

All  
Summer  
with  
you

BETH GOOD

Quercus

## CHAPTER ONE

Jennifer had been sobbing for hours. She felt ragged, raw, and had lost all sense of time. She was lying face down on her bed, ignoring occasional notification chimes from her mobile, when the bleating of a goat brought her upright.

She knew it was a goat, and not a sheep, because her friend Rekha had once kept three goats at her beachside Cornish home. Three very vocal goats, named after three Hindu gods: Shiva, the Destroyer, whose key skill had turned out to be precisely that; Ganesha, the Elephant God, due to the odd shape of his head; and Durga Devi, the Invincible Goddess, known for knocking over and rummaging among the dustbins, no matter how securely their lids had been fastened. Only Rekha had moved away to Devon years ago, taking her goats with her, so this couldn't be one of hers.

Jennifer grabbed the box of tissues from her bedside table, blew her nose, dabbed ineffectually at her eyes and swung herself off the bed.

Her reflection mocked her from the mirror on the wardrobe door: long, dark, tangled hair, red-rimmed eyes and a complexion as mottled as a halloumi and beetroot salad. Her oldest, baggiest pair of jeans were speckled with paint

from redecorating the living room, and her vest top had ridden up her midriff almost to her chest, making her look decidedly *louche*. She had lost weight, too. She wasn't quite as flat-chested as she had been in her teenage years, but boyish would not be an inaccurate description of her figure.

Was it any wonder Raphael Tregar had preferred the curvy, well-endowed Hannah Clitheroe to her? Her chin started to wobble precariously.

'Forget him,' she thought out loud, and wagged a cross finger at herself in the mirror. 'Raphael Tregar is not worth it. He's just a man. But you're a woman, and women can do anything they set their minds on. Anything at all. You hear that? You're a *woman*.' Having established this important distinction, she wandered to the window and gazed down curiously into the small front garden. 'And you, my friend,' she continued, finding a pair of slanted eyes looking back up at her, 'are a goat.'

She had moved into Pixie Cottage a week ago, and had been working on her keynote speech for the Pethporro Folklore Festival for most of that time, barely venturing out except to purchase fresh milk and the occasional cheese sandwich.

She was already feeling lonely out here, in the middle of nowhere; she could not deny it. Lonely and a little depressed.

But wasn't that why she had moved here in the first place? To escape the demands of the outside world, and wallow, and write her book?

It seemed the world was not done with her yet.

This was her first encounter with a local.

'But whose goat are you? That's the real question. It's not like I have many neighbours all the way out here.'

She lifted her gaze to the vast Porro Park estate that bordered the cottage, her neighbour's house invisible behind thick woodland. Not just her neighbour, in fact, but her landlord. Pixie Cottage belonged to the estate, and was formerly home to a gamekeeper, apparently. Now it was a rental property, and she was its latest tenant. Apart from Porro Park, there was no other human habitation for several miles in any direction. So unless the goat was living wild in the woods . . .

Losing interest in her shocked expression, her visitor lowered its head to graze the herb bed, and Jennifer heard the faint jingle of a bell.

She leant closer to the window, staring. The animal was wearing a collar under its fine grey goatee beard. A thick collar, with a bell attached to it. Perhaps this goat had a reputation for wandering, she thought grimly, watching it chomp a second generous mouthful of flat-leaved parsley. A collar and bell meant it was no wild Cornish goat, to be chased away at will, but a domesticated animal with an owner.

An owner who was almost certainly aware of its absence by now and quite possibly frantic with worry.

'Okay, you pest. That's enough of my parsley.'

Jennifer pushed her feet into her sandals and hurried downstairs before the wretched animal could spot the runner bean climbers wreathed lavishly about a bamboo frame just ten feet from the herb bed. She hadn't sown any of the plants at Pixie Cottage herself, of course, but she hoped to be the one who would reap their harvest later that summer – not this nameless goatee-sporting thief.

The cottage was not difficult to negotiate in a hurry. One-bedroomed, it boasted an open-plan kitchen and living room downstairs, with a tiny bathroom on the first floor, next door to her bedroom. The living room had a glass-fronted log burner for winter months, and thick walls to ensure the place stayed cool on hot summer days, according to the agent who had let her the property. Most of the windows downstairs were narrow and festooned with ivy; daylight had a delicate green tint, as if the cottage were underwater. But Jennifer rather liked that. She had felt for so many months as though she were drowning. The greenish light seemed to confirm it.

