**A PLACE CALLED HOME**

All through her schooldays, Evelyn couldn’t wait to leave her town and once she did, she never went back. She stared at the letter in her hand and realised she might have to.

She couldn’t believe that Aunt Ruth was dead.

A knock on the office door startled her.

‘Your first patient is here,’ said Ali.

Evelyn kept her eyes downward; her thick auburn hair falling over her face to hide her damp eyes as she pretended to thumb through a stack of notes on her desk.

‘Could you just give me a minute Ali? I’d just like to go over Mrs Baker’s x-rays again before I examine her.’

‘Sure. I’ll take her down to get her bloods done. Just let me know when you’re ready,’ said Ali.

Evelyn pulled a tissue from the box that sat on the corner of the desk and dabbed under her eyes trying not to smudge the mascara. She took in a deep breath and hesitated before she picked up the phone to book a flight back to New Zealand.

She made her way up the steep gravel driveway noticing the familiar sign that led up to Tui Ridge Cottage and what was once Uncle Walt’s surgery. It had been two decades since she’d left to live in London. The gravel crunched beneath her tyres, as two chestnut horses grazing in the paddock momentarily lifted their heads to check out what had broken the silence.

Evelyn felt a sense of remorse as she thought of Aunt Ruth and Uncle Walt. She’d meant to come back, she really had, but her career had become a substitute for all the people she’d cared about then, including Blake Jensen. The last she’d heard from Aunt Ruth was that Blake had left the stables and had moved to Australia. She was glad of that, as at least she wouldn’t have to face him. She’d regretted not saying goodbye.

She smiled at the memory of Uncle Walt who used to tease her and say, ‘He’s a good catch that boy you know, and good breeding too. Did I ever tell you that I knew his father?’ He’d laugh and wink at her. She’d been fond of Uncle Walt. He’d been the GP at Tui Ridge for over 50 years, and his death two years prior had left a huge gap in the community.

It had been Uncle Walt who’d encouraged her to go into medicine, and when she’d won a scholarship, there’d been no looking back. Her parents would have been proud of her too. She tried to brush away the painful memories of the tragic car crash that killed both of her parents, and Sam, her baby brother. It was Aunt Ruth, her mother’s sister, and Uncle Walt, who had no children of their own who had taken her in and cared for her.

The tears overwhelmed her, and she allowed them to flow. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand and sniffed. She had to pull herself together and keep strong so that she could focus on clearing out the cottage, put it on the market, and return to her life back in London.

Her career was everything to her and she was at the top of her field as a well-respected plastic surgeon by her colleagues throughout the world. Her name had made it into the papers after spending 15 hours reattaching the tendons to the fingers of a man whose right hand had lost all four fingers. The papers had called her a ‘heroine.’

Evelyn parked next to the garage where an old wooden cartwheel covered in lichen leaned up against its wall. It had seen better days she thought as she felt under the old grey stone beside it to find the key. She looked down at the keyring that read, ‘Home is where the heart is,’ and she knew it was.

She breathed in the heady scent of fresh spring flowers that poked their heads through an array of colourful flower beds and stepped onto the wooden step fondly touching the brass horseshoe door knocker, although now dulled from lack of polish. Pushing the key into the lock she drew in a deep breath as she prepared herself for the emptiness.

Evelyn froze as she heard a barking dog scuttling down the wooden hallway with what sounded like footsteps behind. The cottage was supposed to be empty, and the surgery hadn’t been used at the rear of the house since before Uncle Walt had died.

As the door opened, Evelyn stepped backward, catching her breath as her eyes met the man standing in front of her. His tightly fitted jeans blended perfectly with the blue and white of his checked shirt.

‘Cut it out Trigger. Sorry about this. His bark is worse than his bite,’ he said, as he picked up the Jack Russell and tucked him snugly under his arm.

‘Can I help you? Has there been an accident or is someone ill?’

Their eyes met and were pulled together like magnets. Evelyn felt an electrifying current rush through her body as she momentarily closed her eyes.

‘Evie, is that you?

‘Blake? I-’

‘Oh my God, Evie, it is you.’

‘Are you alone?’ asked Blake, popping his head around the door to look.

