ISLE OF BLISS

CHAPTER ONE

It was unbelievably expensive. But that didn't matter to those who lived there – they were unbelievably wealthy. Neither did it matter to those who had bought this lush island in the middle of the Pacific, developing it into a private luxurious residence and becoming multi-millionaires themselves in the process.

A yacht, white with red sails, was entering the bay. On it were two excited older ladies, Jemma, and her friend Amelia, gazing at the small town, shining bright among towering palms.

"Oh! Beautiful! Simply beautiful!" exclaimed Jemma.

"Yes, far better than the brochure!" agreed Amelia.

As they moored, a white landau drew up. The two ponies were brown and had pink roses twined between their ears. A portly man clambered out. "Welcome! Welcome! dear ladies," he cried, "may your stay be blissful on the Isle of Bliss."

"Thank you very much, Mr er?" responded Jemma.

"Call me James – I am the General Manager. Your chalet is ready for you, and all your luggage will soon be unpacked by our staff. I'm sure you'll love the Swiss Village!"

Jemma and Amelia were helped into the landau, James sat facing them, and the coachman set off at a brisk pace down the main street. There were no cars and people were strolling along, entering the many little restaurants, or designer shops, some even going to the library. They passed the golf course and turned down a narrow path overhung with

branches through which gentle light filtered. At the end was the bay, sparkling in the sun, and on the curve was the Swiss Village filled with chalets, all of different designs, but all with geraniums spilling from flower boxes on their balconies. Some people were reclining on loungers at the beach, and a waiter was serving drinks and snacks.

James opened the door with a flourish. “Entrée. Mesdames!”

The room was huge. Bright floral sofas, flowers on tables, white shutters opening wide on to the balcony, the sea and distant small islands.

“Just what I asked for!” Jemma could hardly contain her delight.

“And so comfortable!” said Amelia, sinking into the sofa’s cushions. “I could sit here forever!”

“Tell me, James, was that Lady Honoria we passed in the town? She’s an old friend of mine.”

“Yes, one of our most distinguished guests. She came when the Earl died,” he dropped his voice and widened his eyes, “could not stand her daughter-in-law – she was a teacher!” The friends laughed.

“Well, dear Ladies, just pick up the phone if you want anything, anything at all. Here on Bliss, it’s all play and no work!”

Amelia reached for a menu on the coffee table. “Hm, 10 pages of cakes! What will you have, Jemma? I fancy a Swiss roll as we are now in a Swiss village. This one is filled with cream and pineapple and topped with chocolate.”

“Make it two. And coffee please.”

“Tell me about Lady Honoria, I don’t remember you ever mentioning her.” said Amelia as she returned from placing the order for the coffee and Swiss rolls.

“No, I don’t think I have. It was so long ago, and we both went our different ways. We grew up in the same village and went to the village school. We were very good friends for a time. Her father owned the local pub while my father owned the village store. I used to help my family in the afternoons, and Honoria helped serve meals at her father’s pub in the evenings. So, in some ways we had a lot in common. Except, whereas I was rather plain she was exquisite. Every year she seemed to become more beautiful. When we finished school, we both just stayed at home, and helped our parents with their businesses which were expanding rapidly as more people moved into the village. It was an easy commute to London by train, and it was a very quiet and pretty village.”

“By that you mean it had a duck pond, a church, lots of trees and I suppose a castle nearby?”

“Yes, and of course there was a local cricket team! I became an ardent supporter because Peter was the captain.”

“Surely you don’t mean Sir Peter who employed me as your housekeeper?”

“The very same!” laughed Jemma. “Tall, handsome Peter. All the girls were after him, but he chose me.”

There was a discreet purr from the phone. Jemma picked it up.

“Madam, the Bishop of Bliss would like to welcome you. May he come in five minutes?”

“Yes,” answered Jemma, replacing the receiver. “Bother, I’ll have to finish that tale later.”

“And I’ll have to order another Swiss Roll and coffee for our guest!”

Lifting her hands in the air, and looking up Jemma cried, “Thank you, Peter darling for all this! Thank you! Wherever you are.”

