally he could locate Harry by the sawing, hammering or swearing which signified her whereabouts in the yard, but today the stillness was watchful and heavy. What hadn't he noticed?

Jettisoning the last of his roll-up, he hurried to the boatsheds, tormented by visions of Harry overcome by paint fumes or her broken body at the foot of a ladder. When she wasn't there, he went across to the boats that were laid up in the yard, calling her name at each one. She hadn't gone out to the moorings because the large inflatable she used for inspections, with its powerful outboard motor, was firmly secured to the pontoon. And then he realised what was

missing and a ghastly vision of the past rose up to haunt him.

Jimi wasn't his ideal first mate, but he would have to do. There was no way he was going to take that other rascal, Corrigan, out with him. Beneath the nancy-boy outfit of tight black jeans, baggy white tee shirt and girly scarf, George could see that the younger man had some useful muscles. George recalled a school dinner lady he'd courted once; she'd had fine strong arms from carrying all the heavy pots around too. Anyway, hopefully there wouldn't be any need for anyone with brute strength. Hopefully Harry would be safe and well, but he wouldn't rest until he made sure.

Catching Jimi unloading a box from the back of his flashy black sports car meant that he could avoid Matthew. There was a conversation to be had, but it could wait. Unlike Harry.

'George! How are you, mate? Everything all right after last night? Come over here and get a whiff of this awesome cheese.'

'No, thank you. Something stinks, all right, but I'd say it was something fishy.'

Jimi frowned. 'Really? But I didn't buy any fish.'

'You don't say!' George said, pointedly. 'Right, young feller, I need you to help me. Miss Harriet's missing. I think she's taken the boat out.'

'George, I'm busy,' Jimi said, nodding at the box in his arms. 'Besides, what's the drama – that's what Harry does, isn't it? Mess around in boats?'

George pushed his face close to Jimi's. 'I'm telling you. Not asking you.'

Rebalancing the box, Jimi shrugged and started to walk away.

It was only because he needed Jimi in one piece that George refrained from twisting his arm up behind his back again; but it was just as well that Jimi appeared to have second

thoughts about the wisdom of waltzing off when he was in midflow.

‘Okay,’ Jimi sighed. ‘Where’s the fire?’

‘Miss Harriet’s father took *Calypso* out once when he was under a lot of pressure too; money worries, family ... Oh, and he’d just heard bad news. Someone he’d been very close to had died.’

Jimi nodded. ‘That’s a shame, but what’s it to do with me?’

‘The final blow was finding out he had a son. A son he would never get to see because the boy had been raised by another man who thought he was his father. He was devastated by the news.’

Jimi had gone pale.

‘When folks is under pressure,’ George said, with feeling, ‘they don’t always think straight. There was a terrible tragedy that day ... I ’ope it’s not too late to prevent another.’

Matthew reached for the bottle and poured himself a whisky. If George had broken Jimi’s arm, it would have made the decision for him; but could he afford to fire his chef with the finale of the film festival at Samphire approaching? After all, Jimi had only been trying to prove that he was on Harry’s side. Yet something about Jimi’s whole attitude wasn’t ringing true. Matthew picked up the glass and then thought better of it. Maybe it was simply Jimi’s attitude to Harry he didn’t like. Maybe he just didn’t like the thought of what was going on between them? And getting drunk wasn’t going to help him feel any better about that.

Reminding himself to duck as he went through the doorway – although possibly a blow to the head might be what was required – he went to the kitchen. If ever he needed a sign that it was time to move on, then that close encounter with Harry Watling ought to have done it. Something about seeing her

standing there in the half-light, nipples visible through her thin tee shirt as her chest rose and fell, had been disturbingly erotic – and Matthew was shocked at how much he'd wanted to do something about it.

After a steadying slug of cold water, he reasoned with himself. Hey, he made his living finding beauty in unexpected places, after all. He was a long way from home, from Gina. Hardly surprising, then, that he was beginning to find Harry strangely attractive. Yep, that would do it.

And yet it didn't explain why she kept coming into his thoughts. Sometimes he'd imagine her standing on her terrace at night, proud and mysterious with the starlight above her. Or he might think about her sitting opposite him on her sofa, looking so small and fragile, her grey eyes so distrustful that he'd almost felt compelled to reach out to her and take her endearingly childlike hand in his. Matthew wiped his mouth and stared blindly out of the window. There had to be a logical reason for why he kept thinking about Harry, because the alternative was just too bizarre to contemplate. Another unwelcome wave of guilt hit him as he thought about the charter. And now he had George on his conscience, too. The point was – what was he going to do about it? Was it too late to put things right?

Setting off to Watling's to catch George, he was surprised to see him handing Jimi a life jacket at the end of the pontoon. Since it wasn't easy for either of them to get past him on the precarious floating platform, taking to the water was their only escape; if he was quick he'd kill two birds with one stone.

'What do you want, yer bastard?' George snarled.

It wasn't an encouraging start.

'I need to speak to you, George. Jimi was right about the charter – but I promise I'm not going to take the boat yard away from Harry.'



‘Well, she needs to hear it from you – if it’s not too late.’

Jimi’s hands were shaking as he tried to adjust his life jacket. Matthew’s stomach lurched as he realised what George was saying; then he turned to Jimi, looked at his distraught face and realised with a jolt that he wasn’t the only one who cared for her.

‘Give me the jacket, Jimi. This is too difficult for you.’

Jimi’s reply caught in his throat. George placed a heavy hand on his shoulder.

‘Matthew’s right. You’ve had enough of a shock already. Go up to the caravan and make yourself a hot drink. Biscuits in the tin.’

Matthew goggled.

‘Go on, son,’ George said gently. ‘Do as you’re told. We’ll take care of Miss Harriet.’

A day of being marooned on the mudflat was fine. Harry had thoroughly lost her temper, had a damn good howl and felt peculiarly cheered up by a tin of vegetable soup eaten in the sun whilst watching the birds. She’d even managed a short nap on deck, which was fine until she woke up and thought about Matthew and made herself cry again. She was also beginning to feel very silly. Running away to sea was a great idea in the heat of the moment, but sooner or later she would have to return to sort out her problems.

Having poked around the sides of the boat with a long boat hook, Harry had established that there was scarily little water in front of the boat. The port side was high up on the bank too; but there was plenty behind, and enough to starboard, for her to be encouraged about the chances of levering the boat off at high water. Aware of how fiercely the tide sluiced through the channels, Harry put on a life jacket and clipped herself on with a lifeline before putting her plan into action. Furious as

she was with Matthew, she didn't actually want to give the impression that she'd thrown herself overboard because of him.

Stepping over the guardrails, she hung on to the thick wire rigging which held the mast in place and leaned back as far as she dared, trying to persuade *Calypso* in the direction of the deep water. By the time her arms were ready to leave their sockets and her hands were red raw from the wire, Harry realised she was making as much impression as a fly on an elephant. If only she'd had the foresight to take the All Blacks for a sail before she'd run out of water.

Tired and aching, Harry went down to the cabin to check the tide tables. It wasn't good news; she was never going to refloat *Calypso* by herself. Biting her lip, Harry looked at the radio and, with heavy heart, prepared to call up for help.

And then she heard the sound of an engine. Asking one person for assistance was better than airing her weakness to the public at large. Jubilant, Harry bounded up the companionway and was delighted to see George coming towards her in the boat-yard skiff with its powerful engine. The fact that Matthew was with him took the edge off her relief a little and made her legs shake. She didn't feel any better when Matthew boarded her boat, but, hey ho! It was probably sensible as far as negotiating a rescue went. Most importantly, she and *Calypso* would soon be free.

'All right, George,' Harry began, 'This is the plan - '

George revved the engine and started moving away - probably trying to assess the best approach. Then he picked up speed and roared off.

'George! Come back!' Harry bellowed, only to be ignored.

'Well, I'll be damned,' Matthew muttered. 'Crafty old bugger.'

## *Chapter Twenty-Five*

That was that then, thought George. It was high time those two sorted out their differences. If there was any explaining to be done, Miss Harriet might as well hear it straight from Matthew. He'd never really believed there was anything devious about Matthew's nature; some of his strokes hadn't been too clever, but George couldn't criticise him for that. This way the pair of them would have to listen to each other; and, if he'd been a betting man, he'd have put money on his feeling that they'd do more than that. No, best not get into that; one vice was enough for any man. George shut the door of the caravan behind him and quickly got into bed. All this fretting had worn him out and, now that he knew everything was going to work out, he was damn well going to catch up on some sleep.

'Lovely spot this, isn't it?' said Matthew, looking surprisingly cheerful. 'Great conditions for fossil hunting in this exposed mud. Did you know you can find sharks' teeth on the foreshore?'

Yes, he would know that, wouldn't he? Being ideally placed to gobble her and the boat yard up. 'Why? Have you lost any?' Harry snarled. Matthew grinned and headed down the companionway. Seconds later, he was halfway back up and waving the dirty saucepan from Harry's lunchtime soup at her.

'Did you actually eat this stuff?'

'What's wrong with it?'

'Everything,' said Matthew, tossing the whole lot over the side.

Great. Trapped on the boat with a madman.

‘That’s very irresponsible!’ Harry told him.

‘Not quite as irresponsible as running away to sea without telling anyone where you’re going and worrying everyone sick. Oh, and you’re trespassing.’

‘Like hell I am,’ said Harry, glaring at him. ‘Sorry, King Canute, but you’ve no rights whatsoever over the sea.’

Matthew looked smug. ‘In case you hadn’t noticed, you’re not on the sea and that’s my sandbank you’re sitting on.’

‘Yeah, thanks for reminding me,’ she grumbled. ‘You needn’t have come out all this way to tell me. Anyway, how do you know I’m not just waiting for the tide?’

Matthew grinned and his dimple danced merrily. ‘You’ve got a very long wait if that’s what you’re doing. I used to dinghy sail, remember, so I’m well aware of tidal ranges. George panicked when he saw your boat had gone - but, when a solitary mast appeared halfway down the channel, it wasn’t difficult to work out what had happened.’ Matthew laughed. ‘I would’ve loved to have seen your face when you realised what you’d done; I bet it was a picture.’

Harry scowled in his direction, but he had already disappeared back down the companionway. After a few minutes of wondering whether she could sit it out on deck, she was forced to join him. The long summer nights were giving way to a hint of autumn; she was cold, and the cooking smells drifting up to her from below were making her stomach rumble.

Harry had always thought of *Calypso*’s saloon as cosy. Gimballed lamps reflected off the gleaming varnished wood, creating a soft, subdued lighting. She’d run up curtains from cheerful Indian cotton and covered cushions with a faded red velvet remnant. The space had been a bolt-hole, a little home from home where she could escape from the world; but now

the world had come to join her and her cosy saloon was feeling positively snug.

‘Good,’ said Matthew, beaming at her. ‘Do you have any glasses? I’ve found everything else.’

He certainly had. Something imaginative which had started life as tinned beef was simmering on one ring of her two-burner cooker, whilst some fragrant rice bubbled gently on the other. *Calypso* didn’t run to an oven, so he’d done a good job of improvising, and he’d even got to grips with a temperamental foldaway table just big enough for two. Harry passed him the glasses and he nodded approvingly. ‘Can’t stand drinking out of plastic,’ he told her, as he opened a bottle of her Special Occasion Shiraz.

‘I’m glad you didn’t need a small saucepan, seeing as you’ve thrown mine overboard,’ Harry said, tartly.

‘Do you think I’m stupid?’ he said, draining the rice. ‘I’d have made you retrieve it for me if I’d needed it. Here,’ he quickly passed her a glass of wine. ‘Have a sip of this before you say anything.’

Throwing him a last look of extreme displeasure just to show he wasn’t getting away with anything, Harry decided she might as well enjoy her meal. The logistics of the cabin meant that, if two of you were seated at the foldaway table, it was very difficult - without the co-operation of the other person - to become unseated. Flouncing off was not an option; besides, there wasn’t anywhere to flounce off to, even if you did succeed in getting up. And she certainly wasn’t going to sit outside whilst Matthew Corrigan enjoyed her nice warm cabin.

‘Now, I’ll hold the table whilst you get up. Then you’re to sit down out of the way and drink your wine, whilst I clear this up and make some space.’

What the heck, thought Harry, why not try passive for

once? She might even find that she liked it. When Matthew sat down beside her, she found she liked that too; but then he said, 'Harry, we need to talk,' and she started to feel unhappy again. And, when he refilled her glass, she was certain that whatever he was going to say wasn't going to cheer her up at all.

