

The Big Dreams Beach Hotel

(Start reading before it's published!)

Lilly Bartlett

Chapter 1

New York is where I fell head over heels for a bloke named Chuck. I know: Chuck. But don't judge him just because he sounds like he should be sipping ice-cream floats at the drive-in or starring in the homecoming football game. *Rah rah, sis boom bah, yay, Chuck!*

Believe me, I didn't plan for a Chuck in my life. But that's how it happens, isn't it? One minute you've got plans for your career and a future that doesn't involve the inconvenience of being in love, and the next you're floating around in full dozy-mare mode.

I won't lie to you. When Chuck walked into our hotel reception one afternoon in late October, it wasn't love at first sight. It was lust.

Be still, my fluttering nethers.

Talk about unprofessional. I could hardly focus on what he was saying. Something about organising Christmas parties.

'To be honest, I don't really know what I'm doing,' he confided as he leaned against the reception desk. His face was uncomfortably close to mine, but by then I'd lived in New York for eighteen months. I was used to American space invaders. They're not being rude, just friendly. And Chuck was definitely friendly.

'I only started my job about a month ago,' he told me. 'It's my first big assignment, so I really can't fuck it up. Sorry, I mean mess it up.' His blue (so dark blue) eyes bore into mine. 'I'm hoping someone here can help me.'

It took all my willpower not to spring over the desk to his aid. Not that I'm at all athletic. I'd probably have torn my dress, climbed awkwardly over and landed face-first at his feet.

Keep him talking, I thought, so that I could keep staring. He looked quintessentially American, with his square jawline and big straight teeth and air of confidence, even though he'd just confessed to being hopeless at his new job. His brown hair wasn't too long but also wasn't too short, wavy and artfully messed up with gel, and his neatly trimmed stubble made me think of lazy Sunday mornings in bed.

See what I mean? Lust.

'I noticed you on my way back from Starbucks,' he said.

At first, I thought he meant he'd noticed *me*. That made me glance in the big mirror on the pillar behind him, where I could just see my reflection from where I was standing. At five-foot four, I was boob-height behind the desk in the gunmetal-grey fitted dress uniform all the front-desk staff had to wear. My wavy dark-red hair was as neat as it ever got. I flashed myself a reflected smile just to check my teeth. Of course, I couldn't see any detail from where I stood. Only my big horsy mouth. Mum says giant teeth make my face interesting. I think I look a bit like one of the Muppets.

'Do you have the space for a big party?' he said. 'For around four hundred people?'

He didn't mean he'd noticed me; only the hotel. 'We've got the Grand Ballroom and the whole top floor, which used to be the restaurant and bar. I think it's even prettier than the ballroom, but it depends on your style and your budget and what you want to do with it.'

Based on his smile, you'd have thought I'd just told him we'd found a donor kidney for his operation. 'I've been looking online, but there are too many choices,' he said. 'Plus, my

company expects the world.’ He grimaced. ‘They didn’t like the hotel they used last year, or the year before that. I’m in over my head, to be honest. I think I need a guiding hand.’

I had just the hand he was looking for, and some ideas about where to guide it.

But instead of jumping up and down shouting ‘Pick Me, Pick Me!’, I put on my professional hat and gave him our events brochure and the team’s contact details. Because normal hotel receptionists don’t launch themselves into the arms of prospective clients.

When he reached over the desk to shake my hand, I had to resist the urge to bob a curtsy. ‘I’m Chuck Williamson. It was great to meet you, Rosie.’

He knew my name!

‘And thank you for being so nice. You might have saved my ass on this one. I’ll talk to your events people.’ He glanced again at my chest.

He didn’t know my name. He’d simply read my name badge.

No sooner had Chuck exited through the revolving door than my colleague, Digby, said, ‘My God, any more sparks and I’d have had to call the fire department.’

Digby was my best friend at the hotel and also a foreign transplant in Manhattan – where anyone without a 212 area code was foreign. Home for him was some little town in Kansas or Nebraska or somewhere with lots of tornadoes. Hearing Digby speak always made me think of *The Wizard of Oz*, but despite sounding like he was born on a combine harvester, Digby was clever. He did his degree at Cornell. That’s the Holy Grail for aspiring hotelies (as we’re known).

Digby didn’t let his pedigree go to his head, though, like I probably would have.

‘Just doing my job,’ I told him. But I knew I was blushing.

Our manager, Andi, swore under her breath. ‘That’s the last thing we need right now – some novice with another Christmas party to plan.’

‘That is our job,’ Digby pointed out.

‘Your job is to man the reception desk, Digby.’

‘*Ya vol*, Commandant.’ He saluted, before going to the other end of the desk.

‘But we do have room in the schedule, don’t we?’ I asked. Having just come off a rotation in the events department the month before, I knew they were looking for more business in that area. Our room occupancy hadn’t been all the company hoped for over the summer.

‘Plenty of room, no time,’ Andi snapped.

I’d love to tell you that I didn’t think any more about Chuck, that I was a cool twenty-five-year-old living her dream in New York. And it was my dream posting. I still couldn’t believe my luck. Well, luck and about a million hours earning my stripes in the hospitality industry. I’d already done stints in England and one in Sharm El Sheikh – though not in one of those fancy five-star resorts where people clean your sunglasses on the beach. It was a reasonable four-star one.