CHAPTER TWO

The man at the door in a grey cassock braided in gold reminded Jemma of an ancient tree stripped of leaves. She didn't know why, but he did. His voice was thin, and tremulous as if winter's wind was blowing through it.

"Blessings, blessings, many, many blessings be on your home from the God of Love," he intoned. Walking slowly into the room, he smiled beatifically at the two rather bemused friends, and said, "I am the Bishop of Bliss, come to bless your home and welcome you. My name is Father Chaff. I am a member of the Venerable Order of Chaff. I am visiting new residents," he wheezed, "to bring them a little present."

"Oh! I love presents," said Amelia breezing in.

Jemma led the way into the sun lounge where they sat and after some small talk, Father Chaff handed the friends copies of "The Bible According to Chaff" as they enjoyed coffee and Swiss Rolls.

"Oh thanks, Father Chaff," said Amelia, "I have never owned a Bible."

"Neither have I," said Jemma, "this looks very slim - not like the Bible they used at school."

"That would have been the 1685 King James Bible," he said. "Very out of date! Times have changed, and we must keep up with them. The world is so much better now. Look at Mandela and Mother Theresa." "And look at Hitler and Stalin!" responded Jemma. Father Chaff looked pained.

"We have a church here on the Isle. A beautiful spot in the woods, and big enough for our congregation. We have a service once a month that includes a concert. Do come, dear Ladies!" With that he smiled and left.

“We haven’t been to church for ages, well not really at all” said Jemma, closing the door after they said their goodbyes to Father Chaff. “Always more important things to do, I suppose.”

“Won’t harm to go,” answered Amelia. “And the concert might be passable.”

Amelia then wandered out onto the balcony. “Do come out here, Jemma. Just look at the sea!”

“And the beach! Our beach! No kids yelling and chucking sand. Real bliss. Let’s go!”

The two friends waddled down to the beach. Finding a couple of deckchairs, they flopped down, ordered Cokes from the waiter in a large sunhat, and stared blissfully at the sea. Their peace was soon disturbed. A man of about seventy came and introduced himself.

“I’m Gus, your next-door neighbour. That’s my chalet,” He pointed to the green painted one alongside theirs.

The friends introduced themselves, and he continued, “I live by myself. I saw Father Chaff visiting you. Harmless old thing. His monthly church service is very popular. Of course, he says the same thing at every service… God is love, and we are going to meet our loved ones one day. I’ve got three. Divorced them. Hope I don’t meet them in Heaven! My dogs loved me more than they did, and didn’t spend my money!”

By now, Jemma and Amelia were laughing, and feeling they rather liked him.

“I’ll leave you to enjoy the beach, but please come to the next service. The concert afterwards is always good. Got some fine musicians here, and the

organ is the best money can buy!" The friends said they would consider it as he returned to his deckchair closer to the ice cream stall.

"I'm thinking of going to the library," Jemma said, packing up her beach bag and straightening her ill-fitting straw hat. "I want to see if I can get a copy of the King James Bible," she told the surprised Amelia. "It seems as if something is telling me to do it."

CHAPTER THREE

The next morning, the friends woke to more sunny skies. Refreshed and eager to explore, they ordered the landau. It arrived with the ponies decked in blue ribbons and coronets of fresh agapanthus.

“Please take us down the main street and show us what’s what. I want to stop at the library and borrow a book,” said Jemma. However, when she asked the librarian for the King James Version of the Bible, she was told there was none -she had never heard of it! “Then, perhaps, after lunch, can we go to the woods to see the church?” asked Jemma.

“Certainly, Madam. Whatever you wish!” replied Pierre. The Ponies trotted gently down the street. “Oh! There’s Honoria!” exclaimed Jemma.

“Come, Amelia, I must introduce you, and just agree with whatever I say.”

Mystified, Amelia followed her friend to the older woman standing in front of a dress boutique.

“Hello, Honoria!” said Jemma.

“Oh, hello Jemma,” she replied, “Father Chaff told me you were here.”

