



*Bay Tree Cottage*

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## *Chapter One*

Ginger waited till the café was empty to speak to Joe. She put her tray of dirty dishes down on the counter, took a deep breath and said it. ‘I need a week’s holiday, urgently.’

As she’d expected, he folded his arms and scowled at her. ‘Why?’

‘Private business.’

‘Can’t do it.’

‘You could bring Karen in full-time. She’d welcome the extra money.’

‘I don’t want Karen; I want you, Ginger. And so do the customers.’

‘If I’m so popular with them, Joe, why don’t you give me the rise I’ve been asking for? Two years it is, now, since my last rise. Anyway, that’s neither here nor there. This is really important. I have to go somewhere.’

‘You haven’t said what it’s about.’

‘I already told you: it’s private.’

‘Well, I can’t do it. Even a funeral only takes half a day off usually.’

Suddenly her resentment at the way he treated her boiled over. She'd stayed because there were advantages to working within walking distance of home, not to mention the free food when leftovers couldn't be sold any longer. But this was a once in a lifetime opportunity and she didn't intend to miss it. She folded her arms across her chest. 'Then I quit.'

The words seemed to echo in the air between them. He gaped at her for several seconds, then shook his head slowly. 'You don't mean that! You've been here for nearly ten years. You can have one day off and that's it.' He turned back to his newspaper as if the problem was solved.

It was the final straw. She left the tray on the counter and went into the back room. It only took her two minutes to dump the things from her locker into her shopping bag. When she turned round, he'd brought the tray into the kitchen and was staring at her in shock.

'What are you doing?'

'I just told you: I'm quitting.' She went to stand right in front of him, so close he took an involuntary step backwards, still holding the tray.

'I want my wages and holiday pay before I go.' She told him the amount. She always kept an eye on the money side of things. You had to with Joe.

He shuddered and dumped the tray on the nearest surface. 'It *can't* be that much!'

'It is. You know I'd never cheat you.'

'That's all very well, but I'm short of cash. Just take a couple of days' leave, if you have to. I'll pay you holiday rates for it after you get back.'

'I'm not coming back to work here. If you don't pay me now, I'll report you to the authorities.' She knew how

carefully he avoided anything which gave officials the right to poke their noses into his affairs, so she added, 'That'll bring the VAT man down on you.' She didn't think it had anything to do with VAT, but Joe hated even to say the words and knew even less about it all than she did.

'Take the whole damned week off, then.'

'No. I've had enough of your bad temper and poor pay. I'm ready for a change. I'll not be coming back to work here, so you'd better call Karen and start looking for a replacement for me.'

'But—'

'No.'

Another long silence, then he took out his wallet and counted out the money, slapping it down on the counter in front of her. 'Don't think I'll have you back.'

'I won't even consider asking.'

She took the notes and coins, counted them again, just to be sure, and stuffed them into her purse any old how.

When she was out of sight of the café, she stopped and took a long shuddering breath.

What had she done?

As Ginger walked home, it began to rain and she put up her umbrella. She was, she admitted to herself, feeling more than a bit shaky. She'd well and truly burnt her bridges now, hadn't she? She was a woman who valued security and usually planned every aspect of her life.

She hadn't planned this, let alone thought it through.

'What have you done, girl?' she muttered as she went into the small terraced house. She looked to the right and saw her son sitting in the front room watching TV and smoking. He

must have come home from work. Was it that time already?

She'd been smelling cigarettes on him for a week or two but hadn't said anything because she was fed up of quarrels that got you nowhere. Now, the anger that had carried her through against Joe bubbled up again and gave her the courage to stand up to her thirty-year-old son, who seemed to be getting nastier by the month.

'How many times do I have to tell you, Donny? I'm not having smoking in this house. Even your father did his smoking outside. If you want to follow his example and die of lung cancer, you can do it somewhere else. I'm not putting my life at risk with your sidestream smoke, though.'

'Don't nag, Ma. I'm not really smoking. I just need a cigarette every now and then. Anyway, I can't do it outside. It's raining.'

'You're still not smoking in here.'

'Mum, let it drop!'