There’s a big misconception about hotelies that I should probably clear up. People assume that because we spend our days surrounded by luxury, we must live in the same glamour. The reality is 4a.m. wake-ups, meals eaten standing up, cheap living accommodation and, invariably, rain on our day off. Sounds like a blast, doesn’t it?

But I loved it. I loved that I was actually being paid to work in the industry where I did my degree. I loved the satisfied feeling I got every time a guest thanked me for solving a problem. And I loved that I could go anywhere in the world for work.

I especially loved that last part.

But back to Chuck, who'd been stuck in my head since the minute he'd walked through the hotel door.

I guess it was natural, given that I hadn't had a boyfriend the whole time I'd been in the city. Flirting and a bit of snogging, yes, but nothing you could call a serious relationship.

There wasn't any time, really, for a social life. That's why hotelies hang out so much with each other. No one else has the same hours free. So, in the absence of other options, Digby and I were each other's platonic date. He sounds like the perfect gay best friend, right? Only he wasn't gay. He just had no interest in me. Nor I in him, which made him the ideal companion – hot enough in that freckle-faced farm-boy way to get into the nightclubs when we finished work at 1 or 2a.m., but not the type to go off shagging and leave me to find my way home on the subway alone.

'I hope you're happy,' Andi said to me one morning a few days later. The thing about Andi is that she looks annoyed even when she's not, so you've got to pay attention to her words rather than the severe expression on her narrow face. Nothing annoyed Andi like other people's happiness.

But I had just taken my first morning sip of caramel latte. Who wouldn't be happy?

'You've got another assignment,' she said. 'That Christmas party. You're on it.'

'But I'm on reception.' My heart was beating faster. She could only be talking about one Christmas party.

'Yes, and you're not going to get any extra time for the party, so don't even think about it. I can't spare anyone right now. You'll have to juggle. He's coming in at eleven to see the spaces and hopefully write a big fat cheque, but I want you back here as soon as you're finished. Consider it an early lunch break.'

Even though my mind warned me to stop questioning, in case she changed her mind, I couldn't resist. 'Why isn't Events handling it?'

'They would have if he hadn't asked for you especially. It's just my luck that it's a huge party. We can't exactly say no.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Then wipe that stupid grin off your face and next time try not to be so frickin' nice.'

'I need to use the loo,' I told her.

'Pee on your own time,' she said.

I didn't really have to go, despite the industrial-size caramel latte. I just wanted to put on some make-up before Chuck arrived. Instead he'd see my green eyes unhighlighted by the mascara and flicky eyeliner that I rarely remembered to use. Pinching my cheeks did bring up a bit of colour behind my freckles, at least.

Every time the revolving doors swung round, I looked up to see if it was Chuck.

‘You’re going to get repetitive strain in your neck,’ Digby pointed out. ‘And you know our workmen’s comp sucks, so save yourself the injury. Besides, you look too eager when you stare at the door like that.’

‘I’m putting on a convivial welcome for our guests,’ I said. ‘Just like it says in the Employee’s Manual.’

He shook his head. ‘There’s no way that what you’re thinking is in the manual.’

The weather had turned cold, which was the perfect excuse for woolly tights and cosy knits or, if you were Chuck, a navy pea coat with the collar turned up that made him look like he’d been at sea. In a suit and dress shoes.

‘I’m so sorry I’m late,’ he said. ‘I hate wasting people’s time.’

‘It’s not a waste,’ I told him. ‘I’m just working.’ I caught Andi’s glare. ‘I mean, I’m on reception. I can show you the rooms any time you want.’

Anytime you want, Digby mimicked behind Chuck’s back. Luckily Andi didn’t catch him.

‘Thanks for agreeing to take on the party,’ he said as we shared the lift to the top floor. ‘Not that I gave your colleagues much of a choice. I told them I’d book the party if you were the one organising it. I hope you don’t mind. It’s just that you seemed ... I don’t know, I got a good feeling about you.’

‘No, that’s fine,’ I said, willing my voice to sound calmer than I felt. Which meant anything short of stark raving mad. ‘Once you decide which room is most suitable, we can start talking about everything else.’

‘I knew you’d get it,’ he said.

The lift doors opened on the top floor into the wide entrance to the former restaurant. ‘As you can see, there’s still a lot of the original nineteen thirties decor,’ I said. ‘Especially these art deco wall sconces. I love them. Ooh, and look at that bar.’

I’d only been up there a few times, so I was as excited as Chuck as we ran around the room pointing out each interesting feature, from the geometrically mirrored pillars to the sexy-flapper-lady light fixtures.

‘I’m such a sucker for this old stuff,’ he said. ‘I grew up in a house full of antiques. Older than this, actually, in Chicago.’ Then he considered me. ‘You probably grew up in a castle from the middle ages or something, being English.’

‘That sounds draughty. No, my parents live in a nineteen fifties semi-detached with pebble-dash.’

‘I don’t know what any of that means except for the nineteen fifties, but it sounds exotic.’

‘Hardly. Let’s just say it looks nothing like this. Will this be big enough, though? You said up to four hundred. That might be a squeeze if we want to seat them all.’

‘My guest list has halved, actually,’ he said, shoving his hands into his coat pockets. ‘The company isn’t letting spouses and partners come. Isn’t that weird, to exclude them from a formal social event like that? It’s going to be black tie with dinner and dancing. They were always invited wherever I’ve worked before.’