'All right,' she said, quickly. 'I know what you're going to say; but, before we get down to details, I'm going to have to admit that you were right about Little Spitmarsh and I was wrong. And, even if I could pretend that the changes in the town won't affect me, I can't ignore what's been going on at Watling's. I really thought there might still be enough people out there who would like to escape to a quieter place and the gentle pleasures of pottering around in the water, but you only need to take a look over at the marina and all the motorboats to see I was wrong about that, too.'

She shook her head. 'Water miles don't seem to count the way air miles do; recreation means powering across vast expanses of sea for the thrill of it, and sod everyone and everything else! I've tried, Matthew, but whichever way I look at it I can't keep Watling's going in its present form.' She held up her hand. 'I know, I'm sure you're going to remind me about what you said about my land being better off in someone else's hands; someone who could realise its potential. Well, I haven't got a choice now; it's either sell land to you, or lose the boat yard altogether. The game's over.'

'I'm not going to buy your land,' he said gently.

'Tell me something I don't know,' she sniffed. 'You don't need to now. Not when you own half the seabed. It makes Watling's absolutely worthless.'

Matthew cupped her cheek in his hand in what she took as a brotherly sort of gesture, and made her look at him. That was fine, except that her heart was pounding in a response that

didn't feel at all sisterly.

'I've been thinking about it, and you're right,' he said, lulling her with his soft, throaty voice. 'Any kind of housing development along Champion's Creek would be utterly insensitive. Not only would it be detrimental to the wildlife and so much natural beauty, but Little Spitmarsh would entirely lose its character. You've only got to look at the development at the marina at Great Spitmarsh to see what could happen here.'

Thank you! Harry thought silently. My point exactly.

'However hard they've tried to disguise those holiday apartments with a bit of architectural tweaking and a few nautical references, the effect is still that of a housing estate with a floating car park attached. I'd hate to see that happen to the creek. With the extensive rights I've acquired, I could ensure that it will remain untouched.'

He dropped his hand and Harry found she was missing it. She looked at the thin leather band he wore round his wrist and the faded chambray shirt she'd seen him in so many times. Renovating Samphire must have cost him a small fortune; he'd probably been counting on the housing development to finance the restaurant.

'But how can you afford to do that?' she asked.

Matthew smiled at her. 'I don't need to worry about money. And I've now found my next development, so there's plenty to keep me busy.'

'Oh well, that's marvellous, isn't it?' Harry said, wondering why it didn't feel marvellous at all. Hadn't she known all along that Matthew wouldn't have any long-term interest in Little Spitmarsh if a more interesting and lucrative development came along? And in the meantime, whatever he claimed now, the charter would ensure that he could always return for a second bite at the cherry, if market conditions

dictated it in the future.

But, for now, Campion's Creek was safe and her land unthreatened by development. She ought to have been celebrating, but something didn't feel right. Puzzled, Harry couldn't stop her gaze lifting to Matthew who, she suddenly noticed, was so close that she was acutely aware of the warmth of his body, the sound of his breathing, the clean masculine scent of him. If she reached up, she could stroke his cheek or run her finger down the soft bare skin between his ear and his sideburn. 'I can't afford to keep Watling's going,' she croaked, feeling more sorry for herself by the second. 'I don't know why, but it just hasn't worked out.'

Matthew picked up his glass and drank some wine. 'It will, Harry, there have been some big changes in the town. You'll notice the difference at Watling's too.'

She shook her head. 'God knows how hard I've tried, but I just can't attract customers any more.'

'Yes, well, there's a reason for that,' he said, furtively.

Harry went cold. Now what?

'And it's not one you're going to like. Still, at least George is out of your way here.'

'George?'

'He's been doing his very best to drive all your customers away. Thought it might force you to turn to me for help.' Matthew's dimpled flickered, briefly. 'As if.'

Harry sat still and listened. By the time Matthew had finished, she didn't know whether to sack George all over again or kiss him when she next saw him. Silly old sod. No wonder he'd hit the bottle, the strain of the subterfuge must have been unbearable for him.

'At least I know now, even if it doesn't help me out of the current mess,' she said, wiping her eyes.

'I promise you there are customers ready to go,' Matthew



assured her. 'As soon as George told me what he'd been up to I made him start chasing up anyone who'd made enquiries and telling them there'd been a misunderstanding. A couple of Frankie and Trevor's clients have asked about the chances of keeping a boat up here, and I bet the families who eat at Samphire would much prefer a *Swallows and Amazons*-type mooring to life in a marina. I've also reinstated your adverts in all the sailing press which George cancelled for you – and I've put your prices up too, your new customers will be able to afford them.'

Matthew glanced at her; presumably, she thought, to make sure she wasn't about to scream. 'With the amount of business coming in, you'll soon be able to afford to pay someone to take the day-to-day strain off you and George. It's about time you both had a rest.'

Harry ran a hand across her forehead; it was all a bit much to take in.

'Matthew, why have you done all this?'

'Do you remember the day we first met?'

She'd need a blow on the head to forget. 'You were sitting in my favourite thinking spot.'

'Was I?' Matthew grinned. 'No wonder you weren't thrilled to see me. The thing is, Harry, I never forgot what you said about trying to maintain a working waterfront. I'd bought the old clubhouse by then, so it was easy to justify the development by telling myself I was doing a service to the area.'

'Everyone else thought so, too,' Harry acknowledged.

'I'm used to getting my own way. I could see that a smattering of expensive apartments along the creek would be a perfect complement to the restaurant, but you wouldn't have it, would you?'

'Because I wanted a working waterfront for everyone to

enjoy, not just the fortunate few!’

He reached over and took her hand. ‘It’s all right. I did get the message.’

‘Sorry.’

‘When I found the charter, it would have been simple for me to put you in a position which would have made it very difficult for you to continue trading.’

‘I think George almost beat you to it.’

He squeezed her hand. ‘It’ll be fine, just you see. But I couldn’t do it. And do you know why?’

Harry shook her head.

‘Because of you,’ he said, his eyes dark in the shadows of the lamplight. ‘Every time I decided to act, I thought about you; I thought about when I first met you, a little tough tomboy all wary and mistrustful. I thought about you refusing to back down when you thought my proposals were wrong, even when you were on your own. And I thought about what you said about keeping the boat yard going in memory of your father. Well, you certainly achieved that. If George hadn’t decided to take matters into his own hands, you’d probably be looking at a profit. Your father would be proud of what you’ve achieved.’

‘I don’t think he’d be too thrilled about me sailing onto a sandbank! He’d have something to say about that, certainly.’ Harry ran a hand across her forehead; spilling everything out had left her exhausted.

Matthew must have read her thoughts. ‘Come on,’ he said, ‘let’s turn in. Hmm, these saloon berths don’t look as if they’ll be very comfortable.’ He looked at the two narrow seating areas that doubled as beds.

‘They’re not,’ said Harry, standing up and going to the folding teak door which divided off the fore cabin. ‘But fortunately this end of the boat’s really quite civilised.’

She pulled back the door to reveal the V-shaped double bed that her father had cunningly fitted into the small space. Like everything else on the boat, Harry had made it a rule to have a home from home; so the bed that nestled in the crook of the glowing timbers was beautifully fitted with her second-best bedding.

‘Clever girl,’ Matthew said approvingly.

Harry was glad that her face was buried in a locker. So, she was so utterly unfanciable that he thought he could share such an intimate space with her without, apparently, even registering that she was a woman? Just because he’d changed his mind about Watling’s didn’t mean that she’d give him a second chance to humiliate her. She tossed him a sleeping bag. ‘See you in the morning, Matthew. Try not to make too much of a noise if you use the heads in the night, will you?’

The mist collected on George’s beard and rained gently onto the cockpit sole, as he steered his way towards *Calypso* on the high early-morning tide. He was slightly concerned that the skiff’s engine would not be powerful enough to drag the stranded yacht off its shallow grave. But he’d resisted the urge to summon help from a bigger boat at the marina, for fear that talk of Miss Harriet grounding her boat would be all round the sailing fraternity. He was keeping his fingers crossed that, if they took it slow and gentle, *Calypso* would be waterborne once more and no one else need know.

George’s main worry, though, was that Harry and Matthew might not have resolved their differences and that one or the other had been forced to walk the plank. As George approached *Calypso*, he was reassured to see two people waving at him, but it was too soon to decide on the state of play. Positioning the skiff amidships of the yacht, he took lines from Harry and Matthew who were standing at either

end of the boat. *Calypso* was deeply buried, but after ten minutes of gentle persuasion the yacht floated off with no harm done. Motoring closer to agree the next course of action, George thought that Harry looked more relaxed, as if free of some of the worry that had been haunting her for too long. So far as anything else was concerned, there was nothing.

Having checked that all the mud and debris churned up by Harry's efforts to release the boat herself hadn't done any harm to the engine, George led them along the channel back to Watling's, disappointed that his scheme hadn't quite come off. So much for hoping that his days of taking responsibility for Harry Watling were numbered.

Instead of being delighted when the familiar black-stained buildings hugging the creek came into view, Harry began to wish that she and Matthew could have had a bit longer on the mudflats. Out on the boat, it had been just the two of them; Matthew had been almost caring, the future of Watling's looked secure and she wouldn't even have to worry about having a housing estate on her doorstep. As they crossed the tide gate and entered the little basin where the smaller boats were moored, Harry could see George getting ready to take the lines. And Jimi was there, waiting anxiously, with a very glamorous woman. Teeth and Hair, thought Harry miserably, the woman George had spotted leaving Matthew's house.

There wasn't much time. 'Matthew?'

He dragged his gaze away from the shore and looked at her questioningly.

'Thank you.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'For what?'

'For everything. For giving me time and not using the charter, for looking after George, for helping to save Watling's.' She bit her quivering lip.

Matthew laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. 'What's wrong, then?'

Harry looked at the pontoon; just a couple of minutes before the spell was broken, and they went off to their separate worlds. 'I wondered when you were leaving, that's all.'

He frowned and shook his head. 'I'm not going anywhere.'

It was her turn to be puzzled. 'But your next development?'

'It's in Little Spitmarsh. I've bought a block of Victorian houses, I got the idea after I'd had a look at Walton House. They're going to look amazing when they're renovated,' he said happily. 'Just the sort of luxury holiday apartments people are after. Now are you going to do something about getting this boat tied up safely, or are you just going to stand there and let her crash into the pontoon?'

## *Chapter Twenty-Six*

Harry could have done without a welcoming committee as she jumped ashore. The sight of Teeth and Hair pacing up and down in her spike-heeled boots, waiting to pounce on Matthew, was certainly one she could do without. She used the pretence of ducking to secure the mooring lines to avoid seeing the happy couple reunited, which meant that she was unprepared for Jimi rushing forwards and grabbing her as soon as she straightened up.

‘Harry, I was so worried. I thought I’d lost you!’ he said, hugging her tight.

It was nice of him to be concerned, thought Harry, looking over his shoulder to see if Matthew had noticed; but possibly a bit over the top. Perhaps he was trying to prove something to Teeth and Hair? Pity he was wasting his time. Anyone could see that she and Matthew were far too engrossed in each other to notice anyone else.

‘Ere, that special resin you’ve been waitin’ for is in,’ George said, eyeing Jimi balefully. ‘Postman’s taken it back up to the town. Jimi, you can give me a hand ’ere.’

‘Bloody great,’ Harry muttered.

‘I’d ’ave got it meself, only with all this toin’ and froin’ I’ve been otherwise engaged.’

‘That’s all right, George.’ She pulled herself together. ‘You’ve been wonderful. Thank you – I owe you for looking after me and for coming to rescue me.’

‘I tek it I got me job back, then?’ he said, raising a bushy eyebrow.

‘You’re lucky there’s still a job to come back to!’ Harry reached up and kissed his weatherbeaten cheek. How had she

thought she could manage without him?

Matthew walked away, wishing he hadn't witnessed the tender little scene between Harry and Jimi. He'd guessed what was going on, but it still wasn't very pleasant seeing it under his nose. Of course, he would never have admitted that half the reason he was so cross was because he was disappointed in Harry. How could a girl with so much spirit and resolve allow herself to become embroiled with a narcissistic, strutting, shallow little weasel like Jimi? All the more reason to wash his hands of the restaurant sooner rather than later.

Abruptly he came to and realised Gina had stopped walking and was watching him through narrowed eyes. 'So why didn't you tell me Harry Watling was a girl?'

'Well, hardly. Not so you'd notice,' Matthew snorted.

'Oh, I think you have, Matthew. And Jimi certainly has. Isn't that why you've got a face like thunder?'

'Gina!' he shouted, before adopting a more reasonable tone of voice. 'Gina, be serious. I mean, look at you – and think about Harry. Kerisst! I mean she dresses like a boy, she's got hands like a builder, and it looks as if she cuts her hair with a knife and fork! C'mon!'