'No. And while we're at it, I'll give you a week to get out or I'll hire someone to throw you and your things into the street. I've asked you several times to find a place of your own to live and you haven't. This smoking is the final straw.'

'You wouldn't do that.' He sounded amused.

'Oh, wouldn't I?'

'Well, I can't *afford* a place of my own.'

'You could if you stopped smoking and cut back on the boozing.' She plucked the cigarette out of his mouth and threw it into the fireplace.

'I'd only just lit that.' He jumped up and thumped her, sending her crashing into the corner of the fireplace surround.

It was the second time he'd hit her. They both froze in shock.

'You drive me to it,' he muttered. 'You and your nagging.'

She rubbed her arm where it'd hit the fireplace. 'Your father never laid a finger on me in all our years together. You're definitely not staying here, Donny.'

'You needed me to help with the lifting when Dad was dying of cancer, didn't you? And I came for you then. You need me now as well. I pay half the rent and I keep you safe. It's getting a bit rough round here, in case you hadn't noticed.'

She had, but wasn't going to admit it. 'I'll be safe from everyone but you then.' She took out a tissue and blew her nose to prevent herself from crying. Her own son had hit her! Twice now. How could he do that?

'I'm not leaving, Ma, but I'm sorry I thumped you. It won't happen again.' And before she could say anything else, he grabbed his jacket and left the house.

He'd promised that the first time he hit her, too. She didn't believe it any more because he'd just done it again, hadn't he? Sitting down abruptly because she felt wobbly, she let the tears fall. It was going to come to a serious confrontation if she wanted to get rid of him, because why should he move out voluntarily when things were so comfortable here? The trouble was, she couldn't bear to live in a pigsty so she kept on clearing up after him. That meant he had a built-in housekeeper and cook.

Last month she'd caught him raiding her purse. He'd always been lazy and sometimes lied to her but she'd never expected that. He was going from bad to worse. She had to stop it.

She'd threatened to ask for the council's help in getting rid of him. She wasn't even sure that they would help but knew the thought of them butting in would upset Donny. And it had. That was why he'd thumped her the first time.

He'd been very careful since, not a sign of violence, but

she'd been shaken to the core by him daring to hit her, so had gone online and read about family members beating others up. She'd found out it didn't just happen to wives, but to parents too, especially elderly ones.

She was only fifty-one, and no way was she elderly, but she was a small, thin woman and he was over six foot tall and burly. Apparently grown-up children, usually the sons, sometimes started thumping their parents. Only occasionally at first and they apologised, but gradually they got a taste for it.

It seemed to her now that Donny was showing the classic start-up symptoms and she hadn't been doing a good job of standing up for herself. After she'd told him to leave last time, she should have followed through. *Dare* she do something about getting him out this time?

Well, she had to or her life would be miserable.

She looked at the town's website and found out that there was a phone number for women in trouble. She studied herself in the mirror and pulled up her sleeve. There was a nasty bruise on her arm now, where she'd hit the fireplace.

She was definitely in trouble.

She got out the cheap smartphone she'd treated herself to last year and took a selfie of her upper body, showing the bruise.

Then she stared in the mirror and nodded, promising herself that things were going to change. She had a chance for a new life now and she intended to seize it with both hands. Giving up her job was the biggest risk she'd ever taken.

When she considered his reaction to a little thing like her throwing away his cigarette, she worried about another thing she'd be risking: him wrecking the house. But perhaps she could do something to protect the things she cared about.

She paced up and down, trying to work out how best to do this. In the end, she decided to write to the council and plead for their help in getting rid of Donny, who had become abusive.

First things first. Before she left for the interview she had to make sure the possessions she cared about were safe. There weren't many: her embroideries, her family photos, a few special books. The only real jewellery she owned was her wedding ring and that never left her finger. Well, she couldn't get it off now, could she? Her knuckles were a bit swollen. Those hands had worked hard.

She looked round and grimaced. The furniture was too shabby to care about. You could pick up better stuff at the tip in the recycling section. It'd be a bit of a nuisance if Donny damaged things, but she didn't care about it.

What else needed adding to her mental list of preparations?

