A Seaside Escape
Lisa Hobman
When your perfect dream becomes your worst nightmare...
had secretly sniffed it, shaken it and been so tempted to peel back just one corner of the sparkly Santa paper but she had always placed it back under the tree unopened.

In their usual festive tradition, Josie and Brad arrived to stay on Christmas Eve and they all drank champagne and prepared the veg for their festive feast. They had eventually gone to bed at around midnight, after playing a very long game of Scrabble, which Brad had won and boasted about for the rest of the wine-fuelled evening.

Mallory awoke at nine on Christmas morning and made her way downstairs, eager to open her gift from Sam. Brad and Josie were still sleeping and so she switched on the tree lights and admired her beautifully decorated, real tree as she inhaled the fragrance of the garland over the fireplace. In spite of the losses she had suffered over the years, Christmas held so many wonderful memories for her and she loved the festive feeling.

Taking the rectangular box wrapped from under the tree, she read the tag once more,

To my beautiful Yorkshire Rose, lots of love from Santa Sam.

She grinned widely and eagerly ripped off the paper and inside was a red velvet box. She opened it slowly and gasped at the contents. A stunning white gold bracelet of linked hearts, each with a diamond at its centre. Wedged into the lid of the box was a note.

She unfolded it and read, Mallory, I give you my heart, forever. Tears of happiness stung her eyes and she wished so much that he was here with her.

Lunch was amazing but Mallory and her guests ate far too much, rendering them all sleepy. At two o’clock, the phone rang and Mallory almost vaulted over the sofa to answer it.

‘Hello? Sam?’
‘Hey, baby, it’s me. Merry Christmas.’
‘Oh Sam! Merry Christmas to you too. I miss you so much.’
‘I miss you too. Been telling my mom and Ry all about you,’ he told her. ‘They want to meet you. How would you fancy a little holiday out here sometime?’

In spite of how fast things had progressed she could think of nothing she wanted more. Maybe she should have been terrified at the prospect of meeting his family but deep inside she knew this was meant to be, so instead of fear, her heart tripped with a jolt of excitement. ‘That’d be amazing. We’ll have to arrange it. I opened my gift by the way.’

‘Yeah? What did you think?’ He sounded hopeful.
‘It’s just beautiful, Sam. I love it.’
‘I’m so glad. I just wanted you to have it when I saw it.’

Hearing his voice made her heart melt and made her miss him even more. Being apart at Christmas was difficult even though, relatively speaking, they had only just met. They chatted for a while until Sam had to go.

‘I’ll see you soon. Can’t wait.’ She sighed into the receiver.
‘See you soon… I love you.’

Her heart skipped a beat when she heard his words. ‘S-sorry?’
There was a pause at the end of the line. ‘Whoops… I should maybe have said that to
you in person, huh? Well, it’s out there now so I’m going to say it again. Mallory, I love you.’

Tears cascades down her face. ‘Oh Sam, I love you too.’

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**January 2015**

Back in the present, Sam wasn’t giving up on his hare-brained idea.

Mallory knew he had been feeling a little homesick for the open spaces of Canada and she also knew that he loved the similarities between his home and the Highland vistas of Scotland. It had been those things that had driven him to do his usual ‘just looking’ on the Scottish property websites and it had been *then* that he’d discovered Sealladh-mara Cottage – or Seaview Cottage in English – at Clachan Seil, twelve miles south of Oban on the West coast. The little whitewashed house sat near the water’s edge on Seil Island, a stunning seaside location close to the beautiful hump backed Atlantic bridge and in one of their favourite locations. He had evidently fallen head over heels for the place.

He had decided that he had spent too much time working for his brother and even though he had been living with Mallory since their fourth month of being together he wanted to buy a place of their own, and to do something completely different, maybe write a historical novel.

He insisted they could afford it now, with the shop doing so well and his inheritance – a combination of money left by his beloved father and Uncle Jacob, his father’s eccentric and wealthy brother. And if they could sell her little house they could have a comfortable life in Scotland.

‘Why wait until we’re too old to really enjoy it, huh? At least say you’ll think about it, Mally?’ he pleaded as she rested her head on his shoulder in a warm embrace and Ruby tried her best to squeeze in between them. ‘I mean, we could go and visit a few more times first before we relocate completely?’ he implored. ‘And Josie is more than capable of running *Le Petit Cadeau* for you now. She’s there more than you are. Sealladh-mara Cottage has a workshop, so you could concentrate on making stuff for the business again, which you know you’d love. Look at it. It’s the perfect seaside escape.’ He desperately tried to convince her of the prospect of such an idyllic lifestyle.

Mallory turned and picked up the printout of the pretty whitewashed, stone-built cottage and began to read the description. Three good-sized bedrooms, one en-suite, one family bathroom, lounge, dining room, farmhouse-style kitchen, utility room and, best of all, the detached workshop.

She and Sam had spent some happy holidays over the past couple of years in Argyle in the Highlands and had visited the little isle with its pretty bridge that spanned the inlet of the Atlantic Ocean. And admittedly they had talked about how wonderful it would be to live there someday. *Someday*. But the thought of making such a huge change now was a
scary one. Would she be crazy to consider it? Realising that not all of her spur of the moment decisions had been mistakes she looked at the idyllic cottage in its location by the water and sighed.

‘It does look very pretty,’ she mumbled, not realising she had done so out loud.