'So why haven't you got on with your development? You always said you needed the housing to make the restaurant worthwhile. You've got the legal means to acquire the land, yet you've been umming and ahing about taking it further. There has to be a good reason why you've been so reluctant to do anything that would be detrimental to Harry Watling.'

'She's had a tough time.' It sounded pretty feeble. 'I wanted to give her a chance to make a success of everything she'd worked for. I felt ...'

Fraternal? Yes, that's what had given him that nice warm feeling, a sense he could give her some brotherly guidance

about the direction she should take, knowing how alone she was. He thought about her on *Calypso* looking up at him with those serious grey eyes, a delicate heart-shaped face and that wide mouth that was both clumsy and alluring. Sitting next to her, he was aware of the smell of the warm sea breeze, white cotton, washed hair and a sweet, feminine scent that was all Harry's own. And, when she'd rubbed her eyes with her small practical hands, suddenly they didn't look like little fists any more. Nor, for that matter, did they seem so innocent.

'Horny?' Gina suggested tartly. 'She blew you out, didn't she? That's why you're trying to put a different spin on it. You spent the night on a tiny little boat together and she wouldn't let you! Jeez!' Gina shook her head in disbelief. 'Maybe that's where I've been going wrong? Maybe if I'd played hard to get, you'd have fallen in love with me.'

'I am not in love with Harry Watling!' Matthew roared.

'I think you'd better work that one out, Matthew,' she said, smiling sadly. 'Because one thing's for sure – you're not in love with me.'

For once the dark blue eyes met his without mockery. 'I came here to tell you that G Mag House has offered me promotion. Assistant Editor.'

'That's great news for you, Gina. Congratulations.' Even to his own ears it sounded weak, as if he was addressing a stranger.

She gave a short laugh. 'Actually, Matthew it's great news for you too. The job's in New York. That's why I've needed to see you, to tell you. I had this crazy idea of us starting again somewhere fresh and exciting. But I'm not the one exciting you any more, am I?' Again the dark eyes were naked, unguarded. 'Tell me, Matthew, is there any reason why I shouldn't go?'

Matthew opened his mouth to protest, then decided against



it. They both knew he was only going through the motions. Their relationship had already been dying when he decided to take on the development of the old clubhouse.

‘No? I thought not.’ She smiled at him wearily. ‘You wanted out, Matthew. That’s why you ran away up here, the last place I would ever want to stay.’

It sounded too hollow to deny it. ‘You still found me a great chef.’

Gina laughed. ‘I was trying to make you jealous and I certainly succeeded – although not quite in the way I imagined!’

‘I still don’t know how you persuaded Jimi to come up here. He’s not my favourite person, but he’s brilliant at his job. And hungry to get his own kitchen. How did you manage to convince him that a restaurant in the middle of Little Spitmarsh was worth seeing?’

Getting Jimi aboard had been a major coup; even though, having walked out of his previous restaurant under a cloud, the guy knew that there was something of the last-chance saloon about this job. He’d kept himself out of debt by working for an agency with private clients, and had proved himself a creative, passionate and driven chef. Matthew was anticipating menus that would set the restaurant reviews alight.

‘Well, not like that, darling, although he is very good-looking.’

Matthew was still relieved to hear it, even though Gina was, and always had been, a free spirit.

She pulled a face, as if reading his thoughts. ‘Oh, Jimi’s hungry all right. He could always see the attraction of being the next big seaside chef, but there was more to it.’

‘Oh?’ Matthew couldn’t think what other reason there could be to draw Jimi to Little Spitmarsh.

‘His father ran a boat yard somewhere up here on the east coast, apparently. Jimi lost his mother some years ago to breast cancer, but it was only recently – after the man he thought was his father died – that he discovered that his real father was someone else. I think Jimi’s been looking for his past.’

Matthew breathed out slowly.

‘Hey!’ Gina said, more gently. ‘Don’t look so worried. Your Harry isn’t in love with him. Any woman can see that.’

I bloody hope she isn’t, he thought grimly.

As fairy tales went, Little Spitmarsh was more of an Ugly Duckling than a Sleeping Beauty. Even Harry had to admit, as she walked slowly back to the yard, that it hadn’t exactly woken up to be beautiful; but the little family excitedly unloading their rental van outside a terraced cottage in Sea Lane were thrilled with its unconventional charm.

‘I can’t believe we’re here!’ Mum sighed, as Harry stopped to help them with a large chest of drawers.

‘We said we’d do it,’ Dad chipped in. ‘But that’s all most people do – talk about moving to the coast. Well, we’ve done it.’

By selling their ex-local authority flat on the fringes of London, the family had netted enough cash to move somewhere where they didn’t have to worry about their outside wall being daubed with graffiti every night, finding used needles thrown over their fence or being mugged for their mobile phones.

‘We love the mixture here,’ the woman enthused. ‘It’s got old-world charm, but with some really lovely shops too. It feels up and coming, but it hasn’t been overwhelmed, unlike some places in the south-west.’

Despite Harry’s predictions of doom, Matthew’s restaurant

had succeeded in making its mark as Little Spitmarsh's Unique Selling Point. Not least with the family beside her. 'It's great for a tiny place like this to have such a brilliant restaurant opening too,' the woman continued. 'And, with the money we've saved moving away from London, we can even afford to go there for special occasions.'

Recharged, they returned to their unpacking, their children spilling around them. Not quite the Up-From-Londoners Harry had anticipated, but a real family eager to make a new start. Whether Matthew had just been lucky or extremely perceptive, Harry couldn't guess; but she had to admit that his vision had raised spirits in the down-at-heel town. The film festival was an inspired touch to draw people to the area; and, with the council and tourist partnership trumpeting its success at every opportunity, similar events were bound to follow.

Not everyone drawn to Little Spitmarsh would be so keen to stay there permanently. Some of the old flats in Victorian houses ripe for renovation would certainly become dark spaces in the winter with blank windows, curtains left undrawn and no children to swell the numbers in what was left of the local schools. The summer visitors and second-homers would fly back to their comfort zones; but, more importantly, they would return. In winter the little businesses emerging would struggle, but when the sun came out again there would be money to be made, staff to be employed, homes to find and the balance of the economy might just tip in the locals' favour.

In time, Harry could see that Little Spitmarsh would flourish with more festivals, eating places and knick-knack shops and an artists' quarter. Eventually the natives would have to drive somewhere else, a new out-of-town development, to buy their screws, their paint, their curtain hooks and their discounted clothes. Everyone would be

looking for homes, and the planning department would allow more space to be gobbled up so that yet more people would move in, preventing the closure of local schools, stopping the brain drain and making the place somewhere its residents were proud of.

All she hoped, she thought, making her way back to her house, was that Little Spitmarsh's revival would not, as she feared, only be attuned to the visitor looking for gourmet foods, novelty shops and a self-consciously groovy ambience. At the rate its salty, raw and real past was being reinvented, even Matthew's potential customers would settle for anything they could get. Would anyone still notice the silty tide creeping in and out of meandering creeks, the wind rustling the grasses and the birds whooping and calling in the setting sun? Would anyone even care?

It was evening by the time Matthew had finished with everyone. He stood outside Harry's front door and waited. Maybe she'd gone up for an early night? Thankful, but disappointed at the same time, he peered through the glass door, wondering if he should try the bell again. An inner door swung open and Harry appeared, making him feel as if he'd been caught doing something illicit. There was just time for him to register her expression; she looked pleasantly surprised, hopeful even, before she shut down and assumed her customary look of suspicion.

'I'm not selling anything,' he promised. 'Can I come in?'

Taking her turned back as consent, Matthew followed her into the large open-plan living space and felt the same jolt of pleasure and satisfaction he'd experienced the first time he'd walked in there.

As she settled nervously in front of him, Matthew searched her face in the low light. Facially, the resemblance to the man

he'd come to tell her about wasn't immediate. Harry had obviously inherited her serious grey eyes and full mouth from her mother; but there were flashes in her expression and the way she held her head which were more obvious to him. Both carried a lot of strength in their slim frames.

'What do you want, Matthew?'

Not to be here, he wished for a moment; but someone had to tell her, and no one else was in a fit state to do it.

'I've been over with George ...'

She went pale. 'He's not ill again, is he? He shouldn't have been out in a boat so soon.'

Matthew shook his head. 'He's fine.'

Harry sat back, looking relieved. 'Okay, what's he done now then?' she said, laughing. 'Have I got to fire him again?'

'No, no, nothing like that.' Matthew shoved his hands through his hair. 'He was very worried about you, though.' He took a deep breath and tried to sound calm. 'Harry, what do you know about your father's death?'

He felt awful when it took her a few seconds to compose herself. Eventually she let go of the breath she'd been holding. 'Look, George can't get in a state every time I take the boat out because of what happened to Dad. Everyone knows that sailors are vulnerable in small inflatable dinghies; tales of over-confident seamen taking chances in familiar stretches of water and coming to grief are legion.

'Dad should have known better, but he took a risk; he wasn't wearing a life jacket because he knew these waters like the back of his hand and he thought he could get away without basic safety precautions. Unfortunately, in those few seconds between climbing out of the dinghy and boarding the boat, he lost his footing and fell. Once he was in the water – well, you know how fast the tides are round here. He wouldn't have been able to fight it. And then he was gone.'

He watched as she brushed the tears away.

‘Sorry. You know, sometimes I just feel so angry with him for being so careless.’

Matthew could feel his pulse thudding; how he wished he could just let her carry on being angry at the version of the past she was used to.

She blew her nose and managed a weak smile. ‘Dad was careless; I’m not. George doesn’t need to worry.’

He was still wondering where to start, when she shuffled forward in her seat as if to get to her feet. ‘I could do with a drink,’ she explained. ‘What about you?’

Yep, that seemed like a much better idea; but he still needed to make her listen to him. He reached inside his jacket and took out the battered leather notebook. She stared at it for a minute and sank slowly back in her chair.

‘Oh my God! Where did you get that? It’s Dad’s logbook, isn’t it? I haven’t seen it for years; no one could find it after his death.’ She looked up at him, perplexed. ‘What are you doing with it?’

Matthew’s heart ached for her, and his head ached for what he was about to do to her. ‘George recovered this from the boat after ... after what happened to your father,’ he began. ‘He and your mother decided that it would be better for you, given how young you were, if you didn’t know the ins and outs of what really happened ...’

Harry was getting impatient. ‘Typical! I might have known that Mum had something to do with it. What right did she have to make judgements about what I could handle? Just because she couldn’t hack it! What could possibly have been so bad about his accident that I needed to be protected from it?’

Suddenly her eyes went to the logbook and she stopped talking. Matthew watched as the relevance of its contents

slowly began to dawn on her.

‘It wasn’t an accident, was it?’ she breathed very quietly.

He tried to take her hand, but her arms were wrapped tightly round her body as she tried to shield herself from the hurt.

‘He was a very troubled man, a very torn man. He loved you and he loved your mother, but he’d just found something out that had broken him in two ...’

The colour had completely drained from her face and her mouth quivered with questions. He couldn’t stand sitting there, watching the pain wrack her small frame. He moved round the table and, as he went to place his arm round her stiff shoulders, she suddenly held out her hand.

‘Stop prevaricating, Matthew. Nothing you can do will change what’s written in that logbook. Just let me read it, will you?’

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

*How can any sailor bear the loss of the ship he has built to carry and serve him? My craft, I thought, was well constructed and true. Here, in this safe and secluded harbour of life, I believed I had made a solid and secure foundation for my young wife and our darling daughter, a ship, I believed, to serve me all my days. With enough rough weather behind me to set my mind at ease about the seaworthiness of the vessel, I hoped that I could look forward to a time when we would turn our faces to the sun and enjoy life to the full.*

*I see now that my construction was always flawed. Like a drowning man, I look to its surface where all appears familiar, sturdy and durable, but it cannot save me now; I know the structure is unsound, fatally wounded by one storm too many and sinking before my eyes. That place of safety where I thought to shelter my wife and child was exposed and vulnerable before I even began. What good am I to them now? I was blind not to see that I could never be wholly there for them when I had left so much of myself - more even, than I knew - in a faraway land.*

*The next passage is one that I shall make alone. The air was cold around me when I set out this morning, but the evening has been quite lovely and I am calm. Calypso sways to a gentle swell and I hear it begin. A whisper like the suggestion of a breeze. Ripples across the water. Closer, closer. The memories reach out to me.*

*Lit by neon in the city you smile at me, the night fountains shimmering as you sweep your fingers through the spray. Early morning on the river, ever-changing like the waterfront, the rituals of the past, the shock of the new. The shock of love.*



*White sheets, golden skin. And, as I prepare to slip the lines, I see your face.*

‘How long have you known, Jimi?’ Harry asked, as her half-brother silently handed the logbook back to her. From this angle it was hard to believe that it was true, that this dandy in his sloppy black cardigan and black skinny jeans was anything to do with her. The heavy hair flopping over his forehead was clearly inherited from his mother and she looked out too from his dark, slanting eyes. Yet something had effected a transformation, some of the strutting confidence had evaporated, making him seem more approachable, more familiar somehow. And when he turned to her, his expression agitated, she knew that he was feeling just as sick and churned up as she was. Divided loyalties. Family secrets. Still, that’s what they had come to sort out.

