

VICTORY ISLAND

EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL BY
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PART TWO

Before

CHAPTER NINE

“FUCKINGARSEHOLEBARSTARDITIS!” Charlotte screamed as her arms and legs flailed in fury at the branch jammed up against the wall of the house. Instead of falling straight down to the ground, it had dropped in the worst way possible. Heavy and laden with pine cones, it had bounced off its tips and sprung up to smash the brittle spouting at the back of the house. The thickest, heaviest part of the trunk with snapped off branches had hooked into the spouting that remained. It made it near impossible for an inexperienced townie to get down on her own. She’d found it five minutes after she’d arrived yesterday as she did a quick sweep of the cribs compound to take stock of her inheritance.

Charlotte’s heart sank to find her water tanks almost empty. The smashed spouting and downpipe had meant no rain collection. One tank had half a metre of foul-smelling muck in the bottom, its twin was only quarter full. This was her only access to fresh water. She had no choice but to repair it, and preferably before it rained. It was her responsibility alone.

Now Charlotte had a precarious perch on top of the water tank, two metres off the ground. She braced her right foot against the small window frame and her left pushed hard against the trunk. There wasn’t much to hold onto, so she gripped what remained of the spouting. Though still before ten, it was muggy, and the shine on her skin didn’t help with her grip. Dust off the needles clung to her sweat and created a gritty film. With skin hot and scratched, angry tears threatened to fall.

The branch hadn’t budged an inch in the hour Charlotte had been at work. Three alternatives occurred to her: 1, chainsaw (too scary, she’d only ever watched Grandpa use it and she didn’t have a clue how to start the thing); 2, get up on the roof and try from higher up (not a good idea when you’re the only one on your island); and 3, ask Jim to help her when he came back to pick her up in a week’s time (which left her without water until then).

She decided to try her current method one last time. She gave a good strong kick at the trunk, her bum right up in the air and all her weight on the window frame and spouting. That’s when she got the fright of her life.

“You’re coming at it from the wrong angle,” a man called up from below her.

When you are the sole inhabitant of an isolated island, visitors don’t tend to turn up without warning. An escaped farm animal, or a swooping bird maybe, but a man had been furthest from her mind. Her involuntary reaction was to straighten up which caused her shorts to lose their grip on olive-green plastic. She started to slide and grabbed at the bushy, dried pine needles to slow her fall. In her mind’s eye she saw herself swing sideways and drag the branch with her. She would land heavily on her back and the branch would crush her. Instead the twigs tore away from the main branch and whipped her in the face as she fell. She tasted tangy pine sap and the metallic brightness of blood as her lip split. She landed in a heap, her fall broken by the man. He’d managed to protect her head, but paid for it by landing on his back. Charlotte ended up in an awkward position across his legs.

The branch remained firmly attached to the house.

Charlotte drew in a shaky breath as fire surged through her fingertips. Her brows lowered and jaw clenched. She ignored the pain in her elbows and knees and pushed herself away to glare at her surprise visitor. He lay on his back, arms bent up at the elbow

so his hands hung in the air. He waited for his lungs to obey him and finally sucked in a noisy breath.

“Well, fuck you!” Charlotte turned to scream at the branch and pushed herself back onto her bum. She turned back to the man, opened her mouth and instead of angry words, to her mortification, a sob escaped. All the emotion that she’d hidden in the weeks since her grandfather had died tore free in torrents of tears and ugly sobs. She went on and on, unable to get control as the world caved in around her. The stranger sat up and took her hand. He waited patiently until she was done and for some unfathomable reason she allowed it. Somehow this stranger made her feel safe.

After a few minutes Charlotte ran out of tears and took a few ragged breaths. She pulled the hem of her t-shirt up to wipe her gritty, tear-stained face and wrinkled her nose at the strong scents of pine and sweat. The man stood and offered a hand to help her up.

Keenly aware of the heat in her cheeks and swollen eyes, Charlotte pressed her fingers to her face and stuttered an apology. “I’m so sorry!” she managed, as the stranger tested his arms and legs for injuries. “I really didn’t mean to land on you, or blubber like a total mess...”

He cut her off with gentle hands on her arms just below her shoulders. It was an intimate gesture and Charlotte felt off balance. His height and strong build made Charlotte feel tiny, but it was his voice that dragged her back through time. “It’s ok Charlie. I’d cry too if I’d come home to that mess!”

Charlotte’s chin snapped up. There were very few people in the world who’d ever called her Charlie, and how did he know her name in the first place? She tried to make out his face, silhouetted against the late January blue sky. She stepped around him and caught his arm to turn him with her. He looked familiar but she couldn’t quite place him. He had tied back his sun-bleached, sandy hair which revealed a strong jaw covered with scruffy stubble. He reminded her of a Norse god, even dressed in his forest-green Department of Conservation shirt.

The man frowned in confusion. “It’s Ben, Ben Lewis,” he said with a smile that crinkled the corners of his denim blue eyes and flashed his dimples. “I didn’t think I’d changed that much Charlie D.”

Charlotte shook her head and hummed her disbelief. Of course she knew Ben. They’d spent hour upon hour together in the school holidays as children, either here on the island, or across at his family’s farm. And one spring evening when they were teenagers, he’d been her first kiss.

With a jolt Charlotte remembered that Ben had been the one who found Grandpa George. Just before Christmas he’d suffered a massive heart attack alone here on the island. This thought caused fresh tears to fall.

Ben pulled her close. “I don’t usually have this effect on women,” Ben hummed and gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. Charlotte hiccupped a little and he took it as encouragement. “Come on, let’s get out of this heat,” he said, and took her hand to lead her around the side of the house.

Charlotte resisted with a firm shake of her head when they reached the steps to the front door. “No, no, I can’t go in there,” she hadn’t yet braved her grandfather’s house. “I’m set up in Tide Inn.”

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