

FIONA GIBSON

The

DOG
SHARE

avon.

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For Caroline, Ratty and Moth with love

Prologue

‘Dad,’ I yell, ‘look at that dog!’

I’m running across Silver Beach. I know it so well; every rock, the names of all of the shells, the best places to find flat stones for skimming. I know most of the people we see here – and their dogs – at least to say hi to.

But I’ve never seen this dog before.

I stop and wait for Dad to catch up. ‘That’s the kind I want,’ I tell him.

‘Are you sure?’ he says, smiling. ‘Last time we looked, you said you’d have *any* kind . . .’

He means the dog rescue centre websites. I’m always checking them out, seeing which dog I’d adopt if Dad would let me. Not that he will – I realise that. *It wouldn’t be fair, I’m out all day, we don’t have a garden, blah-blah-blah*. I’ve heard it all a million times. But it doesn’t stop me looking . . . just in case.

I like reading about dogs too. I know loads of canine facts, like they only sweat from furless areas (their noses, the pads on their feet). And when they see a dog on TV, they actually *recognise* it as a dog. Some even have their

favourite programmes (my friend Lucas's whippet likes *Match of the Day*). Dogs are *amazing*.

I grab a piece of driftwood and throw it. The dog tears after it and brings it back to me. We do it again and again as Dad strolls about, looking for more sticks.

The dog's mostly brown, with a patch of white on his chest, and he's a bit scruffy and skinny. He probably wouldn't win any of those competitions where the dogs are paraded about in front of judges. I don't really like those competitions, but maybe the dogs don't mind. Obviously they can't say, 'God, this is boring, having to sit nicely and look neat. Can we go out and play now?'

I like thinking of all those competition dogs sending each other telepathic messages, planning a mass breakout. I mean, they can communicate through sounds, movements and by producing scents – so why not by telepathy too?

A dog is as intelligent as a two-year-old human, I told Dad recently.

That's amazing. But we're still not getting one, he said with a smile.

'I can't see anyone about,' Dad's saying now. 'Maybe he's run away?'

'Yeah, maybe.' I nod.

'We should take him to the police station,' he adds.

'Can't we play a bit more?'

Dad checks his watch. 'No, we really should go. We don't want to miss the ferry, do we?'

In fact, I wouldn't mind missing it this time. I don't really want to go back to Glasgow. And I definitely don't want to take the dog to the police station. I want to play here all day, like I used to, when it wasn't just me and Dad who came to the island, but Mum, too.

Sometimes I feel sad being here without her. It didn't matter so much when I was little – I'd been busy building sandcastles, filling my bucket with seawater to flood moats, all of that. But I'm not little anymore. I'm ten years old and sometimes the sadness seems to creep in, a bit like the seawater that seeps in through my trainers and wets my feet. And I can't do anything to stop it.

I miss her then. But I'm not missing her now that I have this little dog to play with. We run and run, and I pretend not to hear as Dad calls out: 'I don't feel good about leaving this dog on the beach by himself. If we hurry up now, we could drop him off at the police station and we'll still catch the ferry . . .'

'Aw, Dad!'

'He's probably run away. And someone'll be going crazy, looking for him.' Dad's looking serious now, properly worried. 'See if you can catch him. We can use my scarf as a lead . . .'

'Can't we take him home?' I stare at Dad, wanting him to say yes more than anything. 'Please, Dad. Please!'

'I'm sorry. You know we can't do that.'

'But he's lost! Or maybe he's been abandoned?' I look back round, expecting to see the dog sitting there, waiting for our stick game to start up again.

But he's not there. And when I scan the whole beach I spot a blur of brown in the far distance, growing smaller and smaller until he runs around the headland, and is gone.

Chapter One

Two Years Earlier *Suzy*

The island had come clearly into view, illuminated by a shaft of silvery light. We stared, transfixed, from the deck of the ferry.

‘So, what d’you think?’ Paul asked.