The painful penny dropped with a clang. Of course he’d have the perfect girlfriend to bring along. A bloke that cute and nice wasn’t single.

‘Which company?’ I asked, covering my disappointment. ‘Your company now, I mean.’

‘Flable and Mead. The asset managers? Sorry, I should have said before.’

Of course I’d heard of them. They were only one of the biggest firms on Wall Street. No wonder Andi had to say yes when Chuck made his request. We were talking big money.

And big egos. ‘I’m not surprised that other halves aren’t invited,’ I told him. Surely he’d worked out why for himself. ‘They usually aren’t invited in the UK either. The Christmas do is your chance to get pissed and snog a colleague.’

Chuck laughed. ‘I’m really glad I’ve seen all those Hugh Grant movies so I know what you’re talking about. So maybe it’ll be everyone’s chance at Flable and Mead to snog a colleague too.’ When he smiled, a dimple appeared on his left side. Just the one. ‘And as you’re working with me to organise the party, I guess that makes you my colleague, right?’

Did he mean what I thought he meant? The cheeky sod. ‘Come on, I’ll show you the ballroom.’

But the ballroom had nowhere near the ambiance of the top floor, and I knew before Chuck said anything that it didn’t have the right feel. Whereas upstairs had character and charm, the ballroom had bling. I’d only known Chuck for a matter of hours, but already I knew he wasn’t the blingy type.

‘Definitely upstairs,’ he said. ‘So it’s done. We’ll book it. Now we just need to plan all the decorations, the food, the band, DJ. I guess the fee goes up depending on how much in-house stuff we use.’ He laughed. ‘I’m sorry, I really am in too deep here. I talked my way into my job. I have no idea how. My boss is a Northwestern alum like me and that must have swung it for me. Before I only worked organising conferences and a few parties at the local VFW hall. This is the big time.’

I knew exactly how he felt. When I first started at the hotel I had to pinch myself. There I was, about to live a life I’d only seen on telly. All I had to do was not muck things up. Digby had been on hand to show me the ropes when I needed it. So the least I could do for Chuck was to help him as much as I could.

That’s what I told myself. I was paying it forward.

‘We’ve got a range of decorations we can do,’ I told him, thinking about how much I was going to get to see him in the upcoming weeks. I could really stretch things out by showing him one tablecloth per visit. ‘And we work with a few good catering companies, who I’m sure can arrange anything from a sit-down meal to a buffet. One even does burger bars, if you want something more quirky.’

‘What I’ll want is for you to help me, Rosie. You will be able to do that, right?’

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘Whatever you need. It’s a whopping great fee your company is paying. That buys a lot of hand-holding.’

‘I was hoping you’d say that,’ he said. ‘The second I came in and saw you, I knew this was the right choice. We’re going to be great together, Rosie.’

I was thinking the exact same thing.

Chapter 2

Lill raises her tiny hands with a showbiz flourish that catches everyone's attention. Lill is nothing if not an attention-catcher. Her platinum bob shines out from beneath her favourite black top hat, and she looks every inch the circus ringmaster with her moth-eaten red tailcoat over her usual thigh-skimming miniskirt and white go-go boots.

This wouldn't look at all unusual if she wasn't pushing seventy.

'Happy anniversary to you, happy anniversary to you, happy anniversary, dear Rosie, happy anniversary to you!'

Lill's voice soars clear and strong above everyone else's and the Colonel calls me Rose Dear. That man hates a nickname.

They're all bunched together in our hotel's decrepit bar, directly under the lurid green banner we used last year when the Colonel's biopsy came back benign. At his age, that kind of thing deserves celebrating. I was the one who tore it taking it down, so it reads CON RATULATIONS. Story of my life, really.

They couldn't be prouder of their surprise, though. Even the dog looks smug.

It's an ambush, though I suppose I've been half expecting it ever since Lill let slip that they knew the date was coming up.

Three years back in Scarborough. Who'd have thought it?

It's touching that they've done this, although I'm not big on surprises, which has made me paranoid for days. I even double-checked the restaurant this morning, but everything was normal – Chef barking orders at Janey and Cheryl. Janey and Cheryl rolling their eyes behind Chef's back. Chef acting like he doesn't know they're doing it.

I should have thought to check the bar. It's just beside reception through double doors in the wide entrance hall, but it's never open this time of morning, unless we have a stag party in. And that hasn't happened in yonks. Not even the Colonel uses it before evening. He's got his own private whisky stash up in his room. He says he likes to keep his loved ones close.

'For she's a jolly good fellow...' The Colonel's voice trails off when nobody joins in. 'I didn't realise you were married, Rose Dear,' he says. The ice in his glass tinkles as he sips.

Everyone stares at him as if we don't hear his gaffs every day.

'She's not married, Colonel. She doesn't even have a boyfriend,' Janey says.

Her tone isn't unkind. Just matter-of-fact. *But ta for that reminder*, I think.

'It's her three-year *work* anniversary, Colonel,' Peter kindly reminds him. 'Not a wedding anniversary.' Peter reaches down to pet Barry, who's starting to look bored with the whole event. Though it's anyone's guess what better offers a basset hound might have at eleven o'clock on a Tuesday morning at a seaside resort in the off season.