The place had been bland magnolia throughout when she moved in, a colour she despised. She had redone it in white downstairs, and the living room smelt bracingly of fresh paint.

The local paper was still lying below the log burner where she had thrown it earlier in a fit of temper. She didn't so much as glance at it on the way out. But her nerves prickled.

*That bloody photograph!*

There was still no sign of Ripper, she noticed. Since installing a cat flap, her Siamese cat had been vanishing at regular intervals in search of voles and other hapless prey. At least there didn't appear to be any corpse trophies lying around this morning.

Meanwhile, the goat was demolishing brightly coloured nasturtiums, both front hooves sunk in the flower bed, head down as it munched busily.

There was an old length of rope in the shed. Jennifer shook off the spiderwebs, looped the rope over her arm and

approached the goat in a firm but non-threatening manner. The goat looked up and stopped chewing. Nasturtiums trailing from its mouth, it eyed her warily.

Now, what was it Rekha had said about the best way to catch goats?

## CHAPTER TWO

‘Come on, goaty-goat. Time to go home.’

The goat bobbed its head, unimpressed by the rope. It bleated and complained all the way along the shady woodland path that lay between her cottage and Porro Park, as they walked in the direction of the house. But Jennifer did not relent, clicking her tongue at the reluctant animal and tugging gently on the rope she had knotted to its collar whenever it showed signs of trying to bolt.

‘Not far now,’ she said in a reassuring tone.

She knew her way through the woods, having explored this path a few times already, curious to see where film star Alex Delgado lived. Not that he actually lived here, of course. The great house at Porro Park was a second home for the celebrity actor, who spent most of the year in some multimillion-pound London pad, according to the letting agent.

He had strict rules for any tenants of the former gamekeeper’s cottage, too. Her background had been vetted, and on moving-in day, Jennifer had been made to sign an agreement. She was not permitted to pass beyond the woods, or take any photographs of the main house or its occupants, or allow any guests to enter the grounds via her premises,

which was inside the grounds of the park. The whole estate, including her little cottage, was concealed behind a huge wall topped with broken glass and razor wire.

For privacy, she had her own side entrance by road to the estate, with a gate operated by a key code: a complete faff to manage in the pouring rain, as she had already discovered, jumping out of her car once to enter the code, then leaping back in, utterly drenched.

Abruptly, the path ended at an eight-foot-high red-brick wall. Beyond it she could see nothing but rhododendron bushes, huge and glossy-leaved.

There was an arched doorway in the wall, and in it an iron-studded wooden door.

The door stood slightly ajar.

‘Your escape route, no doubt,’ she said to the goat in a disapproving voice.

The goat spotted the doorway and abandoned all pretence of not knowing the way. It bleated merrily and trotted ahead of her towards the wall, looking almost eager to get home. Jennifer walked behind, still keeping hold of the rope, just in case. But it was clear the greedy runaway knew where it was going.

She followed the goat through the arched doorway onto a charming rhododendron walk, a gravel path edged with massive bushes that still bore a few red and pink blooms from their spring flowering.

‘This is odd,’ she muttered. ‘Who on earth do you belong to? Not Alex Delgado, that’s for sure.’

Her new neighbour was known for playing tough military men in blockbuster movies. She and her stepsister Caroline had watched a few of his films together on their occasional

girls' nights in. His most famous role was as Cheetham, an ex-SAS officer on a quest to clear his name, a quest that continued relentlessly from film to film, giving him ample opportunity to blow things up.

She chuckled. 'Somehow I can't see a big film star owning a goat.'

The goat replied with a non-committal 'meh'.

Though Delgado hadn't made any new films recently. There'd been some kind of incident during the making of his last one – a terrorist attack, that was it. People had been killed, others wounded.

Alex Delgado himself had been injured in the attack, though not seriously. She vaguely recalled an interview he'd given a few days later from his hospital bed. He had looked shocked and gaunt on camera, his chest bandaged, his face scratched and burnt. But he'd sounded perfectly calm. The show must go on, et cetera.