‘It’s incredible,’ I murmured. ‘It’s like one of those old religious paintings – like a Michelangelo or something. All it needs are some floating cherubs and a scattering of naked muscular gods . . .’

‘Pervert.’ He laughed and squeezed my hand.

I glanced at his handsome profile: long, strong nose; full lips; messy, wavy, light brown hair being buffeted by the wind. ‘I’m so excited, Paul,’ I added. ‘Look at those mountains! And those little white cottages dotted along the shore . . .’

‘And I think that’s the whisky distillery over there.’ He pointed towards the end of the town.

‘Really? It’s tiny!’ I gazed at the purplish hills that scooped down towards the greener lower pastures. A little way along from the town – the only sizeable settlement

on the island – lay a wide crescent of beach. It looked deserted. There would be no resort-style entertainment here, no shops crammed with souvenir keyrings and novelty booze that never seems quite so enticing once you cart it home. My heart soared with the anticipation of a whole week together, separated from the rest of the world.

My mother had been astounded when she'd first heard about our trip. 'Belinda said you're off to some island?' she'd barked down the phone. So she and my sister had been gossiping about Paul and me. Although I didn't know where my hackles were exactly, I was sure they were raised.

'Yes, we just thought it'd make a nice change,' I explained.

'A *Scottish* island?' she gasped.

'That's right, Mum. It's in the Hebrides.'

'The Hebrides! How on earth will you get there?'

'We'll drive up to Oban on the west coast and take the ferry from there. It looks amazing,' I added, to stir her up even further.

Mum paused, obviously figuring out how to fish for more information in a non-blatant way. 'Isn't that a bit . . . different for you two?'

Ah, the 'D' word, a favourite of Mum's, as in, 'Oh, is that a new jacket, Suzy? It's different!' I.e., 'If you're happy to go out in public wearing such a hideous article, then who am I to stop you?'

'We've been up to the Highlands plenty of times,' I reminded her, 'since Paul's dad bought that hotel. You know we love it up there.'

'Yes, but that was in *proper* Scotland, wasn't it?' You'd have thought we were talking the Arctic Circle. But then

my parents had spent their whole lives living within a few miles of York – where Paul and I also lived – and rarely ventured out of Yorkshire.

‘Erm, it was on the mainland, yes,’ I replied. ‘But the islands are proper Scotland too, Mum.’

‘That was in a town, though, with things to do.’ Like we were a couple of kids. ‘And obviously,’ she added, ‘now Paul’s dad has, um . . .’

Died was what she couldn’t quite bring herself to say. My boyfriend had lost his father the previous summer. Paul had only been ten when his mum had passed away, and apparently he and his dad had been a real team – inseparable really – as he’d been growing up on their Bradford estate. He’d taken his death extremely hard.

‘We are still allowed in Scotland,’ I said lightly, ‘even though Ian’s not there anymore.’

‘I know that, love,’ Mum said, in a softer tone. ‘But d’you think Paul will enjoy it? I mean, don’t you normally go to Majorca or Spain—’

‘I’m sure he’ll love it,’ I said firmly.

‘But what will he *do* there?’

‘What everyone does on a Scottish island, I’d imagine,’ I said, sensing a throbbing in my temples. ‘Explore and enjoy the incredible scenery . . .’

‘What if it rains?’

I couldn’t help smiling at that. ‘You’re talking as if he’s a difficult toddler who I wouldn’t consider taking anywhere if there wasn’t going to be a gigantic soft play centre or a petting zoo.’

‘I’m sure there aren’t any petting zoos there!’

Now I was laughing. ‘Mum, he’s a forty-eight-year-old man. He doesn’t need a petting zoo. And if the weather’s terrible I’m sure there’ll be some jigsaws in the cottage.’

‘I wouldn’t have thought he was the jigsaw type,’ she remarked.

‘Oh, yes. Let him anywhere near a 2000-piecer and he can’t keep his hands off it.’