'Righty-ho,' the Colonel says. 'Chin up, old girl, it might not be too late for you.' He wanders out. We can hear the tap tap of his cane on the careworn parquet floor as it carries him off to his usual chair in the conservatory, where he likes to spend his mornings.

Colonel William Bambury always cuts a dashing figure, even when he's half cut before lunchtime. Which is most days. His shirts are perfectly pressed and the crease in his

trousers could slice through a joint of meat. After forty-five years in the Royal Marines, he knows his way around an ironing board. In summer his ensemble is khaki. He adds a green tweed jacket in cooler weather, and on occasions like today he pins his medals to the front.

Personally, I'd live in thermals and a winter coat if I were him, because I know he doesn't put the heat on in his room. He says it's because he likes the bracing air, but I know it's to save money. We need whatever comfort we can spare for the guests.

'Sorry about that,' Cheryl says. 'Janey can be a thoughtless arse.'

'That's rich, coming from you,' Janey retorts.

'She's right,' I say. 'You're exactly alike.'

And not only in personality. From the neck up, Janey and Cheryl could be twins. They wear their blonde hair blown out pin-straight and their make-up laid on with a trowel. If one tries a double eyeliner flick or a new set of false lashes, the other one does too. They claim to have their own lipsticks, but they're all in the same shades.

It's below the neck where the differences lie, though they wear identical faded black-and-white waitress uniforms. Janey is as athletically slender as Cheryl is plump, though they both hate exercise, which makes me love them all the more.

'Can we have the cake now? I'm starving,' Janey asks.

'Oh, right, the cake,' Lill says. 'With my performance, I nearly forgot.'

Nobody points out that singing four lines of a trite old song isn't exactly a sell-out show at Scarborough Spa.

Lill hoists a plain white cake onto the burnished bar top. I'm surprised she can get it up there with her scrawny arms. 'We did ask Chef to add some colour to the icing, but he said you wouldn't go in for that kind of frivolity.'

Chef means *he* doesn't go in for that kind of frivolity. He's cut from the same military cloth as the Colonel, though Chef's cloth is ex-Army green.

'Where is Chef? Isn't he coming in?' I ask.

'Not when he's getting ready for service,' Janey says. 'It's fish and chips today.'

Peter's eyes light up at the news. 'With mushy peas?'

Cheryl nods. 'And the home-made tartar sauce that you like.'

'Can you believe our luck, Barry?' He scratches behind his dog's ear.

That's a hypothetical question, though, since Barry was strictly banned from the restaurant after he made off with Chef's crown roast two Christmases ago. He didn't get far on his little legs, but dinner was ruined and Chef still holds a grudge.

Kindly Peter Barker swipes the scant strands of his coal-black hair over his shiny dome. It's a nervous habit, but necessary because his parting starts about an inch above his left ear.

His hair colour is probably as artificial as his surname, though he won't admit to tampering with either one. But really, a dog trainer named Barker? Moreover, a fifty-something dog trainer named Barker with hair that black, when his face is crinklier than a sheet that's been forgotten in the washing machine?

We'd give him a lot more stick about it if he wasn't such a gentle soul. Believe me, we've got a lot of opportunity, with him living here at the hotel.

That's the arrangement the Colonel has with the council: to house some of the people who need a place to live. They've been here for years and even though I'm the manager, I

don't know the exact details of the arrangement. They're just our friends in residence. I guess they bring in a bit of revenue. Given how few paying guests we get, it might be the Colonel's only steady income.

'Will you have lunch with us?' Peter asks me.

'Yes, why not?' Lill adds. 'The guests leave this morning, don't they? It's been ages since you've sat down properly for a meal, and you are celebrating. Three years. Where does the time go?'

That's a really good question, though I've been trying not to dwell too much on it lately. Otherwise it could get depressing.

I'm not saying that Scarborough itself is depressing, mind you. At least, I've never thought so. But then I was born and raised in a bungalow not a mile from the hotel, with the waterfront penny arcades, casinos, ice-cream shops, chippies and pubs a stone's throw away. It's a faded seaside town like many of the old Victorian resorts, but we're hoping for a revival. With a little vision, we could become the Brighton of the north. I do love the grand old buildings, even if they've all seen better days.

Who hasn't?

When I left at eighteen, I assumed I'd never come back, except for holiday visits to my parents. Yet, ten years later, my parents are living exotically in France while I'm back in the bungalow where I grew up.

See what I mean? Looked at in the wrong way, one could find that sad.

'Rosie can have lunch off today, can't she?' Peter calls to the Colonel, who's come back into the bar.

'Don't mind if I do,' he says, refreshing his drink. He's talking about helping himself to the bar rather than my lunchtime plans. 'What?'

'Rosie,' Lill says. 'She can have lunch with us today, can't she?'

'Of course, of course,' he says. 'The more the merrier, I always say.'

Actually, he never says that but, as he owns the hotel and is technically my boss, it's not worth correcting him.

Given Chef's refusal to indulge in a little food colouring, it probably won't surprise you to learn that he's also a stickler for punctuality. If everyone's not sitting down for lunch between noon and two o'clock, they won't get a morsel to eat. Not long after I got the job, I made the mistake of suggesting that we offer room service. Nothing fancy, just a selection of simple cold dishes for guests who arrive outside of Chef's timetable.