They walked beside the creek until Harry got tired of waiting for him to say something. She sat down on the bank where the tide was low enough for her to dangle her legs over the water. After only a quick look of concern for his designer jeans, Jimi followed suit.

‘Harry,’ he began, sounding very nervous, ‘I know how it must have seemed. You must have thought I was only keen to find something to invalidate Matthew’s claim to the boat yard because I wanted something out of it.’

‘Well, presumably you didn’t come all this way just to say hello.’

‘No, not at first. But look at it this way – you got the lot, I had nothing! I didn’t even know that the Harry Watling I was looking for was dead until I turned up that day.’

‘So what were you expecting? That he would turn round and say, “Hi, son! Welcome! Help yourself to half the boat yard?” No wonder you were so disappointed to discover the

place was worthless.'

His voice was raw. 'I thought I was owed something. I'd already lost my mother, and the man who I grew up thinking was my father drank and smoked himself to an early death with the strain of living a lie. He thought he couldn't have children, so when I was born he really wanted to believe he was my father. It was only after my mother's death, when he was going through her possessions, that he was confronted with the brutal truth: the man he trusted, his former business partner, his *friend*, had had an affair with his wife.'

Jimi thumped his fist into the grass and turned to her, compelling her to meet his gaze. 'Can you imagine how betrayed he must have felt? To his credit, he never let on to me about what he knew, but his attitude changed overnight. He could barely stand living in the same house as me. Spent all his nights in the bars or at the gambling tables, trying to forget. He didn't leave me a penny. So, yeah, I did think I was owed, big time!'

Harry exhaled slowly, thinking back to the previous evening. Matthew had waited whilst she read the logbook, as the light slowly leached from the room. He watched her hand shaking as she placed it on the coffee table, nudging it away with one finger before she was tempted to pick it up and hurl it across the room.

She had known that her father, drawn to the place where his father had served in the war and where he had been born, had spent many years skippering charter boats in the Far East; but the revelation of his other life filled her with anger and grief. When, at last, she'd finally given vent to the silent sobs racking her body, Matthew had gathered her up and held her to him, rocking her as if she was a child, until she stopped crying. The room was dark by then; and, when Matthew reached across to switch on one of the side lamps, they were

reflected in the long night-black glass panels. Seeing herself curled into Matthew, his arm clasping her firmly to him, Harry ached to rest there, drawing comfort from his strength. In the half-light, it was easy to pretend that the tableau in the glass was real. Dragging herself away had been a bigger wrench than Matthew would ever know.

‘Are you sure you don’t want me to stay?’ he’d offered, setting down his empty whisky tumbler. ‘I’ll be fine in here. You might want someone close at hand if you wake up in the night.’

Harry pushed the thought away, knowing that in any case there would be no sleep for her that night. Matthew looked exhausted too. When he dropped a light kiss on her head, Harry bit back the urge to tell him not to go and then watched him walk away.

The morning air was still cool, the sun not yet risen, when she found herself wandering over to George’s caravan. The door opened before she’d even thought about knocking, and she knew there had been no sleep for the old man either.

‘Bin on watch for you, Miss Harriet,’ he said, sitting her down with a mug of thick dark tea. And then he proceeded to fill in some of the gaps.

The passage across the Bay of Bengal was one feared by many sailors for its typhoon zone. On this trip, feelings were running particularly high because Harry senior was in charge of bringing back two things very precious to his business partner, Scott Rutherford: his new sixty-foot yacht and his new bride, Irene.

‘Scott wasn’t under any illusions that Irene Tan was starry-eyed about him,’ George had told her, gruff with the effort of remembering what had lain hidden for so long. ‘But he knew she needed him and he hoped that love would follow. Irene ’ad been working as a translator and sending the money to her

mother, who spent most of her husband's small pension trying to ensure that Irene got a good education.'

'So Scott was a meal ticket?'

George sighed. 'No. It wasn't as harsh as that. Irene didn't even want to leave her mother; she'd made up her mind that she would never have the chance to marry, that her duty would always be to her family. And Scott was a very persuasive man; he was always good at getting other people to do things. That's why your Dad ended up doing all the work, whilst Scott gambled away the profits.'

'Why didn't she leave him if she'd fallen in love with Dad?'

'Irene had a little sister, Daphne, who was severely disabled. Irene knew that she would need looking after for the rest of her life, and was prepared to sacrifice her own future to do it. But then Scott came along, promised he would pay for Daphne's care and offered her a way out.'

George smiled sadly. 'On the face of it Scott was the prudent choice all right; cool, rational, level-headed and he was, after all, her husband. Your dad, on the other hand, was a wild card, a risk taker, an adventurer. Irene didn't only have herself to think about, remember?'

Harry tried to put herself in Irene's position: torn between the man she had fallen in love with, and ensuring that the family who had invested so much in her was not left to its fate.

'Well, *someone* clearly felt Dad had done all right. Why else would Jimi have turned up at the boat yard if he didn't think there'd be something in it for him? Besides, how can he be so sure that Dad really is his father? If Scott and Irene had just got married, who's to say that Jimi isn't Scott's son?'

'Scott had been married before and knew that there was almost no chance he would ever have children. 'Course, he chose to omit that little detail from Irene, hoped she would be

there just for him. Didn't tell her about his gambling habit, neither. Oh, he might have pretended to himself that the miracle had happened that he'd fathered a child against the odds, but somewhere in his heart he must have known it wasn't true.'

'Then why didn't he let her go?'

'Because he loved her? Because he desperately wanted a son? Who's to say? All I know is that Irene wrote to your father to set her conscience straight, to tell him about the son he didn't know he had. Your father nearly went out of his mind with grief; but he had you and your mother to look after and, make no mistake, he loved you both. He borrowed money from wherever he could and sent it to Irene, hoping to persuade her to leave Scott and find a place to live whilst he agonised about what step to take next.'

'So he was planning to leave us for her and Jimi?'

George shook his head. 'It didn't get that far. What Irene didn't tell him was that she was dying of breast cancer. Scott wrote after her death to warn your father not to come near the boy. Told him that Jimi didn't know any different, and that it would mess him up even more. Your dad had been through so much and come out the other side, but that, coupled with the financial trouble he was in, felled him like a mighty oak. I don't think he could see any other way out.'

When there was nothing left to tell her, George had given her a rare embrace, patting her gently on the back. 'Go and see Jimi, Miss Harriet. You need each other.'

Harry rather doubted that, but she'd listened to George. Standing with her half-brother, it was impossible to still the vortex of emotions swirling round her brain. The effort made her infinitely weary. How could either of them be free or ever reach some sort of understanding, when the secrets of their being were lost in the past? And all because of two people

caught up in a brief, bright passion, unknowing – uncaring even – of the long shadows their love affair would cast down the years.

It was too much. Abruptly, she got to her feet. ‘You got what you came for, Jimi; the yard’s half yours. I’ll get my solicitor to sort out the paperwork.’

‘Harry!’ Jimi came after her as she walked away. She kept walking and he sped up a little to stand in front of her. ‘Harry, that’s not what I want any more. It’s not important to me.’

She was crying, but she didn’t care. Jimi reached out and tried to grab hold of her, but she pushed him away.

‘The boat yard might not be important to you, but it’s all I’ve got to offer. Now all you have to do is decide what you’re going to do with your share. And let me tell you that George is staying with me. And if you ever, *ever*, put temptation under his nose again, in the form of a bottle of a gin, I’ll *really* make you wish you’d never been born!’

This time he didn’t try to follow.

The invitation to the film festival finale at Samphire sat on the table in her hall for a week. Matthew had tried to deliver it by hand, but Harry, lurking out of sight in the hallway, had waited until she was sure he’d disappeared before creeping round to the front door to see what bombshell might be lying at her feet. Now, sick of looking at it, she threw it in the bin.

Her poor mother had been hopelessly equipped to deal with life without the man who had taken all the decisions for her. Coping with her loss, trying to run the business – with a daughter watching her every move to see if she was doing everything the way Daddy would have wanted – and nursing her dreadful secret. No wonder Maeve had given up and fled!

At first it was difficult to salvage anything. How could she reconcile the truth of a weak man who’d betrayed his close

friend, but had been unable to live with the consequences of his actions, with the large, charismatic, fun-loving father of her childhood? Was this the man whose memory she had worked day and night to keep alive?

But, just when she was beginning to feel that her heart was broken, another small voice reminded her that he was still her dad. Nothing would change the fact he'd been a father to her in every sense that really mattered. It was too easy to turn round and blame him for robbing her of anything any normal person would call a life for the last five years. As Harry was gradually realising, the truth was that it had suited her to use him as a pretext for railing against everything she didn't like.

For far too long she'd been judging anyone who presented her with an alternative view of the world, weighing it up and finding it wanting. Not because it wasn't good enough for her father, but because nothing was ever good enough for *her*! Longing for him to be proud of her was natural. But by digging her heels in, acting in his name, pretending she was doing what he would have wanted, she had caused a lot of pain. And all for what?

Harry went back to the bin and took out the envelope, feeling as if she was standing at a fork in the road. She could either take the view that she had fought the tide and kept the boat yard going for nothing but a fantasy – and give up. Or she could make up her mind to stand on her own two feet and start taking responsibility for herself.

Taking a frank look at herself in the mirror, Harry stared at ruffled hair, long overdue for a proper cut, straggly dark brows, shadows under her eyes and a tired bare face. Surely even she didn't have to look this bad? Telling herself that Carmen was probably fully booked made her realise that she would actually be disappointed if she couldn't be fitted in. Having made the decision, she rushed round to Crimps only to

find that the new stylists were all busy and Carmen was taking a half-day in order to prepare herself for the film festival.

Pausing outside to shake her head at the change in the salon, which for years had sported an 'Appointments not always necessary' sign and now looked as if it would have to introduce a waiting list for prospective clients, Harry was reminded again of how rapidly the changes in the town were gaining momentum. Watling's was now a world away from its glamorous neighbours. Well, no doubt that would all change too.

'Who were you trying to kid anyway?' she asked herself, looking at her pink and dishevelled reflection in the newly glazed window. When her reflection sprouted big hair and enormous breasts, Harry decided it was a sign she should give up and go.

'Harry?' Carmen said, trotting out.

Harry waved her away. 'It's okay, Carmen. I'm too late, you're busy.'

Carmen's chocolate-brown eyes examined her greedily. 'Not for you, Harry.' Hauled in before she could think twice, Harry submitted to being bound in a gown and led to a basin. Before the hiss of running water drowned out other sounds, she distinctly heard a triumphant murmur of 'So long I wait for this day!'



## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Matthew fastened his silver cufflinks and shrugged on the white dinner jacket. Once, it had made him look like a young Bryan Ferry, but this evening he felt more like bruised, embittered Rick in *Casablanca*. He took a quick glance in the mirror and felt about as world-weary as Bogey too. In the past he'd been an arrogant bastard, always scheming, planning, and looking for the next opportunity to get rich. So hungry to get on to the next challenge that he'd sweep anyone who objected out of the way. Sometimes he'd missed what was really important.

Jimi, in his chef's whites, shook his head at the Levi's that Matthew refused to swap for evening trousers and at the black bow tie, left unfastened round his neck.

'It's corny, Matthew – but, heck, it works for me.'

Matthew turned to the younger man. 'How about you, Jimi? How are you doing?'

Jimi swallowed before replying. 'Yeah, good.'

'Just give her time. It's been a shock, that's all.'

'Yeah, well, I've waited all this time. I can wait some more.' He pulled himself together. 'And in the meantime I've got work to do.'

Matthew slapped him on the back with a heartiness he didn't feel. 'Show time!'

Harry had opted to hire a minicab rather than walk the short distance without the disguise of her dungarees. As she paid the driver and watched the car go off without her, she felt terribly alone. Inside the building she could see the flicker of lights on little tables, the bustle of waiting staff weaving

through the gaps, the silhouettes of faces bent close in conversation. George, taking a turn at a baby grand piano, was sending the sweet, sad notes of 'As Time Goes By' through the open window into the rosy glow of the evening sun.