‘Hmm.’ Mum paused, then added: ‘It’s not a bucket list thing, is it?’

‘What, completing a 2000-piece jigsaw?’

‘No! I mean Paul wanting to go to that island—’

‘You think he’d only want to visit a designated area of outstanding beauty if he were about to cark it?’

‘Of course not,’ she blustered. ‘Why are you so defensive? I didn’t mean to upset you, Suzy.’

‘I know that,’ I said, impressed by my ability to remain cordial. ‘Anyway, it sounds like there’s plenty to do there. There’s a distillery that does visitor tours, and you know Paul loves whisky . . .’

‘You can say that again.’ Mum never missed an opportunity to imply that my boyfriend was a useless drunk.

‘. . . And then there’s the smokery,’ I added. ‘They do incredible fish, apparently. Buckingham Palace has a regular order for kippers. In fact, the island’s name comes from the Gaelic word for herring – *sgadan* – so Sgadansay actually means “Isle of herring” . . .’ *A factlet I’m sure you’re fascinated by*, I reflected, sensing Mum’s interest dwindling now it had become clear that I would Not Be Riled. ‘And we’re planning to do loads of hiking,’ I breezed on, ‘up and down hills in our anoraks . . .’

‘Do you even *have* an anorak?’

‘I’ll get one. And waterproof trousers. There are these amazing silver sand beaches and we don’t want the weather to hamper us . . .’ *And then there’s shagging*, I yearned to add, keen to wrap up our chat now. *If it pours down all week – which I fully expect – I’m planning to*

cram the fridge with wine, draw the curtains and we'll shag each other senseless, in our anoraks. I might even ask Paul to smack me with one of those artisanal kippers. 'And there's probably a church we can visit,' I added.

'Well, I hope you have fun,' Mum remarked tartly, and we finished the call.

In fact, although it pained me to the core, I could understand why she was so perplexed about our trip. As far as Paul was concerned, holiday heaven meant glorious sunshine and music blaring from beach bars – and he always wanted to make friends with *everyone*. We'd been together six years, and although I'd always enjoyed our jaunts, occasionally I yearned for wide-open spaces and for it just to be the two of us. Frieda, my daughter, had already left home and her brother Isaac would soon be flying the nest too. There was no reason, I kept telling Paul, why we couldn't have a few days in the country as well as our usual fortnight in the sun.

However, he'd never really 'got' the countryside, and became visibly twitchy if he found himself in it accidentally. We never even went to parks together, unless we were cutting through one to get to somewhere else. And now he'd booked a holiday that would be entirely focused on country walks, and require polo necks?

I couldn't ignore the fact that it was completely bizarre. But I was damned if I was going to admit that to Mum.

Those thoughts soon blew away on the cool breeze as the ferry approached the quayside. We'd have a wonderful time here, I just knew it. It was a beautiful blue-skied April afternoon, and my heart soared like the seagulls squawking overhead.

* * *

We stayed in a tiny whitewashed cottage close to the shore. Whatever the weather, we'd pack up hearty picnics and set off on hikes along the rugged coastline or up into the hills. Eagles soared above us. We saw red deer who stopped and glanced at us briefly as if to say, 'So, who are *you*?' before scampering away. We rolled up our jeans and paddled in crystal clear streams and fell back, laughing, onto pillows of springy heather.

Our holiday was certainly revealing a side to Paul that I'd never seen before. But I wasn't complaining. I loved the glorious beaches where we'd barely see another soul, and the wonderful bakery, the old-fashioned sweet shop and the cosy pubs in the town. As I photographed a terrace of impossibly cute cottages – each one painted a different pastel shade – we joked that they'd probably been natural, unadorned stone until Instagram had come along. Then out had come the paint rollers and the jaunty colours.

Not once did Paul grumble about the fierce winds or sudden downpours that soaked us to the bones. The local fish and chips were heavenly and seemed to taste even better when we ate them huddled together for warmth in a covered wooden shelter facing the choppy sea. One evening we treated ourselves to a vast seafood platter – everything caught mere hours before we devoured it – at an elegant art deco hotel.