You'd have thought I wanted him to don feathers and do a fan dance for the guests. He gave me dirty looks for weeks. Now I keep suggestions for the restaurant to a bare minimum.

Miracle Jones hurtles towards us through the dining room. Imagine the *Titanic* draped in a colourful dress and you'll get the idea. 'Darling baby girl, I'm so sorry I missed de surprise!' she says in her sing-song Jamaican accent. It's much stronger than that actually, so I'm translating.

Miracle is another of the hotel's long-time residents. She's also the mother amongst us. Large and regal, her black face catches every smile going and bounces it back at you tenfold. You can hear her throaty laugh all through the hotel.

‘I had to be at de church,’ she says, settling her bulk into the chair beside the Colonel and tucking her riotously patterned caftan around her. ‘Today is tea and sympathy day. It’s so sad how those poor souls have got no one.’

None of us can meet her gaze.

Unlike Peter and Lill, Miracle lives at the hotel thanks to her three grown children rather than the council. Every month the Colonel can depend on the fee for Miracle’s room and board. That’s more than Miracle can depend on when it comes to her useless offspring. None of us has ever actually laid eyes on them, so whatever they’re so busy doing, it’s not visiting their mother.

I don’t know how they can do that to such a giving lady. My parents drive me round the bend, but I still see them regularly. Granted, it’s not exactly a hardship when they live in a picturesque village not far from Moulins in France. But the point is that I’d visit even if they lived in a council flat in Skegness.

Nobody imagined they’d actually leave Scarborough. At first I thought they were joking about moving away from the water. Not only are they away from the water, they found the most landlocked village in France to live in. It is nice to visit for a few days, but then I miss the sea.

‘I’ll have to run off straight after lunch,’ Peter tells us as Cheryl and Janey bring our fish and chips to the table. Not that we ordered it. Chef doesn’t so much run a restaurant as a school canteen. We eat what we’re given. ‘I’ve got a three o’clock birthday and Barry and I have some lines to run through.’

We all nod as though it’s perfectly normal for Peter’s dog to run lines with him. Because, in a way, it is.

Peter’s had his trained dog act for decades and he’s well known on the children’s party circuit. Barry’s not your usual dancing dog, though. Well, a basset hound is never really going to be a great dancer, is he? But what he lacks in agility he makes up for in personality. He’s the perfect straight man for Peter’s act. When Peter tells his jokes, you’d swear Barry understands. His facial expressions are always spot on.

The Colonel clears his throat.

‘Have you got a fish bone, William?’ Lill asks. When she puts her hand on his arm, the Colonel blushes.

‘I’ve got something to say.’ Never one for public speaking, he shifts in his chair. ‘We’ve finally had some interest in the hotel.’

This is great news. ‘Was it the *North Yorkshire Gazette* advert?’ He wasn’t keen on spending the money, but I knew it would bring the punters in. And out of season too. If we keep up the publicity, imagine what we could do when it’s not rainy and cold. ‘We’ll have to open up some of the other rooms, though,’ I say. To keep the utility bills down we only keep the first floor open for hotel guests. We’re managing. Just.

‘It’s from a US hotel,’ he says.

I’m confused. Why would a US hotel send guests here? ‘Do you mean some kind of exchange?’ If so, we haven’t got many guests to send their way in return.

‘You don’t mean a sale, Colonel?’ Peter asks.

No, he can’t mean that.

‘It was a surprise to me too,’ the Colonel says. ‘You remember when we tried selling the place after we played ‘The Last Post’ for my sister. Couldn’t give it away with a free prozzie then.’

‘William.’

‘Sorry, Lillian.’

I do remember that summer. It was when I worked here in school, though I didn’t have anything to do with its management. I was under Chef’s tyrannical regime then. It’s hard to imagine the hotel more run down than it is now, but it was.

‘They approached me,’ he says. ‘Made an offer sight unseen.’

‘You’ve sold the hotel?’ Lill asks. It’s clearly news to her. ‘William, how could you?’

‘I thought you’d be pleased,’ he says. ‘You know how long I’ve wanted to get out from under the place. Now I’ll be free.’

‘You thought I’d be pleased? How long have we known each other?’

‘Eight years, Lillian.’

I’ve only known Lill for three and even I can see that the Colonel’s news is about as welcome as a parp in a phone box.

‘And you think I’d be pleased to know you’re selling the hotel out from under us to strangers? Out of the blue?’

‘I’m not selling it out from under us! We’re all staying. It was part of the negotiation. I made sure, Lillian. Now we won’t have to worry about keeping the hotel running. Let it be on someone else’s watch. I did it for us, really.’ His bushy eyebrows are knitted together in concern. ‘All of us.’

Lill crosses her arms. ‘There is no us, William.’

The poor Colonel. His upper lip may be stiff, but his bottom one starts wobbling with emotion.

‘Rose Dear.’ The Colonel looks beseechingly at me. ‘Once we’re established with new owners here, you might be able to do a stint with them back in the US if you want. Wouldn’t that be nice?’

I want to make it better for the Colonel, I really do. But I’ve spent the last three years trying to forget all about my life in the US. The last thing I want is to go back there now.