Harry tried to think of all the horrible things she had to face on a regular basis, like taking the tender out on lonely nights to check on other peoples' yachts when the sea lunged at her or threatened to capsize her. Even that seemed better than walking into the pit of terror that was the crowded restaurant. She checked her watch and hoped that she'd timed it right. With a bit of luck she could slip in just before the screening, during which she could practise everything she had to say to everyone afterwards. Right, all she had to do was put one foot in front of another; after all, somebody in there had wanted her to come, hadn't he? Or else he wouldn't have dropped an invitation through her door, would he? Concentrating on that thought, Harry lifted her chin and stepped forwards.

At first she put the fact that the conversation seemed to die as she walked through the door down to extreme self-consciousness. But, as she stood there waiting to bolt, she realised that the room really was quiet. Carmen, seated at a nearby table and showing a perilous amount of cleavage, gave her an encouraging nod and beckoned her in. Harry couldn't trust herself to look at Matthew, who, as she was only too aware, was standing by the piano; so she let her gaze rest on George, who gave her a wink and began a spirited rendition of 'Some Enchanted Evening'.

Recalling the lyrics of the song George was playing, Matthew realised that the woman standing across the crowded room was certainly a stranger to him. For a start she was wearing a dress. And what a dress. In some pale silky fabric, it was strapless with a tight bodice that clung to what was,

undeniably, a pair of breasts, showed off a tiny waist before billowing out to a wide skirt that foamed just above surprisingly shapely calves. Matthew sucked in his breath. Harry's dungarees had been responsible for the best-kept secret in town: Harry Watling was all woman!

So who was the stranger across the room? Matthew hoped that George wasn't about to continue his *South Pacific* theme with 'Cock-eyed Optimist'. Harry didn't look too optimistic right now; in fact she looked scared stiff. Just as it occurred to Matthew that he ought to do something about her plight, there was a movement from the side of the room.

'For someone who doesn't usually look anything like a dame,' he heard Frankie say, 'our Harry hasn't done too badly.' He and Trevor, resplendent in pristine white tee shirt and striped tee shirt respectively, closed in on her protectively, one on each side, leaning forwards to kiss her and murmur reassurances. And then it happened. Harry looked from Frankie to Trevor, and from Trevor to the expectant faces around her. But, instead of pursing her lips and pulling down the shutters on her emotions as Matthew would have predicted, she let her wide, expressive mouth curve slowly into a smile that lit up the whole room. Matthew, watching in wonder, felt as if the breath had been knocked out of his body. Before he could register what had struck the blow, she was gone, spirited away by Frankie and Trevor to sit at their table.

'You look beautiful, Harry, simply stunning,' Frankie told her, raising his glass. 'Here's looking at you, kid.'

'And that dress is divine. Not quite what I would have anticipated in your wardrobe!' Trevor added, topping up Harry's wine, which seemed to have disappeared quite fast.

Harry felt herself blushing. 'This old thing! I've had it for years. Actually, you're right,' she whispered, leaning

forwards. 'It's Carmen's, from her younger days.'

'Not to mention slimmer,' added Frankie. 'My, didn't she grow up to be a big girl! Still, I suppose you're about the same height. Take my advice, Harry, don't have whatever she's having – you don't want to go the same way. Now where did you get those shoes? They're not Carmen's too?'

Harry stretched out her foot and admired her newly varnished toenails. Thank goodness for Little Spitmarsh's charity shops and the person who hadn't been able to squeeze their feet into the glamorous silver evening sandals. 'Oh,' she said casually, 'they're vintage.' She just caught the look of surprise on Trevor's face as the lights went down and everyone was transported to war-time Casablanca.

Bogart promised Ingrid Bergman, once again, that they'd always have Paris. The lights went up and Harry laughed to see the waiting staff scatter as the inhabitants of Little Spitmarsh rushed for the buffet.

'Harry?'

An elegant woman in black trousers, a black silk shirt and a multi-strand pearl choker was smiling at her with tears in her eyes.

'Mum!'

'I didn't say anything when we spoke on the phone, because I wanted it to be a surprise. Matthew warned me in advance that you might not feel up to coming, I just hoped you would,' Maeve said in a rush.

Before Harry could decide what to say, her mother pulled her close.

'Harry, darling! Oh, it's so good to see you again!'

She was still a beautiful woman, Harry observed, when they finally let go of each other. Her parents had made a striking couple: her father larger than life, ruggedly handsome,

and her petite mother, with that classic bone structure and an expressive mouth that was always poised on the brink of a smile. Well, the laughter had stopped many years ago and her mother wasn't smiling now. Agitation clouded her wide grey eyes and worry creased her brow.

'Mum, don't,' said Harry, ushering her over to a quiet corner of the room and feeling her own mouth quiver as her mother started to cry. Reaching out for her, Harry drew her into her arms, marvelling that she was still capable of comforting another human being when her heart was thumping so hard it seemed about to break. 'Hush,' she said, as Maeve sobbed quietly on her shoulder. 'It's all right.'

But it wasn't all right, was it? It would never be all right again.

Maeve's hands were shaking as she wiped her eyes. 'I've wanted to tell you for so long,' she said, through her tears.

'So why didn't you?'

Maeve sighed. 'I don't know. I was too scared, I guess. I thought you were better off not knowing, so it was easier to stay in France and pretend that the rift between us might miraculously heal itself than tell you the truth.'

Harry rubbed her temples. If she had known the truth about her father, she might have made a different choice. Perhaps she would have been free of the boat yard, free to be young, free to be frivolous. As it was she'd worked night and day, all these years, for what?

'Your father loved you so much. He was thrilled to have a daughter. And when he died, when he decided to take his own life ... well, I'd already lost him. I didn't want to lose you too.'

Maeve shook her head. 'You've got so much strength, Harry. You were brave to come here tonight and looking so beautiful too.' Taking her hand, Maeve smiled at her. 'You've

been alone for so long, holding the fort, that I was worried you'd never give in, never admit that you needed company,' she said, stroking Harry's fingers. 'You're so like your father in that respect; once he'd made up his mind, he wouldn't budge either. I worshipped him, but it wasn't an equal partnership. I know it's tough for you to hear this, Harry, but I'm a far happier woman now, with Don.'

Harry reached for her and wondered how they'd got in such a mess. Was it her father's fault for storming his way through life, daring anyone to challenge him? Had she and Maeve loved him so much that without him they were totally bereft and completely rudderless? No, that wasn't right; you couldn't love someone too much, not a living breathing person anyway, but you could let the past get in the way of the present. Harry sighed. Maeve had moved on, George had tried to move on, but Harry had only wanted to stop the clock.

'Where is Don, Mum?'

Maeve looked anxious. 'Don't worry, he's not here. He stayed at the hotel. We thought it would be best.'

'Oh, Mum.' Harry shook her head. Goodness, she'd made everyone miserable. 'I'm so sorry for what I put you through. I was wrong. I thought I was saving the boat yard for Dad. I thought I was the one keeping him alive in some way and that you had turned your back on him. In the end it wasn't about Dad, though, was it? I put Watling's before all the truly important things in life, like looking after you and George.'

She took a deep breath. 'There's some putting right I have to do, if it's not too late. Maybe I could start by finding out about your life in France? I've decided to make a few changes here and I'm planning to take some time out. I'd love to come and visit you both, if you'll have me.'

'You're my daughter, Harry,' Maeve said, clasping her hand tightly. 'You don't need to ask. Come when you like.'

Stay as long as you like. But come as soon as you can.'

'So common,' sniffed Fabian as Roy Moulton, wearing a black shirt, white tie and trilby, elbowed his way past. 'Just like a provincial wedding reception.' After the success of the *Dirty Dancing* screening, a space had been cleared for anyone who wanted to show off on the dance floor, also to Fabian's disgust.

Harry, returning with more drinks, squeezed past Roy and perched on the chair next to Carmen.

'Nice to see you and your mama happy again,' Carmen clucked approvingly. 'Just like me and my Lola.'

'Thanks, Carmen,' Harry said, hugging her. 'I couldn't have faced any of this without you.'

'Like a fairy godmother, eh?' Carmen's face fell. 'Aye yi yi! I suppose you are back to the ugly dungarees tomorrow?'

Harry got up. There was someone else to see. 'Maybe,' she said, winking. 'Tomorrow's another day.'

George was sitting quietly to one side of the room, nursing a glass of water, his shoulders slightly drooping; but his face brightened as Harry positioned herself in front of him.

'Hallo, Miss Harriet,' he smiled. 'You don't 'alf look a picture.'

'You don't look so bad yourself,' she said, pointing at his suit. 'George,' she added quietly, 'would you do me the honour of dancing with me?'

'Don't know why I should,' George grumbled affectionately, 'seeing as you can't dance.'

'No, but you can, George, and no one will know I've got two left feet if you don't let me show myself up.'

'Come on, then. But for once in yer life just trust me to know what I'm doing, will you? Or I'll tip you right on yer arse.'

Harry, being very careful not to do anything that could be misconstrued as a refusal to take orders, let George lead her confidently in a waltz. He was such a good dancer that soon she felt as if she could glide across any ballroom. Once she was able to stop concentrating so hard on what her feet were doing, Harry had a chance to look at George; he was still thinner in the face and sadder looking, but he had shed his grey pallor and his eyes were bright.

‘Oh, George, I’m so glad you’re all right,’ she began. ‘I was so worried when you were ill. I wanted to come and visit you, but I was afraid. I’m never going to make that mistake again.’

‘Hush,’ said George. ‘Ain’t no harm been done. Leastways, not by you. That’s what I told Matthew. I said you was a scared little girl who misses ’er dad. I know how much you loved him.’

‘A tad more than he loved me, apparently,’ she said, airily.

‘You know how much he loved you, Miss Harriet. You could see it all over his face from the minute he clapped eyes on you, so don’t start any of that old nonsense.’

She felt a lump in her throat. She wasn’t sure if she wouldn’t have preferred George to tell Matthew that she was every bit as scary as her reputation. Anyway, it hardly mattered now.

‘And what about yer mum?’ George asked. ‘Are you sorted out with her?’

‘Yes. Yes I am, funnily enough. It’s easier, in a way, knowing why she kept her distance from me.’

‘Don’t be too hard on her, will you?’ George pleaded. ‘She was so young, so innocent. Sometimes I felt that your father took advantage of her complete trust in him, just to try to forget his own demons. And he managed it too, for several years. You mustn’t lose sight of that.’



'I know,' said Harry. 'Look, George, I've been doing some thinking and ...' She faltered, feeling quite choked about the boat yard.

George's firm hand on her back reminded her to keep moving.

'There's plenty of time to talk about tomorrow, tomorrow.' He told her. 'But, if you keep pulling on my arm like that, you'll 'ave us both over. There, that's better.' He grinned. 'If only you would do as you're told more often. You wouldn't 'alf save me a body of work.'

Harry rolled her eyes, but kept her mouth shut. She'd been fighting everyone for far too long. As the music stopped, Harry became aware of a ripple of applause which grew louder and louder. Blushing, she looked around to see that everyone was on their feet. Frankie put his fingers to his lips and whistled loudly, Carmen was clapping her hands at nineteen to the dozen and Matthew nodded, his dimple creasing his cheek as he smiled at them both. Harry leaned over and planted a kiss on George's cheek.

'Getting soft in yer old age, you are,' he grumbled.

'You know, George,' she said quickly, 'you've always been there for me. A bit like a dad, in fact.'

'Good lord!' George replied, sandy eyebrows nearly touching the ceiling. 'Do me a favour, Miss Harriet, 'aven't I been punished enough in this life?' Shuffling back to a seat, he nevertheless looked up and gave her a wink, and Harry felt so relieved that she'd had the chance to put things right between them. Tomorrow she'd start making it up to George for everything he'd done for her, but tonight she had one thing left to do.

A couple of heads turned as she walked into the kitchen, but mainly they were concentrating on clearing away as fast as

possible so they could all get home. Jimi was standing by the open back door. His shoulders drooped and his smile, as he turned and saw her, was sad and weary. In an unspoken agreement, they slipped outside for some privacy.

‘Hey,’ he said, ‘it’s good to see you.’

Suddenly she felt shy, nervous. ‘The food was wonderful, Jimi, you’re obviously really talented.’

‘Matthew gave me a free hand to put my team together. They’re a good bunch, which helps. But, yeah,’ he grinned, ‘I’m too talented to risk my hands running round your boat yard.’

He turned to her, his smile gentle. ‘It’s your boat yard, Harry. I know that now, I can’t imagine anyone else running it. And, yes, I was envious of you, before I got to know you. My dad, Scott, or rather the man I thought was my dad, kept me at arm’s length after my mum died. I was so hurt, I just couldn’t understand why, and then I got angry. I even stopped using his name.

‘I thought you had it all, so I was determined to get my fair share. But that was before I realised how much you’d suffered too. So much for our legacies, eh?’ He reached out and touched her lightly on the arm. ‘You’re the one who’s built the boat yard up, the one on the brink of success. It isn’t and never was anything to do with me. I’ve got my own career.’