'Is it because of your dad that you wanted to come here?' I asked that night as we strolled back to the cottage.

'Kind of,' he said. It made sense that Paul had been drawn to Scotland, which, in turn, had led him to researching the Outer Hebrides for our trip. Ian had been a ducker and diver, owning various ramshackle hotels in Yorkshire before making his final purchase way up north,

in Fort William. He'd loved the Heather Glen Hotel so much he'd moved to Scotland permanently and spent his final years living in its annex of leaky attic rooms.

Like his father, Paul had never had a thought-out career plan. When I'd met him he'd been flogging spicy sausages from a fast food van close to York Minster – but that enterprise hadn't lasted long and there had been a string of ill-fated schemes since then. 'When's Paul going to settle down?' my sister asked a couple of Christmases ago at her place. She and her marathon runner husband Derek live in a vast modern detached house on the outskirts of Leeds. Their kitchen island probably rivals some of the smaller Scottish isles in terms of square footage. Child-free by choice, and with a law degree and a high-flying job with the civil service, Belinda has always relished her wiser older sister role.

'He's *fine*,' I replied, defensively. 'There are plenty of things he can do. He's very resourceful.'

'Hmm, is that what you call it? And you being freelance as well,' Belinda added. By a weird kind of fluke, I had become an in-demand writer of obituaries for newspapers. So much work had poured in – because people are *always* dying – I'd been able to quit my lacklustre job at a recruitment consultancy to focus on writing full-time. 'I don't know how you can stand the uncertainty, Suze,' my sister had added. 'Will he still be like this when he's fifty? Sixty? For the rest of his life?'

I don't know! I wanted to tell her. *Anyway, what does it matter to you what he does?* The thing is, I'd always reassured myself, you don't fall for someone on the basis that they're a settled option. At least I don't. Yes, Paul was certainly fickle and perhaps not your go-to person if you wanted advice on investments or domestic boiler

maintenance policies. But I loved him, and during those long, blissful days as we explored Sgadansay together, I don't think I'd ever felt happier.

Paul booked us onto the whisky distillery tour where a homely lady in an Aran sweater and tartan trousers talked our small group through the distillation processes. We sampled the whiskies and met the master distiller, a rather gruff elderly man with a rangy build and neatly cropped silvery hair. Apparently, his main method of maintaining quality control involved an awful lot of tasting. 'It seems terribly unscientific,' someone murmured.

'It *is* scientific,' our guide said with a smile, 'but it's about instinct, too. Isn't it, Harry?'

He nodded and looked around at us as if wishing he could get back to work, instead of being forced to talk to visitors.

'But how d'you know when it's right?' asked a portly man from Texas.

'Experience,' Harry said with a shrug.

'Harry's been our master distiller for thirty-five years,' the tour guide explained. 'There's nothing he doesn't know about whisky.'

'I'm happy to apply for the job, if ever you want to step aside.' The Texan chuckled. Meanwhile, Paul kept ping-ponging questions to the ever-patient guide: *What creates a whisky's distinctive flavour? Was it the water, the climate, or the casks in which the spirit matures slowly over several years?*

'When you strip it down to the basics,' she explained, 'there are three main components to whisky, and they happen to be the very ingredients that are essential to a healthy, happy life.' She looked around at us. 'Can anyone guess what they are?'

Paul cast me a bemused glance in recognition of her teacherly tone. ‘Water,’ someone piped up.

‘That’s right. And here on Sgadansay we have the best water in the world. Anything else?’

Paul shot up his hand. ‘Barley?’