Oh, yes. Get the car ready for the long drive from Newcastle to Wiltshire. She'd already replied to the email from Mrs Denning, agreeing to attend the interview. And if she didn't get the job, she'd have a go at something else.

She should have made some changes after her husband died. She'd stayed on in the house out of habit. Time to change her habits. More than time.

'Just get on with it, girl!' she muttered. 'Do what you have to!'

By the time her son got home from work the following evening, Ginger intended to have everything ready so that she could leave as soon as he went to work the next morning. It was a good thing she didn't have to go into the café today because she was going to be very busy indeed.

She started by going next door and having a chat with

Kerry, who was a good neighbour and long-time friend – as much as anyone could be a friend who had six married children and goodness knew how many grandchildren forever needing her help.

Reluctantly she showed Kerry the bruise.

Her friend gave her a big hug. ‘You don’t deserve that, love. Didn’t I tell you to get him out?’ She had one son, divorced, who kept getting into trouble, so she knew what she was talking about. She’d been telling Ginger for a while that some folk didn’t want to be helped and you just had to give up on them.

‘Yes, and you were right. I should have got him out.’

‘Anyway, if anyone asks me, I’ll tell them what he’s like and about those bruises, by heck I will. I’ve no time for your Donny these days. He’s gone to the bad like my George did.’

Ginger couldn’t argue with that. But this was her *only* son. Kerry had other sons – and daughters. She wanted the old Donny back, the child she’d loved so much.

The next thing Ginger did was pick up some empty cardboard boxes from the back of the supermarket and load them in her car boot. On the way home, she hired a small storage locker from a place that had opened last year a few streets away in a disused factory.

It took her longer than she’d expected to pack all the things she cared about, but at last it was done and she took them to her storage locker.

The cupboards and drawers in her bedroom were almost empty now, and so were those in the sideboard downstairs, but Donny wouldn’t notice that. Apart from his pigsty of a bedroom, he rarely got beyond the kettle, the TV and the fridge.

She felt exhausted, as if she'd been running ever since she got up, but she wasn't going to stop till she'd done everything on her list.

She went to a garage where she wasn't known to fill her car and check the oil and tyres. Donny used the nearby garage and the owner was one of her son's drinking pals. She didn't want him gossiping about seeing her getting the car ready for a trip.

She was now all set for a quick departure in the morning. It was a long way from Tyneside to the south-west, but she'd always enjoyed driving and she thought her old car would manage to get to Wiltshire all right because she looked after it, like she looked after all her possessions, and had it serviced regularly.

The only thing she hadn't done by teatime was write to the council and ask for help.

When Donny came home from work she was pretending to be watching the TV news. She didn't even look round till he said her name a second time. 'Sorry? What did you say?'

'I asked what's for tea.'

'There's nothing much in the fridge because I wasn't at work today. I ate up the odds and ends. You'll have to buy yourself a takeaway.'

To her astonishment he took a step towards her, scowling, fists clenched. 'You should have gone shopping, then.'

Was he going to hit her again? What on earth had got into him lately? Was it the boozing?

She stood up and shouted back. 'If you hit me again, Donald Brunham, I'll go straight to the police and lay a complaint. I won't put up with any more violence.' She rolled up her sleeve and brandished the bruise at him. 'I'll

show them this, for a start. You did that to me yesterday.'

The bruise seemed to surprise him. She watched him frown at it as he considered what to do.

After a moment or two, he said, 'Some mother you are, not having my tea ready! No wonder you make me angry.'

'Some son you are, not paying your own way. Anyway, I give you one week to get out, then I'll take action to have you evicted.'

'You wouldn't dare.' He slammed out of the house.

How had her son turned so sexist?

She sat down at the kitchen table and after a moment or two she poured herself a glass of her special occasions *amontillado* sherry. She only ever had a single glass but it always cheered her up because it tasted so nice.

This time she drank a toast to her interview going well. When she'd finished sipping the sherry delicately, relishing the taste, she washed out the glass and hid the sherry in her bedroom.

'You'll have to do it, Ginger! Stop procrastinating!' She switched on her laptop and wrote an email to the address on the council website. No getting out of it. Donny had nearly hit her again tonight.