Harry watched as he talked and was startled by a strange new sensation coursing through her body; a sense of pride, a warm, happy feeling.

‘I don’t need the boat yard, Harry. I’ve found something much more important. My little sister.’

As he pulled her to him in a crushing embrace, Harry realised what the unfamiliar feeling was; at last she could forget about fighting the world – she wasn’t alone any more.

## *Chapter Twenty-Nine*

The sky was a clear sapphire blue studded with stars. Harry stopped walking to catch her breath and gaze up above her; had a night ever looked this lovely? Strange alchemy was at work; the keen awareness of everything she'd lost, and the stirrings of hope for what she might find, made her feel dizzy as she searched for an anchor point, something that would steady her.

Once she had imagined on such a night that somewhere her father was still watching her, that if she listened very carefully she might even hear his voice. Now she knew that she would hear only the murmur of the wind and the creeping tide. Harry scanned the heavens and ached for a sign, anything she could take for his presence. She waited and watched and hoped and wished, until she knew that the night was empty.

As her bare shoulders drooped and she became suddenly aware of the cold, a footstep sounded on the gravel behind her and her heart lurched.

'Jimi told me I'd find you out here,' said a familiar husky voice. 'I've been waiting for a chance to talk to you all evening, but I didn't mind the wait when I saw you and George dancing together.'

She felt the warmth of his body as he moved closer to her. 'That dress is quite an improvement on the dungarees, you know.'

'The dungarees are practical,' she said, feeling shivery. 'And warmer.'

'Take this,' said Matthew, taking off his jacket and draping it around her. 'Unless you'd rather go back inside?'

Harry shook her head; she didn't have very much left to

lose, but she still wanted to save face. In the dark it was much easier to pretend that she was someone Matthew might mistake as an attractive woman.

‘It’s beautiful out here, isn’t it?’ he said, still standing right behind her.

‘It’s exquisite,’ said Harry, quickly closing her eyes in case another look at the view she loved tempted her to change her mind about what she had to say next. ‘Just try to make sure it stays that way, will you?’

‘Harry?’

‘You won, Matthew,’ she said, hoarsely. ‘You promised to build the restaurant that would put Little Spitmarsh on the map and you’ve done it. You told me that would be the catalyst for a new prosperity for the town and that’s started to happen too. You said the bucket and spade holidays had gone for good and maybe you’re right. Soon you’ll be developing apartments for a new breed of holidaymakers; people who wouldn’t dream of burning up the atmosphere with jet fuel, but are quite happy to come here. People who’ll overlook the transformations that a plain little town has undergone to provide them with the right ambience for their quaintly chic shops, their good eating places and a range of politically correct entertainment.’

Harry sniffed. One of the downsides of wearing a dress like the one she had on was that there was nowhere to stuff a tissue.

‘I’ve poured everything I had into trying to hang on to the past; a little town desperately in need of rejuvenation, a boat yard crying out for a modern approach, a father who wasn’t the man I’d built him up to be. I was so determined to see the world my way that I was blind to what was happening around me.’

She swallowed, trying to ease her dry throat. ‘I need some

time out. I'm thinking about staying with Mum and Don for a while, or maybe I'll go off on the boat. And yes, I do still feel the same way about *Calypso* and no, I'm not going to disappear over the side like Dad. Just look after Little Spitmarsh whilst I'm gone, will you? Try to make sure there's enough of the old place left for me to recognise when I return. The future's yours, Matthew. We're in your hands now.'

'So you are,' he said, turning her round, taking her hand and examining it in the starlight. Harry gave silent thanks to Carmen for turning it into something less like one a builder would be proud of.

'And very nice it feels too. You've got such sweet little hands,' he murmured, before raising it to his mouth and kissing it.

'There's no need for that,' Harry said, snatching it away before she believed he meant it. 'You've got what you wanted; the charm offensive's completely unnecessary.'

Matthew laughed softly, making it impossible for her to control her shaking legs. 'You know, I was afraid you wouldn't turn up tonight. By the time nearly every table was full and the waiters had started running around, I thought, well, that's it, Corrigan, she's not coming. And then you walked in and took my breath away. You look beautiful, Harry.'

'It's all right, Matthew.' Harry sighed heavily. 'You can save all the soft soap; it doesn't wash with me. If you wanted to talk to me, couldn't you just have come over to the yard?'

'Yes, but then you wouldn't have known what a success the film festival's been. I wanted you to see for yourself how much everyone was enjoying themselves. Look at who was there tonight. It wasn't full of strangers, or people looking down on the town; it was folks who live in Little Spitmarsh letting their hair down and having a good time. It's still the same town – only better, more optimistic.'

'So you wanted to gloat.'

He laughed softly and her stomach did a little flip. She wanted to stuff her hands in her pockets but she didn't have any.

'That's my Harry,' he said, drawing her to him. 'You've no idea how jealous I was of Jimi before I discovered he was your half-brother. That's one of the reasons I was so furious when you wouldn't come up and see George that day. I'd seen you wrapped in Jimi's arms and I just saw red!'

Pressed against his chest, Harry wondered if her hearing was suffering. Matthew jealous of Jimi? About her?

'But what about Teeth and Hair?' she mumbled before she could stop herself.

'Who?'

'The woman George saw leaving your house when he couldn't sleep. The woman who met you at the yard?'

'Oh, Gina.' She felt him laugh. 'Gina and I were always going to go down different tracks; we both knew that we'd run our course. That was the reason she was there, to tell me she was taking a job in the States.'

Harry was starting to feel relieved to be there, safe in the warmth of his arms, but she thought she ought to raise a token protest. 'What do you think you're doing?'

'Something I've been wanting to do since you walked in tonight wearing that dress. Mind you, I have to say the dungarees have been getting to me a bit recently – I did warn you I might want more than your land.'

'That's not very romantic,' said Harry, enjoying being pinned in his embrace.

'That's a bit rich coming from you. Anyway, Ms Watling, how do you explain your behaviour? Hmm? How come you're in my arms and not trying to break them? I'm not getting much resistance here.'

'I've been wrong about a lot of things,' Harry said, with a

nonchalance she certainly didn't feel.

'You're not the only one,' Matthew said, stroking her back. 'I never thought I'd get this close to you.'

Harry pinched him.

Matthew squeezed her tightly.

'Harry?'

'Hmm?'

'There's a lot we need to put right. Shall we go back to my place and clear up a few misunderstandings?'

Clearing up a few misunderstandings would be good. Some meaningless sex wouldn't be too bad either. Although it wasn't exactly meaningless to her, that was the problem. Matthew Corrigan had invaded her life, her territory and she was pretty certain her body was next on the list. Is that what she wanted? Harry did a quick check. Yes, she did. As if her life wasn't in a big enough mess already.

In the soft light of Matthew's bedroom, Harry watched in the mirror as his fingers traced the nape of her neck and travelled down to the zip at the back of her dress. His face was so sexy; those dark, mysterious eyes, the sharp planes of his cheekbones, his jaw, just touched with stubble, grazing her skin as he bent his mouth to her shoulder.

The dress floated to her ankles and she heard Matthew gasp as she stepped out of it and was reflected back at him in only her tiny lacy knickers and silver sandals.

'My God!' Matthew said throatily. 'Why have you been hiding such a beautiful body?'

Harry met his gaze in the glass. She felt strong, proud and not the slightest bit embarrassed by the fact that, whilst she was wearing next to nothing, he was fully clothed. If she was giving him her body as well as her land, she was damn well going to make sure he appreciated exactly what he was

getting. Shivering with anticipation, she waited as, almost reverently, he ran his hands up from her slim hips round her tiny waist and was about to cup her full breasts when she turned to face him.

‘Now,’ she said, pulling off the black evening tie, unbuttoned round his neck, ‘it’s your turn.’

Matthew was shocked to see what he’d been missing all this time. How had he not noticed how beautiful Harry was? Freed from her normal brutally cropped thatch, she looked so much softer with sexy wisps of hair framing her face and a reckless ‘Guess what I’m about to do to you?’ sense of promise in her eyes. Along with the helmet hair, Harry seemed to have shed a few layers of armour. Looking up at him from under sweeping black lashes, she regarded him with none of her usual challenge; instead, her eyes met his with a shy sense of her own worth.

And then there was that body. Matthew took a long look at it because it was certainly worth a second, third, fourth, fifth ... He shook his head, still baffled by what she’d been concealing so well. A man could spend a lifetime looking at that body and still want to come back for more. Maybe it was the combination of strength and vulnerability, the toned tanned arms and taut stomach against the lush softness of breasts and hips, which drew him so powerfully. A curvy pale bum and a scattering of freckles across her tanned shoulders and back – where did Harry do her secret sunbathing and how come he hadn’t spotted her? And whilst he’d always been a legs man – the longer the better – there was nothing wrong at all with Harry’s. No, he thought, stepping back for a better look, these were perfectly in proportion with her height and, set off by those high silver sandals, just crying out to be wrapped around his body.



Still amazed by her, he ran his hands across her hips and upwards until she wriggled round to face him and reached for his tie. He heard her whisper something about it being his turn, before she pulled him to her and his mouth found hers. Looking had been good, very good, but tasting was even better.

*Aah!* When Harry's lips traced the line of dark hair running down from his navel, Matthew's mind went blank. As his Levi's and boxers hit the deck, he pulled himself back by concentrating on trying to kick them surreptitiously out of the way without ruining the mood. Harry's mouth was hot against him – he plunged his hands into the silkiness of her hair, felt the blood pounding through his body and almost lost control. *Control?* He came back to earth with a thud. Wasn't that just typical of Harry to want to take the lead everywhere she went? Apparently she even thought she could push him around when they were making love. *Jesus!* Harry's tongue did another little flick and nearly did push him over the edge. Yeah, that would suit her nicely, wouldn't it, to have the satisfaction of being the one waiting whilst he went out of his mind? Well, Harry, he thought, pulling her to her feet. I'm calling all the shots now.

Harry came to in the half-light of dawn. She stared at the little netsuke figure on the bedside table, a Japanese girl diver wrestling with an octopus. Harry had heartfelt sympathy for her; they were both grappling with problems far too big for them. The Japanese diver only had the octopus to worry about, but Harry had to come to terms with the discovery that she'd just spent the night with Matthew Corrigan.

And what a night – her body ached with all the arching and shuddering it had done. Even thinking about it set everything tingling again, so she decided that the best plan was just to lie

there, with Matthew spooned into her back and his arm flung round her waist, and think about it a bit more. She closed her eyes – and there was Matthew balancing her naked on his hips, pushing her against the wall, spreading her on the bed. A kaleidoscope of sensation: fierce kisses, tender bites, the sweat on his body, the sound of her name on his lips. And then there was coming back from a deep, dark, all-consuming vortex to find him waiting for her, warm and welcoming, bringing her into the safety of his arms. Where next, though? That was the puzzle now – where did they go from here?

Matthew didn't wake as Harry moved from under his arm and turned over, propping herself on one elbow to study the face she suddenly knew so well. She marvelled at how little awkwardness there had been between them – even with the condoms – and how much pleasure there was in discovering that they worked so well together. They'd certainly sorted out something, even if it wasn't what to do about the boat yard. Harry smiled; the boat yard could wait, she was sure of it. Whatever their motives for sloping off to spend the night together, something had changed. It wasn't possible to be this close to someone and not be changed by the experience. If she had gone with him tonight because of a hopeless crush, and if he had taken her because he could, something good had come out of a questionable beginning.

Matthew murmured and rolled onto his back; and Harry, tempted by the long lean lines of his body, had to force herself not to touch him. Not until she'd had a drink of water, at least.

She slid out of the bed and padded down to the kitchen, her body feeling well-used and ready to repeat the performance. No wonder she was so thirsty, she grinned to herself; her body was obviously crying out to replace all the lost moisture. She gulped down a glass of water, then looked in the fridge. Chilled champagne – very nice, perhaps they could open it with their

breakfast in bed? As she took out a carton of orange juice and went to put it on the black marble work surface, she glanced at a document lying next to the phone – and froze.

It was a solicitor's letter typed on expensive-looking paper, explaining something to do with the boat yard; but there was also a matching compliments slip, on which someone called Piers had written in large flowing script, 'Matthew, you might want to think about another way to get what you want; it might be cheaper to be nice to her!' Slowly, with shaking hands, Harry put down the orange juice and picked up the letter, then sank onto a kitchen chair to read it.

