



JESSICA GILMORE

Coming Home to the

Cornish Isles

Tabby jumped at the shrill ringtone, the piercing noise pulling her away from the mesmerizing view. Smiling apologetically at the other people on the boat, she pulled her phone out of her pocket.

Work. Of course. Aspiring partners did not just take off without notice; even planned leave was frowned upon. She silenced the call, imagining dropping her phone overboard in some kind of extravagant gesture, but common sense reigned like it usually did and she merely switched it off, any residual guilt disappearing as the ferry docked.

‘Welcome to Tresco, is this your first visit?’ a crewman asked as she disembarked.

‘I spent every summer here as a child. But I haven’t been back for over ten years.’

‘In that case, welcome back.’

‘Thank you.’ She’d cried throughout that last boat ride back to the mainland, sixteen and convinced her heart was broken forever. As her parents drove her away she’d been sure nothing they said would keep her from returning. But in the end she’d acquiesced, her teenage passion squashed under their conviction that they knew what would make her happy.

And gradually she’d begun to forget. Until yesterday.

Tabby took a deep breath and allowed the flower-sweet, salt-tinged air to fill her lungs. Air never smelt, or felt, this good in London.

New Grimsby was exactly like her memories, a tiny cluster of narrow streets flanked by glorious beaches. Tabby headed towards Old Grimsby and the coastal path, intending to follow it until she reached the cliffs. Her feet knew the way, muscle memory drilled deep. She resisted the urge to march the commuter’s straight-backed, eyes front walk, slowing to a stroll, taking the time to look around at both the utterly familiar and the disconcerting new. With every step the tube and her desk faded further away, as if part of someone else’s life.

Stopping at a view of the sea framed by a vibrant basket of flowers, Tabby felt instinctively for her camera, her hand dropping when she remembered she no longer carried one everywhere she went. Hadn't since the last summer she'd been here.

As she started to walk again her gaze was caught by a shop window showcasing a huge watercolour of a fishing boat pulled high on the beach. Tabby's chest squeezed in painful nostalgia at the sight of the sure, firm brushstrokes. She didn't need to step closer to recognise the bold signature in the corner. An identical signature to the one she'd seen last night. Without quite knowing what she was doing, she went inside.

The airy space tastefully showcased a variety of crafts, sculptures and paintings, including several watercolours by the artist in the window. Tabby stopped by a small one of a ramshackle fisherman's hut, her pulse speeding up as she took in every details of a hut she knew better than she'd known her own mind.

Tabby turned to see a stylish older woman smiling at her.

'Beautiful isn't it?'

'Very.' She swallowed. 'Local artist?' As if she didn't know.

'Jowan Tamblyn? Oh, yes. We're very proud of him. He was offered a scholarship to Columbia, New York, when he was just a teen. But he hasn't forgotten us –as you can see, he still draws his inspiration from the island where he grew up.'

Jowan. Tabby swallowed, hot tears burning her eyes. They had planned to go to Art College together. Until she'd given in to her parents' plans and put her dreams aside. She was glad he had made it, even if she'd opted for safety. 'I saw a picture yesterday by the same artist. In an exhibition in London. A teenage girl, lying outside this very hut.'

If she closed her eyes she could remember the day he'd sketched her. The weight of her denim cut-offs, the way her vest top strap kept falling over her shoulder, the tangle of her hair, mouth swollen with kisses, body aching with need, lying on the blanket they kept in the

deserted hut, soaking up the sun as he drew. She shivered at the memory of Jowan's eyes tracing every part of her, as sure and steady as his brush strokes... As his touch.

'I know the picture you mean. He won't sell it, and he could have, many times over.'

'How much?' Tabby asked impulsively. 'For the fisherman's hut.'

She managed not to gasp at the price, handing her card over as if buying expensive art was an everyday occurrence. She had been saving for a flat deposit. Somewhere central to cut down on her commute. An airless box to sleep in before walking to the airless box she worked in.

No more. She was no longer a malleable teen. It was time to find her own dreams, before it was too late.

It was both harder and much more enjoyable climbing a real hill as opposed to the incline on her treadmill. As she reached the top a white house came into view, poised on the cliff edge, looking out over the ocean. Her breath caught in her throat at the lavender flowers winding through the gate, the pale blue paintwork. Nothing had changed.

She had no right to be here, but Tabby couldn't stop this pilgrimage to her past now, quickening her pace as she neared the house, boldly walking through the gate and around to the long front garden overlooking the sea. She stopped at the sight of a tall, broad figure stood in front of an easel, his blonde hair falling onto his forehead in an achingly familiar way, sea-blue eyes focusing on Tabby in recognition.

'I thought you were in New York,' she said, embarrassed. 'I didn't mean to intrude.'

His mouth curved into the never-forgotten smile as he put his paintbrush down, walking towards her. 'Welcome home, Tabby.'

As if in a dream she stepped forward to meet him, the sound of the sea crashing against the rocks echoed in the roar of her blood, rushing around her body. The feeling of

rightness almost overwhelming her. Jowan's mouth found hers in a bone-meltingly sweet embrace and Tabby knew that this man had been waiting for her all along. She'd finally come home.

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