‘Yep,’ she said, nodding. ‘There’s malted barley, plus yeast, which we regard as the food element. And the last one?’ She looked around again at our expectant faces. ‘*Love*,’ she said finally, ‘by which I mean the patience and care that’s needed to make a distinctive whisky like ours.’ She paused as a skinny young man handed around samples of amber-coloured spirit. ‘And that’s it,’ our guide concluded. ‘Water, food and love. Isn’t that right, Harry?’ I caught the master distiller’s barely detectable eye-roll. I suspected he was too down-to-earth for that kind of flowery talk.

‘That was so interesting,’ Paul enthused as we left.

‘It really was,’ I agreed. ‘And what a swot you were with all your questions! Are you thinking of distilling your own whisky at home in our bath?’

Paul grinned. ‘Why not? I mean, how hard can it be?’ I laughed, trying to shrug off a twinge of regret that we would be leaving the island tomorrow. The sharp, salty air filled my lungs, and Paul kissed the top of my head as we stopped to gaze out to sea. ‘Um, Suze, I’ve been thinking,’ he added. ‘When we get back home . . . well, I’d like to do something different.’

I gave him a quick look. ‘You want to take up hiking?’ I asked with a smile.

‘Not exactly. I mean, I’ve loved it but . . .’ He wound an arm around my waist. ‘I mean a kind of work project.’

Oh, Christ. For the past few months he’d been working

at a gig equipment hire company in York. I'd been relieved that he seemed to have 'settled down', as my sister would have put it. 'What d'you mean?' I asked.

'Well, um . . . you know my job's just a tiding-over thing, don't you?'

'Is it?' I studied his face.

'Well, yeah. I mean, it's not exactly what I want to do for the rest of my life.'

I cleared my throat. 'Yeah, okay, I get that. So, what're you thinking about?'

Dusk was falling and the sky was streaked with pink and gold. Paul pointed towards the cluster of buildings in the distance, their lights glimmering like stars. 'What would you say if I suggested buying it?'

'Buying it?' I stared at him. 'You mean the *island*?' I was laughing now, awash with relief. For a moment I'd assumed he was being serious.

'I mean it,' he said quickly, 'but I'm not talking about the island. Dad's inheritance won't quite stretch to that.'

I blinked at him in confusion. 'So what *are* you talking about?'

He looked at me, clearly fizzing with anticipation, like a child with a secret they're dying to share. 'See the white building over there, down by the shore?'

I nodded. 'The distillery, you mean?'

'Uh-huh.' A smile flickered across his lips. 'It's for sale, you know.'

'Is it?' My stomach shifted uneasily.

'Yep,' he said. 'And the hotel sale should complete next week, so I could go for it . . .' His father's Fort William hotel, he meant, of which Paul was the sole beneficiary; there had also been a sizeable financial settlement, which had come through recently. Given Ian's

haphazard approach to business, Paul had been surprised that there had been anything at all.

‘Paul,’ I started, ‘you don’t really mean this, do you? I’m sorry, but I can’t take this seriously—’

‘Why not?’ He frowned, looking hurt.

‘Because . . .’ I paused. ‘Because you know nothing about distilling, do you? And it’s a highly specialised thing. That Harry guy, the master distiller – hasn’t he been doing that job for thirty-five years?’

‘Yeah, but Harry would still be there,’ Paul insisted, ‘and I wouldn’t need to actually do anything in a hands-on kind of way—’

‘Please tell me you’re not serious about this!’

‘I am. I really am,’ he said firmly.

‘It’s completely mad,’ I exclaimed. ‘You might as well buy a fishmonger’s for all you know about—’

‘I don’t want to buy a fishmonger’s,’ he cut in. ‘I want to buy a fantastic distillery that’s been doing brilliantly for decades now. I mean, it can’t possibly go wrong.’

‘My God, Paul.’ I placed a hand over my eyes momentarily as my sister’s question rang in my ears: *Will he still be like this when he’s fifty? Sixty? For the rest of his life?*

He took my hand and kissed me gently on the lips. ‘It’d be an amazing adventure for us,’ he said firmly. ‘Please, my darling. *Please* say yes.’