As she did so, she felt the blood drain from her face and her mouth turn dry. No wonder this Piers had advised Matthew to back off. It seemed that Matthew wasn't the only businessman buying up ancient rights and invoking feudal laws as a means of trying to bully ordinary people into parting with large sums of money. Another self-styled 'Lord of the Manor' had been quite successful at it, buying up paper titles and spreading alarm and despondency because of his manorial rights over tracts of land – until he tried to claim ownership over sand, mudflats and the riverbed of a major estuary. A lengthy legal battle had ensued, with claim and counterclaim, finally going to appeal where three eminent High Court judges decreed that the true owner was the Crown. Having been in unchallenged possession of the area for centuries, the court ruled that ownership rested firmly with the Queen and, just to rub salt in the wound so far as the Lord of the Manor was concerned, that he was responsible for the substantial legal costs.

*You might want to think of another way to get what you want!* Dropping the letter back on the worktop, Harry managed to make a noise somewhere between a laugh and a hysterical sob. Matthew Corrigan had been taking her breath away all night, and now she was having to take great lungfuls

of air just to stay upright. Worse still, he'd known exactly where he stood when he'd invited her back to his house. All those sweet nothings, all the 'Harry, you're so beautiful', all the 'God, you don't know how long I've been dreaming of this', must have given him a particularly perverse thrill as he realised that he had her exactly where he wanted her – in every sense of the word.

Harry had two choices: she could slink home and crawl under the duvet and cry, or she could go upstairs and kill him.

## *Chapter Thirty*

The first pale-lemon light was just filtering through the veil of night as George loitered by the creek to watch the rising waves. Noting with satisfaction the absence of lights at Harry's house, he decided there was only one place she could be. They'd make a good couple; Matthew was strong enough to keep coming back for more every time Harry turned him away, and perceptive enough to see the loyal, loving woman who could keep him by her side.

There would be another big spring tide today. Later on he'd have a potter round to see that all was well. Had Matthew, he wondered, worked out that the car park down at the restaurant might be a bit prone to flooding? Be a right shame if any of those BMWs got washed away, wouldn't it? But for now, George yawned, it was high time he got some kip.

Matthew panicked when he stretched out and Harry wasn't beside him. What if, after everything they'd shared, all the intimacy and tenderness, she'd packed up and left? A quick look around the bedroom revealed a dress crumpled on the floor by the mirror, a pair of lacy knickers on his side of the bed and one sandal. God knows where the other one was, he thought before settling down again. Unless Harry had hopped off down the road in her birthday suit, she'd be back any minute and they could pick up where they'd left off.

What a thought! Matthew entertained himself by imagining what he was going to do to that hot, strong body of Harry's as soon as she returned. Making love with Harry was a mystery and a revelation; a journey across an unmapped landscape when she kept herself from him, the joy of discovery as he

unlocked another secret part of her. 'Oh my America! My newfound land,' he murmured.

Then the door nearly came off its hinges as Harry burst into the room.

'So that's why you changed tactics, was it?'

Matthew sat up, shaking his head in bewilderment.

'It was risky when it was just me – but, once you knew that Jimi had a stake in the boat yard too, you weighed up the expense of a legal challenge and decided to take the other option. Being *nice* to me!'

She was hopping mad, all right. She was literally hopping – or was that because she was trying to pull her knickers on and rage made her clumsy?

'Of course, you couldn't imagine being *nice* to me before, when I was just a tomboy in a scruffy pair of dungarees, could you?'

Matthew winced as, with much wriggling and a nasty grating sound, the zip of her dress was wrenched up even faster than it had come down.

'But last night you decided you could just about face it, so you asked me back here!' This was a bit muffled because she was rummaging around under the bed. 'Well', she said, coming back up for air and brandishing a sandal at him, 'I hope you enjoyed your cheap date. I hope I was worth it!'

'Harry!'

Ignoring him, she clumped round to his side of the bed, retrieved the other sandal and plonked herself down to put it on.

'Harry, please.' He leaned forward and tried to put his arm round her, but she leaped up as if he was about to set fire to her.

'Don't even think about it!' she yelled.

'I like thinking about it,' he said, giving her what he hoped

was a placatory smile. 'I was just thinking about it when you came in. Come on.' He patted the space next to him. 'Come here and let me explain.'

Harry went still, but she didn't come any closer. 'I'm all ears.'

Matthew exhaled and rubbed his head whilst he thought about where to begin. Really he should start at the beginning, when he'd found the charter granted to Sir Percival Campion amongst the old yacht club paperwork and it seemed like the fastest route to cutting loose from someone who was already beginning to disturb him. He could tell her how bad he felt when he'd come upon her after the fire, worrying herself sick that George had done something stupid, and about how much he'd wanted to comfort her. It wasn't as if he could have added to her pain then, could he? Perhaps he ought to tell her that he knew he'd decided to forget about the charter once and for all, when he'd seen the effect of concealing its existence from George?

He tried to remember what he'd said to her on *Calypso*. Whatever it was it hadn't been enough to reassure Harry, frantic about the prospect of losing everything that was dear to her. The more Matthew thought about where to start, the worse it was beginning to seem if he looked at it from Harry's point of view. From that angle, his failure to tell her sooner that he wasn't keeping the charter as some kind of insurance policy seemed to suggest that he was just waiting until her humiliation was complete – and she didn't look in the mood to see reason at the moment.

'Oh, Harry,' he said sadly.

'You don't mind if I borrow this, do you?' she said, picking up a jumper from the top of the chest of drawers and dragging it over her dress, where it hung fetchingly just above her knees. 'Only I'd rather I was a bit better covered if the whole

of Little Spitmarsh is going to see me do the walk of shame home.'

'Harry! Wait!' he cried, throwing back the covers and looking for his boxers. 'I'll take you home!'

'You've already taken me to Hell,' she told him as she walked out of the door. 'That's quite far enough.'

Fortunately, the inhabitants of Little Spitmarsh were still sleeping off the effects of the grand finale of the film festival as Harry stalked back to the boat yard. Small talk would have been beyond her and curiosity about why she happened to be pacing the streets at the crack of dawn in a state of déshabillé would have been deflected with comments bound to cause offence. By the time she reached the relative security of her house, most of the anger had died down to be replaced with utter misery.

'Big mistake, Corrigan,' Matthew told himself as the front door slammed. Somewhere in the night his life had taken a sharp turn for the worse. His only problem seemed to be identifying where he'd gone wrong. For a start he'd taken Harry Watling to bed. Now if anyone had predicted that one day he'd be lusting after a stropic, tomboyish girl in scruffy dungarees, he would have told them she'd have to be the last girl on earth. Except it had never been that simple, had it?

Strangely, it was because Harry'd always been seriously unimpressed by him that he'd started having those thoughts that he would never have admitted to anyone. He hadn't built up a valuable property portfolio by taking refusals at face value. Matthew had learnt to use patience, skill and some old-fashioned cunning, but Harry had walked away from anything he'd offered her rather than compromise the boat yard she believed was worth fighting for.



Okay, taking Harry to bed had been a good idea. That wasn't where he'd gone wrong. But making love with Harry certainly hadn't been what he'd anticipated. It wasn't exactly chivalrous, but he'd half hoped that it would be like going to bed with Gina, a bit like scratching an itch. Whereas he and Gina had both taken what they wanted and gone their separate ways, with Harry he had been amazed and moved by a shared experience, something emotional as well as physical, something that transcended the sum of its parts. In some respects he understood Harry better than he would have thought possible; in other ways she was completely out of his reach. He wanted to return to her over and over again. He took a deep breath; no mistakes there, then.

No, the problems had started when Harry had gone downstairs and read the letter. Matthew thought about her face, so pinched and white, and wished not only that he'd never left the letter out, but that he'd done something about it sooner. Business could have been the way he liked it: cold, clinical, no strings, in and away. And then he never would have known the beautiful, elusive and giving Harry hidden beneath that brittle shell.

Ducking as he went through the low doorway to the bathroom, Matthew grinned to himself in the mirror. 'Fucking idiot,' he told himself, delighted that he had worked out where he'd gone wrong. It was nothing to do with making love with Harry – the mistake was that he'd let her go.

Harry could see Matthew standing on the other side of the glass door, with a carrier bag from the General Store in one hand and one of Black Narcissus's biggest bouquets in the other. Bloody great! If Frankie and Trevor had caught wind that something had happened between her and Matthew, it was highly likely that soon most of Little Spitmarsh would be

gagging to know what exactly had gone on.

‘Go away!’ she yelled.

Matthew dangled a set of keys at her. Her keys. The ones George was supposed to hang on to in case of emergency. So George knew too.

‘Since we had such an early start,’ Matthew said, as she let him in before he used the keys, ‘I thought you’d like something to eat.’

‘Well, that’s nice of you, but I’m quite used to feeding myself.’

‘Not if that soup you had on the boat was anything to go by.’

He strode past her to the kitchen and unloaded his carrier bag. Harry regarded him reproachfully as he negotiated his way round, digging out pans and utensils. His back, she now knew, was every bit as smooth and muscular as she’d imagined. His legs were lovely – no nasty scary hairy surprises, but just enough to know you had a real man between the sheets – and he had a very nice firm bum. Not that she was ever likely to see it again. Nor did she want to, she told herself hurriedly.

‘I’m sorry this isn’t anything more elaborate,’ he said, after a little while, putting a plate in front of her. ‘But I didn’t exactly get the chance to shop around.’

Harry looked down at her faultlessly cooked breakfast. Matthew’s behaviour might leave a lot to be desired, but not his cooking. Wouldn’t it be lovely, she thought, as the mouth-watering aroma wafted up to her, to come home to a cooked meal after a long cold day?

She glowered at him. ‘Haven’t you had enough fun at my expense already? I mean, you’ve done what your solicitor wanted, so you don’t have to pretend to be nice to me any more. What a pain it must have been to find out that you

couldn't rely on the charter.'

Matthew pointed to her breakfast. 'I didn't cook that for you to ignore it. Now stop talking and start chewing. You'll feel better when you've had something to eat.' Then he smiled. 'And if you don't feel better, I will – because at least when you've got your mouth full you won't be able to pick holes in me.'

Harry was surprised to find that it was a lot easier to concentrate on her food than she would have thought. 'I have to hand it to you,' she said grudgingly. 'That was seriously good. But I was really hungry.'

'Ah well, you've had quite a lot of exercise, haven't you?' said Matthew, making her face flame.

After the intimacy and tenderness they had shared, it was hard to think that it had all been another tactic to get his hands on her land. No wonder she was feeling so miserable.

'It's all right, Matthew. You don't have to try to make it easy for me. I was silly to go to bed with you, I know I'm not the kind of girl you'd normally get involved with, so I was just asking to get hurt, but ...' she dropped her voice. 'Oh God, Matthew. I just wanted you so badly.'

'So you used me?' he said, very gently.

'No!' Harry shook her head. 'No, I do have feelings for you, you know.'

'Oh. Feelings. I see. What kind of feelings would those be?'

'Please, Matthew, don't embarrass me. Let's just leave it at breakfast and then we'll go back to how we were before. We'll pretend it never happened.'

Matthew's smile disappeared. 'Let me tell you once and for all – I didn't make love to you for any reason other than the fact I couldn't stay away from you any longer. Using the charter felt like a bad idea from the very beginning; I was

reluctant to take advantage of it then and I'm certainly not going to now. And not because of what my solicitor told me. Come to bed and let me prove it to you.'

Harry lifted her head up and looked into his sleepily sexy eyes. She only had to reach over, then she could trace the outline of his jaw beneath that hint of stubble. She watched his eyes darken, his lips part as he moved his head towards her. God, he was gorgeous! What on earth did he see in someone who was cross and rude and didn't have legs up to her chest? He'd seen her scowl and cry, covered in engine oil, wielding a sander and on almost every occasion she'd been wearing dirty dungarees. No, Harry pulled her hands away and folded them in her lap. This was too good to be true.

Certain that everything had finally worked out over at the boathouse, George shut his shed door and decided to head for home. When Matthew had turned up at the caravan first thing, desperate for help, George had barely believed it. The Watlings were a perverse bunch and no mistake, forever snatching sorrow from the jaws of happiness. But not this time. The look on Matthew's face proved that he wasn't going to give up on Miss Harriet. Ever.

Dammit! Damn grit in his eyes or some sand blown in from the banks, he thought, ferreting around in his pocket for a handkerchief. Life would be very different in the future. All the years of worrying about Harry Watling and Harry senior before that – it had been like living on the edge of a storm, always wondering when it was going to blow up. He'd done his share of looking after folks called Harry. From now on George was going to have a quiet life, sitting by the caravan, watching the world go by ... And then a really disturbing thought occurred to him. Taking another look over his shoulder at the boathouse, George started to pray that, please

God, if Matthew and Miss Harriet 'ad a baby, let it be called Jade or Chelsea or Romeo – anything but Harry!

Just as he was beginning to relax again and think about sitting outside with a nice cup of tea and maybe a Bourbon or two, he heard a door slam and footsteps stomp across the yard.