However, since the attack, Alex Delgado hadn't been much in the public eye. Now that she thought about it, she couldn't remember if he was even making films any more. Maybe his wounds had been more serious than the reports claimed. Maybe he'd started a hippy commune down here in Cornwall and was working as a goatherd.

Laughing at that mental image, Jennifer found she was almost trotting herself, trying to keep up with the goat. Then the powerful animal gave a sudden jerk and broke free, running off with the rope trailing after it.

'Damn,' she said breathlessly. 'Hey, come back!'

The annoying creature rounded a corner ahead of her and she hurried after it, stopping dead at the sight of a man.

A man she recognised from a thousand internet memes.

A man bending to stroke the goat's ears as it happily *mehed* and headbutted his legs. Bare, muscular legs clad in army fatigue shorts.

Alex Delgado.

On-screen, his designer stubble was always perfect, his short, dark hair impeccably cut and under control even during chase scenes. Today, he had the faint stirrings of a beard where he had not shaved in a while and his hair was messy, standing up in places as though he had been running impatient hands through it. Apart from that, Delgado looked essentially the same as he did in his films. He was thirty-one, she seemed to recall. Two years older than her and in the prime of life. He certainly looked uber-fit. His broad shoulders were almost bursting out of the sandy camouflage t-shirt he was wearing, his tattooed biceps rippling impressively as he reached down to untie the rope fixed to the goat's collar.

'What's this?' he was saying in a deep, gravelly voice that was so familiar it made the hairs rise on the back of her neck. 'Who tied you up, baby?'

*Baby?*

Maybe he really was into goats.

'That's disturbing,' she said under her breath.

Alex Delgado looked up and saw her. He straightened to his full height, which had to be well over six foot, and his dark eyes narrowed on her.

Sexy, she thought.

'Hello.' Again, that voice stirred all sorts of deep-buried instincts inside her. 'And who the hell are you?'

Rude, too.

She didn't reply immediately, recalling the iron-clad tenancy agreement she had signed only a week ago promising never to enter her neighbour's premises, and wondering if a stray goat could be construed as an emergency.

His gaze moved slowly up and down her body, returning to her face with as much suspicion as the goat had shown earlier.

Like goat, like master.

'And what were you doing with Baby?'

'I . . .'

Before Jennifer could come up with a coherent response, an old lady in a long white dress appeared from the shrubbery behind him.

With a shock of voluminous white hair, and a lopsided daisy chain hanging around her neck, the old woman came pushing out from between the gigantic rhododendron bushes as though she lived in them, had always lived there and was now emerging in order to utter some life-changing prophecy.

Jennifer stared, amazed.

Behind the woman came a gaggle of goats: maybe half a dozen skinny, raw-boned goats with mad, staring eyes and bells jingling from collars identical to the one her stray goat wore, closely following their leader as though she were the goat version of the Pied Piper.

This vision in white spotted the goat on a rope and gave a shriek, clapping her hands in delight. 'Baby!' she exclaimed, and Jennifer realised this must be the animal's name and not a term of endearment.

The other goats *mehed* loudly, crowding round their lost compadre with excitement, some even chewing on its trailing rope.

‘How lovely,’ the elderly woman said in a sing-song Cornish accent, studying the goat first and then Jennifer. ‘Of course, it had to be *you*. And here you are at last.’ She beamed at her. ‘We’ve been waiting for you.’

## CHAPTER THREE

‘I asked who you were,’ Alex Delgado said curtly, ignoring the old lady.

Jennifer dragged her gaze away from the white-haired woman and looked reluctantly at Delgado instead.

Instinctively she drew herself up, determined not to be overawed by his celebrity status. She might not be six foot, but she was tall for a woman, and she didn’t like the way the film star was frowning at her.

‘I’m your tenant at Pixie Cottage,’ she said. ‘This goat came into my garden. I thought I’d better bring her back before she strayed onto the main road. You really ought to take better care of your livestock.’

Delgado’s eyebrows rose at her tone. Clearly he wasn’t used to people talking back to him like that.

‘Name?’ he demanded, sounding tough and terse, rather like his military character, Cheetham.

‘You don’t know your own tenant’s name?’

‘My PA will know. He takes care of all that.’

*Of course he does,* she thought.

Jennifer put out her hand. ‘In that case, I’m Jennifer Bolitho.’