Chapter 3

The mood at the hotel has been subdued ever since my party, when the Colonel dropped his bombshell about the sale. It's not helped by the fact that Lill won't speak to him. He's moping around the place, every inch the lovelorn old man, and you can't help but feel sorry for him. He still sits in the conservatory every day, but Lill won't even set foot in there. If they do happen to be in the same room, she makes a big show of ignoring him. But then that's not a surprise. Lill makes a big show of everything.

I would too, if I'd spent half a century in show business like she has. Between her gorgeous voice and flamboyant stage presence, she was a sensation once, nearly up there with the greats of the sixties and seventies. It must be hard to let that go.

I don't blame her for being cross with the Colonel either. We're all a little out of sorts, because it seems that the hotel sale isn't just a possibility. It's a done and dusted deal. Some company called Beach Vacations Inc. now owns the Colonel's hotel, and what I've found on their website doesn't exactly make me think this was a good idea.

Luxury island FIVE-STAR service at three-star prices!! it boasts all over the place. It's got hotels on islands and keys in Florida and on a beach in Rhode Island – which isn't an island, despite the name.

We're not an island either, and that's what's got me worried. Every photo of their interiors and their staff look as if they're kitted out in fabrics made from gaudy old Hawaiian shirts.

Our hotel couldn't be more opposite. It's Victorian and quintessentially British, ta very much. The public rooms have high ceilings, ornate cornicing and parquet floors. The floors might be dented and scratched, but that just gives them a fine old patina. The brass and glass chandeliers are originals, throwing a warm yellow light over the wide entrance hall, and the bar is really pretty spectacular, aside from the old pub carpet that's coming away in places. And Peter was up on the ladder only last month painting over the water stains in the corners, so they don't look too bad, considering all the holes in the roof.

My point is that some loud-shirted American company won't do us any favours in the style stakes.

And worst of all, now we've got a *transition manager* coming to turn everything upside down.

'I think that's him coming!' Peter cries from his lookout post in the conservatory. His announcement startles Barry, who's been napping beside Peter's chair. 'He's definitely from London. He's got pointy shoes.'

And pointy horns, probably. I've never met a transition manager before, but the whole point of them is to change things, right? That's the last thing we want around here. Ta very much again.

Tempted as I am to run to the window to see the bloke, we can't have him thinking that we care that he's here.

'I think you'll like him, Rosie. He's a good-looking lad.'

'He's changing our hotel, Peter, not asking us out.'

‘Right. Still.’

I can see his smile through the wavy old glass of the door even before he reaches it. They must teach that at change management college. Introduction to Sincere-Looking Smiles.

I hate to admit it but, flippin’ heck, Peter’s right. This bloke is a looker, if you take away the thick specs he’s wearing. Tall and broad-shouldered, he looks natural in his fitted grey suit, like one of those arrogant Wall Street types. Only his hair isn’t slicked back. It’s stuck up with gel and there’s a lot of it.

I let him push open the door instead of opening it for him. No reason to roll out the red carpet for someone who’s about to do us over. ‘Are you Rosie? I’m Rory Thomas.’

His accent throws me. I expected brash American, not posh English. Quickly I readjust my prejudices from one to the other. There, job done. Now I can resent him for being a poncy southerner. ‘Rosie MacDonald.’ I bite down the *Nice to meet you* and offer him my hand instead.

‘Will you be staying long?’ I ask. He hasn’t got any cases with him, just a khaki courier bag slung across his front, which clashes with his sharp suit.

‘Are you trying to get rid of me already?’ he teases. When his smile ratchets up a notch, his mouth looks almost as big as mine, but less muppet-like. Kind of nice, if I’m honest. ‘I’m at Mrs Carmody’s B&B on Marine Road. Do you know it?’

‘We’ve got a lot of B&Bs around here. The town’s not that small, you know.’ I don’t know why I’m defending Scarborough when I couldn’t get out of here fast enough myself. ‘The enemy of my enemy is my friend’, I guess.

‘It’s a reasonable size,’ he agrees. ‘I imagine that means reasonable competition, so it surprised me when Mrs Carmody made me leave for the day. I’m not allowed back till after four. I thought those days were over.’

I stifle a laugh. ‘Welcome to Scarborough, where time stands still. I’d have thought you’d just stay here. Is our hotel not good enough for you?’ I don’t know where this narky attitude is coming from. Especially since, technically, he’s probably my boss now.

‘It’s perfectly good enough for me, but I’d have to move out when we redo the rooms. It’ll be less disruptive to just hole myself up at the B&B while works are going on.’ His forehead wrinkles. ‘They did tell you about the renovation?’

‘No. We’ve heard nothing at all. Only that you were coming.’

‘God, I’m so sorry! That’s a terrible way to hear news about your hotel.’ He shakes his head. ‘Really, I can only apologise. I haven’t found the communications great with the company either, if that makes you feel any better.’

It doesn’t.

‘So you don’t know what they’re planning?’ His grey eyes are magnified by his thick lenses. ‘Have you got an office or somewhere for us to sit and go through everything?’

It can’t be good if he wants me to sit down. My tummy is flipping as we go into the oak-panelled office behind the reception desk.

‘This is nice.’ He’s running his hands over the panels. ‘The whole hotel is really something. I love these old places.’

‘Do you *revamp* them a lot?’ I make ditto marks just in case he misses the snark.

