

Summer Harvest

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Extract

If Beth Poole had her way, the need to celebrate birthdays would be eradicated from the human psyche. Instead, you would be born, the doctor would give you a pat on the bottom and make sure you were breathing, and then that would be it. That would be reward enough.

Life: the biggest party of all.

Unfortunately, she didn't have her way. Instead she was staring blindly out the kitchen window of her gran's cozy grey-stone cottage while tamping down a growing sense of impending doom.

'Beth?'

It wasn't the age thing that got to her. Turning thirty-one didn't bother her in the slightest. Her appearance hadn't featured high in her priorities for a long time, particularly the past few years. The frequently unpredictable Yorkshire weather had been kind to her pale skin and she had relatively manageable, short fine blonde hair that matched her light brown eyes well enough. Maybe her sturdy clothing frequently hung off her diminutive frame, but her canine clients didn't care. Most of the adults she socialised with of late needed trifocals to see the end of their nose, so why bother?

If she was honest, she didn't have a problem with birthdays as such – it was everything else. Or to be more specific, it was her irrepressible, stubbornly enthusiastic gran, Violet.

'Beth!'

At least there wouldn't be a party this year. Thank God the frigid weather and icy roads had guaranteed that much. Last year, Beth's 'surprise' birthday party had resulted in two senior citizens coming to blows after they'd learned they were both courting the same lady.

It had struck Beth afterwards, not for the first time, that Violet's friends led far more interesting lives than Beth did.

So, no party, then. That just left her birthday present.

'Beth!'

Beth hoped her gran hadn't spent too much money. Violet Poole had to be the only octogenarian in Yorkshire who went against the short-arms-long-pockets school of wealth management. And she always, *always* went over the top, which explained why Beth had just spent the past five hours training William, the rabbit-obsessed basset hound, in freezing wind and snow instead of staying home.

She was still thawing out and was quite sure her feet would never be warm again. Even so, she wished she'd taken on another client afterwards.

If her day had been fully booked, she would have received her present first thing this morning and the anxiety she was feeling would be a thing of the past.

'BETH!' Violet's bellow nearly shook the rafters.

'Yes?' Beth called back, raising her voice nearly as loud. Her gran's favourite soap opera, *Summer Love*, was on and turned up to full volume.

'COULD YOU COME IN HERE NOW, PLEASE? WE NEED TO SPEAK TO YOU,' Violet roared.

Beth braced herself. The time was nigh. 'All right. Can I get you anything from the kitchen?' 'Just yourself.'

Beth poured herself a cup of tea for fortification purposes then made her way to the living room. It had last been decorated some time during the nineteen seventies, and was now comfortably frayed around the edges, smelling strongly of old books and her gran's

Avon Soft Musk perfume. Beth took a seat on a threadbare orange and-lime-green sofa.

Louis, her gran's second husband of forty years, had already dozed off in his horribly decrepit brown corduroy armchair. His large, arthritically gnarled hands rested on the curve of his stomach.

He was beautifully turned out today in a neatly pressed white shirt and a winter-weight navy wool suit that complemented his leathery mahogany skin to perfection.

Just as neatly turned out and perched on her own genteelly tattered red velvet recliner, Beth's gran appeared twitchier than a bird-watcher spotting a rare warbler.

Despite her apprehension, Beth couldn't help but feel touched that Violet was wearing the red tartan skirt and charcoal grey cardigan she usually saved for church.

'Are you ready, then?' Violet demanded, her sharp blue eyes sparkling with obvious excitement and her fine halo of white flyaway curls bobbing.

'For what?' Beth asked with deliberate obtuseness, sipping her tea.

'Don't be silly. You know very well what,' Violet retorted crisply.

'I have no idea,' Beth insisted, widening her eyes innocently, going along with the game they played every year. To not play would disappoint Violet horrendously.

'Oh, stop it. I might have got momentarily distracted with my soap, but it would take more than that for me to forget your present.'

Louis? Louis!' Violet prodded Louis sharply in his stomach, waking him.

'What? What?' he asked, his Jamaican accent coming to the fore in his surprise as he heaved himself gingerly forward in his chair, wildly searching the room for the source of his discomfort.

'Calm down, old man. I just want you awake for when we give

Beth her birthday present.'

'You know you really needn't have bothered,' Beth protested.

'Quiet. Just say 'thank you'.' Violet waved a finger at Beth before turning to Louis, who was fumbling around on the doily bedecked side table next to his chair trying to find his glasses.

'Where have you put it?' Violet demanded.

'Where have *I* put it? Didn't *you* hide it away last night?' Louis grumbled.

During the ensuing argument, Beth distracted herself by allowing her gaze to drift to the TV, where the residents of fictional Radiant

Bay (somewhere in Australia) were embroiled in enough drama to keep a team of United Nations Peacekeepers tied up for a century.

For the life of her, Beth couldn't understand what Violet saw in the Australian soap opera *Summer Love*. All those blond, beautiful, half-naked teenagers running around on the screen just set

Beth's teeth on edge. Didn't they care about skin cancer in the southern hemisphere? Weren't they worried about shark attacks?

What about spiders? Or snakes? The country was crawling with them. Beth knew all about them because for some unfathomable reason, Violet had given her a weighty *Reader's Digest* book entitled

Australia's Most Dangerous Creatures for her tenth birthday.

Arranged into chapters neatly categorised by species, the book listed all the ways a person could die in Australia, complete with terrifyingly close-up images of angry hissing snakes and spiders with huge poison-dripping fangs. It had given Beth nightmares for years and was, in retrospect, probably the reason she was dreading the gift giving aspect of her birthday today.

No, she certainly didn't understand Australia's appeal or why so many of her fellow countrymen wanted to go there. Give her the rolling green hills and wonderfully temperamental weather of

Yorkshire over burning sun and clear blue skies any day.

'There it is! Louis, it was right in front of you the whole time.

I wish you'd look properly for things.'

'I would if you gave me a minute's peace, woman.'

'There. Beth. *Beth*. She's off brooding again. Look at her. Can't hear a word I'm saying. BETH!'

'WHAT?' Beth exclaimed, spilling tea onto her jeans as Violet's piercing shriek nearly shattered her eardrums.

'Do you want your birthday present or not? No, don't answer that. Just take it.' Violet gingerly leaned forward and handed her a brown A4 envelope.

'Open it!' she commanded when Beth stared down at the object on her lap with the air of someone about to receive a death sentence.

'What is this?' she asked, warily meeting Violet's excited gaze and then Louis's gentle smile before cautiously spilling out the envelope's contents.

'Oh no.' She groaned quietly. This was worse, much worse, than she'd anticipated.

'Aren't you excited?' Violet exclaimed. 'We thought you needed a little holiday, so we went to see the travel agent, Nathaniel, Tom's son. Remember him? And there you go. Two months of sun, sand and beaches. Oh, Beth, I envy you.' She reached out to clasp one of Louis's hands in her own and gave it a squeeze. 'Your flight is scheduled two weeks from now. Louis borrowed your diary and cancelled your clients for the next few months so you don't even need to bother arranging things. You haven't taken a holiday in years, so I know you must have plenty of money saved up to spend once you get there. Well? What do you think? Aren't you going to say something?'

Feeling like someone had not only pulled the rug out from under her feet but had also removed the floorboards, foundations and a good foot of soil, Beth looked into the beaming faces of the most important people in her life and knew she couldn't let them down.

'A ticket to Australia,' she said faintly. 'Wonderful. Gran, Louis, thank you so much.' She forced her mouth to curve upwards into something resembling a smile. 'This is great. Just *great*.'