'Matthew?' he said, rubbing his eyes. 'Aren't you supposed to be tucked up with Miss Harriet?'

'Yeah, well,' said Matthew, pushing his hands through his hair, 'Harry didn't read the same script, apparently.'

George fished in his pocket for his tobacco tin. Something was telling him that a biscuit wasn't going to hit the spot.

'She says too much has happened too soon and she needs time to think it over.'

George winced at the pain etched on Matthew's face.

'The trouble is, George, she's been fighting to keep the business afloat for so long that she doesn't know when to stop. It's not about the land any more; it's Harry I want. What if she refuses to believe me?'

'You're not going to give up now, are you, Matthew?'

As the younger man laid a firm hand on his shoulder, George felt weak with relief. 'Have I *ever* struck you as the sort to give up, George?'

## *Chapter Thirty-One*

On a fresh October morning, Matthew waited in a secluded coil in the creek, slowly going out of his mind. It was still early, yet there was some strength in the sun as it climbed in the sky, promising a golden autumn day. Matthew sat with his back to the world, staring at the fletch marks of gulls' feet in the grey sands and the silver waves edging closer to the soft shore. Just when he was starting to worry that maybe he'd missed something – like a fire in the Chunnel, or a pile-up on the motorway, or the letter, maybe, telling him that she'd met a sexy Frenchman and was never coming back – he heard the whisper of the tall grass as she approached. And then it went quiet and he resisted the urge to turn round.

'I don't mind you staring at me, sweetheart, but your mother might have something to say about your manners,' he said, without even looking round.

'That's about right; she's a big fan of yours. Thinks you can do no wrong.'

'So, are you going to join me or not?'

When she tucked herself beside him, Matthew couldn't hold back any longer. Rolling her onto her back, he leaned over her and drank in the sight of her sweet face brushed gold with a hint of tan, her wide beautiful mouth that was tipped up in a smile and the jet lashes of her grey eyes that were sparkling with tears.

'Welcome back,' he breathed, cupping her face in his hands, feeling its hard planes beneath the soft skin, confirming that she was real and present and in his arms again.

'Did you miss me, then?' she said, her voice breaking with emotion.

Matthew covered her mouth with his lips and felt the ache in his body at her sweet softness beneath him. He was intrigued to see that under the denim jacket she was wearing a cute little blouse with a floral pattern and, he was even more pleased to discover, mother-of-pearl buttons that yielded to his touch.

‘Matthew,’ she murmured with a catch in her voice, ‘suppose someone sees us?’

‘Serve them right for trespassing.’

Harry laughed beneath him. ‘I’d almost forgotten that you own this stretch of land. No wonder you’re claiming your feudal rights. Oh, go on then,’ she said, fiddling with his belt. ‘Take me, master, I’m yours.’

‘Actually,’ he said, gritting his teeth because it was so hard to concentrate given what her fingers were doing, ‘it doesn’t belong to me any more. I’ve given it away.’

‘Wha-at?’ Harry’s eyes flicked wide open and she stared at him in disbelief. Matthew waited, watching the emotions dance across her face. If the land didn’t belong to him, maybe she wouldn’t need him either; she’d spent long enough trying to keep him off it, hadn’t she? To his horror, her bottom lip started trembling and she looked as if her heart was breaking right in front of his eyes.

‘Oh Matthew, why couldn’t you have told me sooner instead of putting me through all this?’

‘Shhh.’ He pressed a finger to her mouth and quickly touched his lips to her cheek. ‘It’s yours. I’ve given it to you. I thought you’d like it as a wedding present.’

‘But I’m not getting married,’ she said in a tiny voice.

‘Is that a “no”, then?’

‘Matthew?’

He pushed the dark hair off her forehead and looked into the serious eyes which were daring to hope. Her instinct not to

rush things had been so wise. During the weeks that followed the revelation of her father's logbook, her emotions had been all over the place. There was so much for her to take in, so much to adjust to. Seeing Harry gradually slough off that brittle exterior, watching her getting to know her half-brother, listening to her talking, laughing, feeling her happiness blossom had been a great joy to him.

But the greatest joy of all was how she'd opened up to him, trusting that even if the first thing he'd wanted from her was her land, it was now her that he wanted beside him – the fierce, spirited woman who'd never given in, never stopped fighting, even when the world seemed set against her.

And if he'd ever thought that a tiny, pixie-faced girl in a pair of dungarees wasn't his type, he'd been proved wrong about that. Wasn't Harry Watling the most beautiful, sexy woman he'd ever seen?

'I love you, Harry. I love you and I want you to be my wife. What do you say?'

Much, much later, they went to over to Samphire to share the news with Jimi and to celebrate. Now that Jimi had taken over the running of the restaurant, it was gaining quite a reputation. Matthew could see how proud Harry was of him.

'I wish I could talk to Dad, too,' she said, as they strolled home under a starlit sky.

'What would you tell him?' Matthew asked, wrapping his arm round her small waist.

'I wish I could tell him how sorry I was that he had to leave us,' she whispered. 'I wish I could tell him that everything has worked out, you know, that Mum and I have a great relationship now and that George says he's going to retire, but we know he won't. I'd tell him how busy Watling's is and that he wouldn't believe how many people are interested in



keeping their boats there.'

She squeezed his hand. 'And then I'd tell him how happy you've made me and how much I love you.'

Matthew stopped her and pointed up as a shooting star appeared in the sky above them, burning brightly as it speared the night. Gone now, in the past, but with one last message to the present. Maybe Harry's father had heard?

Behind them, the lights of Samphire twinkled in reflections on the inky waters of the creek.

'Matthew,' said Harry, beside him. 'If you'd known everything that lay ahead when you bought the Spitmarsh Yacht Club, would you have walked away?'

'No,' he said, quickly taking hold of her hands and trying not to laugh. 'I'd have run.'

The hands bunched into little fists and Matthew was glad he'd taken the precaution of pinning them in his. As his lips came down firmly on hers, her squeal of protest turned into a soft moan of pleasure and Matthew congratulated himself on a shrewd investment: when it came down to love and happiness, Harry Watling had made him a very wealthy man.

~ Ends ~

## *About the Author*



Winning a tin of chocolate in a national essay competition at primary school inspired **Christine Stovell** to become a writer!

After graduating from UEA, she took various jobs in the public sector writing research papers and policy notes by day and filling up her spare drawers with embryonic novels by night. Losing her dad to cancer made her realise that if she was ever going to get a novel published she had to put her writing first.

Setting off, with her husband, from a sleepy seaside resort on the east coast in a vintage wooden boat to sail halfway round Britain provided the inspiration for her novel *Turning the Tide*.

Christine has also published numerous short stories and articles.

[www.christinestovell.com](http://www.christinestovell.com)

## *More Choc Lit*



**New home, new friends, new love.  
Can starting over be that simple?**

Tess Riddell reckons her beloved Frelander is more reliable than any man - especially her ex-fiancé, Olly Gray. She's moving on from her old life and into the perfect cottage in the country.

Miles Rattenbury's passions? Old cars and new women!  
Romance? He's into fun rather than commitment.

When Tess crashes the Frelander into his breakdown truck, they find that they're nearly neighbours – yet worlds apart. Despite her overprotective parents and a suddenly attentive Olly, she discovers the joys of village life and even forms an unlikely friendship with Miles. Then, just as their relationship develops into something deeper, an old flame comes looking for him ...

Is their love strong enough to overcome the past? Or will it take more than either of them is prepared to give?

Print ISBN: 978-1-906931-22-3

PDF ISBN: 978-1-906931-02-5

Epub ISBN: 978-1-906931-32-2



**Revenge and love: it's a thin line ...**

The writing's on the wall for Cleo and Gav. The bedroom wall, to be precise. And it says 'This marriage is over.'

Wounded and furious, Cleo embarks on a night out with the girls, which turns into a glorious one night stand with...

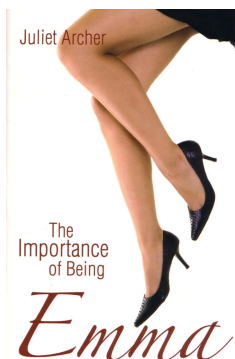
Justin, centrefold material and irrepressibly irresponsible. He loves a little wildness in a woman – and he's in the right place at the right time to enjoy Cleo's.

But it's Cleo who has to pick up the pieces – of a marriage based on a lie and the lasting repercussions of that night. Torn between laid-back Justin and control freak Gav, she's a free spirit that life is trying to tie down. But the rewards are worth it!

Print ISBN: 978-1-906931-24-7

PDF ISBN: 978-1-906931-02-5

Epub ISBN: 978-1-906931-35-3



## **A modern retelling of Jane Austen's Emma.**

Mark Knightley – handsome, clever, rich – is used to women falling at his feet.

Except Emma Woodhouse, who's like part of the family - and the furniture.

When their relationship changes dramatically, is it an ending or a new beginning?

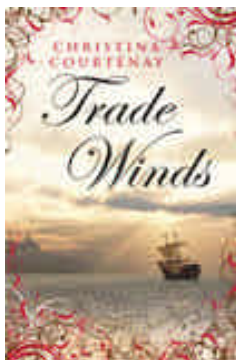
Emma's grown into a stunningly attractive young woman, full of ideas for modernising her family business. Then Mark gets involved and the sparks begin to fly. It's just like the old days, except that now he's seeing her through totally new eyes.

While Mark struggles to keep his feelings in check, Emma remains immune to the Knightley charm. She's never forgotten that embarrassing moment when he discovered her teenage crush on him. He's still pouring scorn on all her projects, especially her beautifully orchestrated campaign to find Mr Right for her ditzy PA. And finally, when the mysterious Flynn Churchill – the man of her dreams – turns up, how could she have eyes for anyone else?

Print ISBN: 978-1-906931-20-9

PDF ISBN: 978-1-906931 -00-1

**September 2010**



**Marriage of convenience – or a love for life?**

It's 1732 in Gothenburg, Sweden, and strong-willed Jess van Sandt knows only too well that it's a man's world. She believes she's being swindled out of her inheritance by her stepfather – and she's determined to stop it.

When help appears in the unlikely form of handsome Scotsman Killian Kinross, himself disinherited by his grandfather, Jess finds herself both intrigued and infuriated by him. In an attempt to recover her fortune, she proposes a marriage of convenience. Then Killian is offered the chance of a lifetime with the Swedish East India Company's Expedition and he's determined that nothing will stand in his way, not even his new bride.

He sets sail on a daring voyage to the Far East, believing he's put his feelings and past behind him. But the journey doesn't quite work out as he expects....

Print ISBN: 978-1-906931-23-0

PDF ISBN: 978-1-906931 -03-2

Epub ISBN: 978-1-907931- 33-9

**November 2010:**



**Money, love and family.  
Which matters most?**

When Diane Jenner's husband is hurt in a helicopter crash, she discovers a secret that changes her life. And it's all about money, the kind of money the Jenners have never had.

James North has money, and he knows it doesn't buy happiness. He's been a rock for his wayward wife and troubled daughter – but that doesn't stop him wanting Diane.

James and Diane have something in common: they always put family first. Which means that what happens in the back of James's Mercedes is a really, really bad idea.

Or is it?

Print ISBN: 978-1-906931-26-1

PDF ISBN: 978-1-906931 -06-3

Epub ISBN: 978-1-906-931-51-3

**November 2010:**



**If life is cheap, how much is love worth?**

It's 1914 and young Rose Courtenay has a decision to make. Please her wealthy parents by marrying the man of their choice - or play her part in the war effort?

The chance to escape proves irresistible and Rose becomes a nurse. Working in France, she meets Lieutenant Alex Denham, a dark figure from her past. He's the last man in the world she'd get involved with - especially now he's married.

But in wartime nothing is as it seems. Alex's marriage is a sham and Rose is the only woman he's ever wanted. As he recovers from his wounds, he sets out to win her trust. His gift of a silver locket is a far cry from the luxuries she's left behind.

What value will she put on his love?

Print ISBN: 978-1-906931-28-5

PDF ISBN: 978-1-906931 -08-7

Epub ISBN: 978-1-906-931-36-0



## *Introducing the Choc Lit Club*

Join us at the Choc Lit Club where we're creating a delicious selection of fiction for today's independent woman.

Where heroes are like chocolate – irresistible!

Join our authors in Author's Corner, read author interviews and see our featured books that have been recommended and rated by our readers and the Choc Lit Tasting Panel.

If you have a favourite novel with an irresistible hero, then let us know.

We also love to hear how you enjoyed *Turning The Tide*.

Just visit [www.choc-lit.co.uk](http://www.choc-lit.co.uk) and give your feedback.

Describe Justin in terms of chocolate and you could be our Flavour of the Month Winner!