‘Me? No, never. It’s my first hotel assignment.’

‘But I thought you worked for the company.’

He shakes his head. ‘I’m a freelancer. They’ve brought me in to do this job. It’s the same process, though, no matter the industry.’

So our hotel is going to be ‘change-managed’ – ditto fingers – by someone with absolutely no hotel experience. ‘Where *have* you worked before?’

‘That sounds like an interview question. A slightly aggressive one. No, I don’t mind,’ he says, when he sees me start to object. ‘It’s natural to have concerns. After all, this is your livelihood. I’ve managed transitions for a biscuit factory and a couple of banks that needed integration.’ He’s counting off on his fingers. ‘An insurance company, and a long stint with Transport for London. Ah yes, and a handmade bicycle business in Leeds.’

Biscuits and bicycles. That’s great experience for running a hotel. If we never need advice on elevenses, Rory’s our man.

‘Rosie, if you don’t mind me saying, I don’t have to be clairvoyant to see that you’d rather not have me here. And I’m sorry about that, but I’m a necessary evil and this will all go a lot more smoothly if we can work together. I’m not here to do your job. And despite what you probably think, I’m not a ball-buster. The sale’s gone through. It’s going to happen now, whether anyone likes it or not.’

I’m a little taken aback by his directness. Rory doesn’t look like a ball-buster, but clearly he’s no pushover either. I might not want him here but, as a Yorkshirewoman, I’ve at least got to admire his straightforwardness.

‘My job is to make the transition as easy as possible for both sides,’ he continues, ‘and that means being the go-between and trying to keep everyone happy. So I’d like it if you could see me as an ally instead of an adversary. Because I’m really not. An adversary, I mean. I don’t have any loyalty to Beach Vacations –’

‘Inc.,’ I add. Something about that really irks me. It sounds so impersonal. The hotel I worked for in New York City was also an Inc. And look at how that turned out.

‘Inc., right,’ he says. ‘They’re paying me to transition the hotel as smoothly as possible, and a transition can only be smooth when everyone is happy. So I’m really here to make you happy.’

Dammit. I can’t help returning his smile.

‘We’re going to be colleagues, only I’ve got the boss’s ear,’ he says. ‘That should be useful to you, right?’

It would be, if it’s true. ‘I do understand what you’re trying to do,’ I tell him honestly. ‘We’re just not big on change around here. Your landlady is the tip of the iceberg, believe me. The Colonel’s family hasn’t changed anything here in years, not even paint colour on the walls. The staff aren’t going to like it.’

When I say ‘staff’, it’s Chef who pops into my head. When Cadbury ditched the Bournvilles from the Heroes chocolate tub, he was apoplectic. Not only is he originally from Birmingham, home of the Bournville, but substituting Toblerone (Swiss!) was unpatriotic. When Cadbury then dared to change its recipe for the Creme Eggs, it was the last straw for him. Now there’s a total ban on their products at the hotel. He won’t even touch a Terry’s Chocolate Orange, and they’re his favourite. We have to hear him grumble about it every Christmas.

‘I’m sorry, but there will be changes with the new owners,’ Rory says. ‘So will you at least let me try to help? The transition is happening. You may as well have me on your team.’

‘Is that what we are? A team?’

‘I hope so. Should we meet the rest of the team?’

‘Please stop saying team.’

‘I’m sorry. The company uses it a lot. As you’d imagine.’

We share a very British smile at the Americans’ expense.

But I’m not laughing after he’s told me everything. It’s bad enough that there’s a whole refit planned for the building. We’ll also be reapplying for our own jobs. Those are the jobs we’ve all been doing perfectly well for years! Like anyone else would want them anyway. Rory claims it’s just a formality because everyone will get new contracts, but I don’t like the idea of jumping through hoops for a job I’ve already got. It sounds like a lot of useless bureaucratic box-ticking to me.

I shrug. ‘Anyway, if it’s definitely happening then there’s no use grizzling about it. So how long will the hotel be closed while it’s being refurbished?’

‘The company isn’t keen to lose any income it doesn’t have to,’ he says, clearly relieved not to discuss my potential job loss anymore. ‘I wish we could close it, but we’ll have to zone the building works so they can be done away from where the guests will stay. It should be okay if we do it in stages. Your occupancy isn’t above thirty per cent anyway at this time of year.’

Of course. The company would have done its homework before the purchase. Rory probably knows more about this place than I do. ‘What about the residents?’ I ask. ‘Will they work around them?’

‘Like I said, we’ll just keep them away from the works. The company might authorise a discount on room rates. We’ll see.’

‘But won’t their rooms need redoing too? I guess we can put them up in guest rooms in the meantime.’

Rory looks confused. ‘Which rooms do you mean?’

‘The residents’ rooms.’ Am I not speaking English? ‘The hotel residents: Peter, Lill. The Colonel, Miracle?’ Best not bring Barry into it just now.

‘The Colonel has a lifetime tenancy, so his room won’t be affected. It’s written into the contract. The company isn’t refurbishing it, though. I don’t know who the other people are?’

Oh really? Well, this *is* interesting. ‘You don’t know about the council agreement? Or Miracle’s arrangement?’ He definitely isn’t going to welcome this news. ‘They’ve all got tenancy agreements with us. With the hotel.’