“What does it look like?’ Evelyn said, feeling annoyed with the fact that he was standing blocking the doorway into what was now her home.

‘I think you need to explain why you are trespassing on private property,’ she said.

‘Whoa, whoa, calm down. I think you’d better come in,’ said Blake.

‘Too right I will,’ said Evie pushing herself past him into the hallway where old family photos smiled down at her as if welcoming her home, except the familiar warm voices were no longer there to greet her.

Blake held the door open to Uncle Walt’s surgery and guided her in, where a soft glow radiated from the desk lamp that was oddly placed on top of folders and papers that sat on an overfilled bookshelf. Her graduation photo sat on the corner of the desk next to a photo of Aunt Ruth standing next to a chestnut mare.

Blake pointed to the *Lazy-Boy* chair, inviting Evelyn to sit while he sat behind the desk in the brown leather chair that was well worn from many years of use.

Evelyn looked out of the window to the empty paddocks that had once been filled with livestock.

‘It’s been a long time, Evie. How are you? I hear that you have done quite well for yourself… I’ve read some of the journal articles you’ve written on maxillofacial surgery, and I must say they’re very impressive.’

‘Thanks.’ said Evelyn, as she twisted her hands awkwardly in her lap.

Blake’s voice was more mature now, but there was something about the way he said her name that made her heart flip. He was the only one who had ever called her Evie.

‘Firstly, why are you in my house, sitting at my uncle’s desk?’ said Evelyn.

Blake interlocked his fingers on the desk and looked down at his hands before he spoke.

‘Didn’t you receive the Will from the solicitor?’

Evelyn detected a sense of sadness in his voice.

‘I received a letter from Aunt Pearl, Aunt Ruth’s sister... my mum’s other sister, to say that she’d passed. Her hands tightened around the arms of the chair as she tried to keep her composure.

‘You didn’t get the Will then?’ said Blake as he opened the top drawer of the desk and pulled out an officially stamped document. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I thought you’d already been informed. It might come as a bit of a shock to you, but I’m sure you’ll understand once you’ve read it. It blew me away, to be honest,’ he said.

He left the room so that Evelyn could read it alone.

As she smoothed out the paper, she felt a sense of finality. It was strange to see memorabilia and physical objects in the same place as she remembered them, but it was the people that were missing and that’s what hurt most.

The Will stated that it was only to be opened after the death of Aunt Ruth, and only if Uncle Walt preceded her death.

Evelyn took a moment and glanced up at Uncle Walt’s practicing certificates on the wall and another wave of grief washed over her. She let out a jagged breath before she continued to read that Tui Ridge Cottage and its contents were to be left to Evelyn Brougham, niece, but that the surgery and its contents were to be left to Blake Jensen, General Practitioner, sole heir, and son of Walter D O’Donoghue.

Evelyn dropped the paper in her lap shaking her head in disbelief. *No. I must have read it wrong.* She picked it up again to re-read it. Her forehead furrowed; *Blake is Uncle Walt’s son?* She had so many questions as a whirlwind of emotions flooded through her.

‘Hey,’ said Blake, not sure what to expect as he came through the door with two mugs of tea.

He perched himself on the edge of the desk with his ankles crossed; her eyes resting on the tan belt adorned with a large silver bull-horned buckle that sat on slim hips. The buckle reminded her of something from a Texan ranch. She looked down at his tanned leather boots that sat mid-shin and were stitched in a looped pattern on each side.

‘No, I didn’t receive the Will. I had no idea that Uncle Walt was your father?’

‘No, me either. It came as a big shock,’ he said.

‘Did Uncle Walt and your mother have an affair? Poor Aunt Ruth… They seemed to be the perfect couple. I don’t understand,’ she said.

‘Apparently so, but my mother won’t tell me much, except that she was in love with Walt; and… well, I was the product of that. I can’t say that I feel very special knowing that your Aunt Ruth had no idea and that my life has been one big lie. I’m so sorry you had to find out this way,’ said Blake as he knelt next to the chair and pulled her towards him.

Evie had forgotten what it felt like to be held as she lay her head on Blake’s shoulder, smelling the freshness of his shirt and the warmth of his body as hegently soothed her and kissed her forehead.

‘We’re home Evie, and I won’t lose you again.’