She explained that her son was an unwanted lodger whom she'd put up in an emergency, but who now refused to leave. He'd started hitting her and she was frightened to stay here while he was around. She attached the photo of the bruise, feeling ashamed to have to do that.

She paused to think about it. Where had she gone wrong as a mother?

With a sigh she went back to the email, telling them she was going away for a few weeks because she was frightened

of her son thumping her again. She would be grateful if they could get Donny out of her house. If they didn't, she was afraid he'd wreck the place in one of his violent tempers.

She finished by saying that she didn't dare come back till someone from the council emailed to let her know her son Donald Brunham was out of the house and it was safe for her to return.

Her neighbour Kerry Smithers at No. 17 could verify everything she'd said about the situation.

If they needed any more information, they had only to ask.

That should make them act, surely? They might not care about her but she'd read in the paper that they were clamping down on people who damaged council property, trying to keep maintenance and repair costs down.

After signing it she reread it and was about to send it off when she realised she'd signed it 'Ginger'. Oops! She deleted it quickly and typed in 'Jean' instead. She'd never liked her real name and had been known as 'Ginger' ever since she started school because of her red hair, but this was an official document and she was Jean Brunham in council records.

She glanced sideways at the mirror and pulled a face. She had to colour her hair now to keep it red, because she'd gone grey early – not grey but pure white. It never came up as nicely as her own colour used to be, though. The last time she'd tried a new colour called 'soft red', but it had come out far too garish. Well, it would fade gradually and she didn't have time to do anything about it now.

She closed her laptop and packed it in its carrying case. She wasn't leaving that behind.

It was only eight o'clock so she switched on the TV, but there was nothing worth watching and anyway, she couldn't

settle, because she kept worrying that Donny would come home drunk again.

She had a shower and went to bed to get an early night, but couldn't settle to sleep, either. But she felt safer in her bedroom.

Donny didn't come home till well after the pubs closed. She heard him slamming about downstairs but gave no sign that she was awake. She'd jammed a chair under the door handle, just in case. He didn't usually come in here, but she wasn't risking it.

To her relief, he went straight to bed without trying to speak to her.

*Thank goodness, oh, thank goodness!*

But even so she didn't sleep well. Donny's snoring woke her several times. He always snored when he got drunk.

She kept dozing off then jerking awake, listening, worrying – was glad when dawn slowly brightened the world.

Ginger used the bathroom and got dressed, but didn't go downstairs. She went back into her bedroom and didn't leave it till after Donny had gone to work. She used the time to pack her final bits and pieces and scribble a note to him, repeating that he had one week to get out. Then she stood staring out of the window, waiting to see him go.

Only then did she leave her room. The kitchen was in a mess and he'd vomited in the sink last night, the pig. Hadn't even rinsed it away. Ugh!

The smell put her off her breakfast, so she cleared out the fridge, wiped it clean and switched it off. She took some food with her to save buying meals and gave the rest to Kerry.

On the way out with her suitcase, Ginger stopped at the front door and stared back down the narrow hall. She had a

sudden feeling she'd not be living in this house again, one of her tingly presentiments that came true, more often than not. Which was strange, because she was planning to return, of course she was, whether she got this wonderful opportunity or not. She hadn't lived anywhere else than this house for over twenty years, had she?

She probably wouldn't succeed at tomorrow's interview, anyway. She'd never been lucky, had had to work damned hard for every single thing she'd got in her life. But she'd give it a good try. It'd be practise at interviews if nothing else.

If she didn't get the job, she'd been thinking she might take an Open University course and gain a qualification of some sort. She'd read avidly all her life and watched current affairs on TV, so considered herself fairly knowledgeable about the world. Only, to get a decent job you needed an actual piece of paper saying you could do it.

Ah, she was silly thinking like that. She should concentrate on what to say at the interview. One step at a time.

Whatever happened, she wasn't going to live with Donny again. No way.

A tear or two escaped as she drove towards the motorway. Raindrops spattered against the windscreen as if the weather was in sympathy with her. She wiped the moisture away from her cheeks with one hand, but more tears followed.

Well, she was only human, wasn't she? When your only son treated you so badly, you had a right to cry.