Rory’s eyes widen. ‘You don’t mean they’re sitting tenants?’

Sitting tenants. Now there’s a phrase to strike fear into the heart of any new owner. I’m glad.

‘I wonder if the company knows,’ he says, looking worried. ‘They’ve only ever mentioned Colonel Bambury’s agreement.’

‘Maybe they don’t know what sitting tenants are, being American. They might not have them there.’ If not, the new owners are in for a shock. I happen to know that the ink is hardly

dry on Miracle's new tenancy agreement. Three years. And the council isn't going to be keen on having to rehouse anyone with the way the government is squeezing their budgets.

'Between you and me,' says Rory, 'it doesn't sound like they did much due diligence before the purchase. Did anyone even come for a site visit?'

'No, not that I know of,' I tell him. 'But who in their right mind would buy an entire hotel without seeing it first?'

Rory leans closer. 'I probably shouldn't mention this, but I'm not so sure they are in their right minds. It's two brothers who own the company, and they don't speak to each other. I've only had Skype calls with them, separately, of course, but from what I gather they're pretty eccentric.'

'When you say eccentric ...'

'They're mad as a box of frogs. You'll see.'

'And these are our new owners? Perfect.'

'At least if they didn't bother coming over to see what they were buying, they probably won't bother us much now after the fact. They seem to like to dictate from afar. Over Skype.' He pulls a grimace. 'You will let me help you navigate through all this, won't you?'

'It doesn't sound like I've got much choice, given what might be ahead.'

'That's the spirit!' He raises his hand for a high-five.

I'm sure I slap it harder than he's expecting.

It's late afternoon by the time we finish and I, for one, am exhausted. I never realised how much work I do till I had to explain it all to Rory. Hopefully that'll count for something when I reapply for my own job.

'What is that smell?' Rory asks.

'Oh, that's the goat. It starts out a little pongy but ends up really nice.'

'Do you serve a lot of goat at the hotel?' A smirk is playing at the corners of his mouth. He seems to find a lot of things funny.

'Only on Caribbean night.' I push my chair back and stretch my back. We both hear the cracks of my spine. 'Come on, you can meet Chef and Miracle. It's her goat.'

'Her...?'

'Recipe. It's her goat recipe. Not her goat.'

As if we'd let Miracle keep a goat in the hotel. We're going to have enough trouble when Rory sees Barry.

Chef and Miracle aren't alone in the dining room when we get there. Lill is sitting with them. She's got her vape in one hand and a martini in the other.

'She's not smoking indoors, is she?' Rory murmurs.

'No, Mister Health and Safety.' But I know why he'd think so. Lill's vape looks like a twenties-style cigarette holder. It's rarely out of her hand. 'Just in time for drinkies!' she cries when she sees us. 'Oh, hello there.'

Rory's greeting is friendly and polite, but I catch the look of confusion on his face.

I guess I'm so used to seeing Lill that her drag queeny false eyelashes, feather boas and white go-go boots aren't such a shock. It's not the boots, actually, that throws people. It's the

sight of her scrawny arms and legs in a vest and miniskirt. She looks like sixties Twiggy has spent way too long in the bath.

‘You’re the henchman,’ Chef says. Like Lill, he’s most comfortable in a vest. Unlike her, Chef’s vest is always white and sometimes stained, and he’s got tattoos all up his beefy arms. He’s left the Army, which may account for the slip in uniform standards, but his haircut is still regulation. And his manner is as exacting as his haircut.

‘Well, I’m only here to ensure a smooth transition,’ Rory explains.

‘Said the SS guard at the camp gate. Call it what you like. How long are you staying?’

‘Don’t be harsh on the bloke, Chef,’ I say. ‘He’s just doing his job.’

Rory smiles his thanks, though I’m not sure why I’m sticking up for him when he’s just told me I’ll have to apply for my own job. Maybe it’s because he seems like an alright person. Maybe because he’s the only buffer between us and our new owners.

‘Rosie tells me you’re making goat. It smells ... good.’

Miracle’s laugh rings out across the dining room, and that’s saying something because the room is vast. In its heyday our hotel would regularly seat a hundred and fifty people for buffet lunches or fancy dinners. There are old black-and-white photos hung all around the hotel that I love to look at. ‘My, isn’t he a charming liar? No, it don’t smell good, petal, but it will. It will.’ Miracle’s chins nod for a few seconds after she stops. ‘My babies always brag about their mama’s goat curry,’ she says, wiping her hands on the bright-yellow apron that’s covering her batik-print dress. ‘They can’t get enough of it. All three begged for de recipe before they moved from home but they say I still make it better.’ She laughs again. ‘I say I do.’

‘You can’t beat a family recipe,’ Rory says. ‘And I know how your children feel. My dad was the cook in our house, and I’ve never been able to make his recipes as well either. There’s something about the way a parent makes it.’

‘It’s de love they put in,’ Miracle says. ‘Come along, boy, I’ll show you.’

‘I don’t want strangers in my kitchen,’ Chef barks.

‘Calm yourself, Chef,’ she says. ‘It’s not your kitchen today. As long as it’s my curry in there, it’s my kitchen.’ Ignoring Chef’s thunderous look, she hoists herself from the table. Then she leads Rory to the industrial kitchen, leaving Lill and I to smooth over Chef’s ruffled feathers.

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