‘Does this mean you’ll think about it?’ The look on Sam’s face was reminiscent of an excited schoolboy. How could she possibly resist?

‘I’ll think about it. But I mean think.’ Almost before the words had left her lips he swept her up in his arms and swung her around, kissing her passionately, before leading her up the stairs to their bedroom.
Chapter Two

January 2015

Mallory awoke to a bright, January Saturday morning. She blinked a few times to acclimatise her eyes to the sun streaming through the ridiculously thin curtains. Sam was wrapped around her, his naked limbs tangled in the cotton sheets and one buttock peeking out. She suppressed a giggle and the urge to spank him quickly to rouse him from his slumber.

Stretching her arms above her head, she thought back to last night’s delicious lovemaking. Sam had been even more attentive than usual, which was saying something. He was a very attentive lover under normal circumstances, but last night she had felt as though he was on some kind of mission. Or was he thanking her for agreeing to ‘think’ about the move to Scotland, to their dream cottage? Maybe he was trying to convince her. But who was she kidding? She needed no convincing. Truthfully the more she thought about it the more excited she became. She knew for a fact that they’d be moving, lock, stock and barrel if they could only secure the deal before some other lucky so-and-so beat them to it. Maybe she should speak to Josie – her voice of reason – before telling Sam to go ahead and book an appointment to see the house.

Realising she needed to go to the bathroom, she slid out of bed, as carefully as was possible considering she was pretty much wearing a six foot two male about her person. She grabbed her fluffy robe and shrugged it on, tiptoeing across the floor and out into the hallway.

When she returned to the bedroom, Sam was gone, but there was the distinct sound of out-of-tune wailing and whistling coming from elsewhere in the little cottage. She giggled and grabbed her mobile from her bedside to text Josie.

Hey hun, Sam has finally lost the plot. Will fill you in later.

A reply came immediately.

Haha! It’s all that maple syrup he chugs!

Rolling her eyes and smirking to herself at Josie’s comment, she drifted down the stairs to find her gorgeous man clattering around the kitchen with serious intent.

Caterwauling, as only Sam could, along with the sounds of Radio 2, he was oblivious to Mallory’s presence in the room. She stood silently watching him as he danced around and sang into the coffee scoop along with Bon Jovi’s ‘Livin’ on a Prayer’. He really was a
delight to behold. His grey checked ‘lounge’ pants – he wouldn’t be seen dead in pyjamas, he had once told her – hanging low around his hips and his unruly bed-hair, sticking out at all angles. She sighed and suddenly felt the need to hold him.

Wandering over silently and standing behind him as he waited for the kettle to boil, Mallory slid her arms around his smooth skin, kissing his back as she did so. Through the kitchen window she could see Ruby outside chasing and yapping at any bird that dared to land in her tiny patch of territory.

‘Well, good morning, Miss Mallory Yorksher.’ The pet name had stuck from their very first encounter, even though they had been engaged for a while and she was soon to be Mrs Sam Buchanan. ‘Did ya sleep well?’

‘How could I not sleep well?’ she replied with a raise of her eyebrows.

‘Oh, I just wondered if you had maybe been lying awake, you know, thinking about little Highland cottages, or maybe mentally setting out your new workshop.’ He turned to embrace her and gently kissed the top of her head.

Although the decision was all but cemented in her mind she knew Sam would run ahead full pelt if she let him know. No, she would talk things through with Josie first. ‘I said I’d think about it Sam, but that’s all,’ she reminded him sternly.

‘I know, I know,’ he sighed, turning around as the kettle clicked off.

She felt a pang of guilt at his obvious sadness. What could it hurt, really? It was something they had dreamed about since they visited Scotland the first time. Admittedly she never expected they’d be able to fulfil the dream until later in life, but hey, as Sam had said, why wait?

Okay, so it would mean a totally different lifestyle and a fresh start. Ruby had loved the beaches up there and the open spaces would be ideal for the little dog. No doubt initially they would be overrun with guests, maybe for the first year, until the novelty wore off for family and friends travelling such a distance. But it would be their very own little piece of paradise. Maybe it wasn’t everyone’s idea of paradise. Scotland wasn’t renowned for its tropical weather, but that really didn’t matter a jot. It was their dream location – theirs.

The mountains reminded her of her father and the lochs reminded Sam of the great lakes – albeit on a smaller scale. Sam had dreamed of writing a book since before he met Mallory; he had a head full of amazing ideas, but never had the time to get them down. Plus, it wasn’t as if they couldn’t afford to take the leap. But it was scary. It was a huge change. But the more she thought about it, the more the butterflies in her tummy danced the soft shoe shuffle. She was excited. She wanted to do it, but there were so many things to consider. Railway Terrace had been a gift from her parents and parting with it would be hard. And what would Josie and Brad think about her moving so far away? Would Josie even want to run Le Petit Cadeau?

They sat at the little kitchen table munching on toasted bagels and cream cheese, drinking freshly brewed coffee, as was their weekend ritual. Sam was chatting away, keen to plan the day ahead. Mallory, on the other hand, was finding it hard to concentrate on Sam’s suggestions to jump in the car and take a trip to the seaside for some fresh air and good old Scarborough fish ‘n’ chips. She was consumed with toing and froing over the minutiae of the possible move in her mind. Josie and Brad were her best friends in the