“I am, and with my dear friend, Amelia. Do you remember that Irish aristocrat and his family who spent a month in our village? Amelia is his daughter.”

“Oh, er yes. Pleased to meet you. May I call you Amelia?”

“Please do,” replied the astonished Amelia.

“Come for tea soon, Jemma, and bring Amelia, of course. I have a little chateau in the French Village.” “That would be lovely, Honoria,” said Jemma.

With that they waved goodbye and parted.

“Jemma!” burst out Amelia when they were out of earshot, “that was a real whopper!”

“It will make your life here far more pleasant” responded Jemma laughing. They climbed into the landau. “What’s the best place to eat, Pierre?” enquired Amelia.

“I like Escargot,” he responded, “but most people like La Pasta.”

“La Pasta it is then!” she said, “Let’s go.”

“It’s not quite here,” he told them as the ponies set off at a brisk trot. “It’s in Tuscany Village.” The road wound up towards the distant hills and got steadily steeper. The ponies slowed their pace, and the friends relaxed as the countryside became ever hillier. They passed some farmsteads with vineyards and olive groves. Lambs frisked in the fields, and goats stood on their hind-legs as they lent against the trees dotting the fields and munched their leaves. They rounded a bend.

“Wow, it’s amazing!” they exclaimed together.

A village stood a little way off on the top of a hill. Its brick houses in soft shades of grey and brown with red pan-tiled roofs, gleamed in the sunlight. An avenue of tall Cypress trees led up to the Village. The ponies walked slowly through the narrow, cobbled streets, and into a quaint square with a fountain and drinking trough for them. Pierre disappeared into a café across the square for a drink, while the friends seated themselves at one of

the green painted tables outside on the sidewalk of La Pasta. They ordered lasagna, which was quite simply stunning, and a bottle of local red wine. After a leisurely coffee and panna cotta, Pierre appeared and helped them back into the landau.

CHAPTER FOUR

Taking a different route, they found themselves in an oak forest. Passing a red mansion tucked away discreetly and called “Naughty Girls”, Jemma said wryly, “They certainly cater for all tastes here, don’t they?” The oaks gave way to a tangled mixture of trees and bushes, and the journey grew progressively darker.

“Spooky” murmured Amelia.

“Yes, it is rather” agreed Jemma.

“We are nearly at the church, ladies,” said Pierre. And there it was, in a clearing. The notice board proclaimed CHAFF CHURCH, and the friends went to have a closure look.

“Welcome to Chaff Church,” read Jemma. “The Church of Love. A service every Sunday evening followed by a concert. Next Sunday’s sermon, by the Bishop of Chaff, is entitled “Our Pets in Heaven”, and will last 10 minutes. The concert will be given by our exceptional choir singing excerpts from “The Pirates of Penzance”. Everyone is very welcome.”

“Well, we won’t fall asleep in a ten-minute sermon, and the concert sounds alright,” said Amelia.

They walked into the church. It was painted yellow, inside and out. There were comfortable pews, but no kneelers, Jemma noted. The organ pipes dominated the interior, and instead of a high pulpit, there was a lectern in the corner.

Returning to their landau, the tour resumed, and the road became considerably lighter. Soon they left the woods and followed a track through

fields of lavender until they reached modern, low lying buildings connected by flowered pathways. Above the entrance was its name: HEAVEN'S GATES.

"Do you believe in Hell, Amelia?" asked Jemma unexpectedly.

"What a question! Why so serious?"

"I don't know. It just came out."

"I think it is time we got home, and had a snooze," said the practical Amelia.

"Hurry up, Pierre, please. We have had a most interesting tour but would like you to take the shortest route back."

Before long they were both happily snoring in their beds.

CHAPTER FIVE

The next day, Jemma found a gold embossed envelope on the breakfast table.

“When did this come, Jane?” she asked their young maid who had just come in with the coffee. “Pierre brought it with the morning croissants, Ma’am,” she replied.

“Good morning, Amelia. Just in time – there’s a note from Honoria inviting us to lunch today.”

And so, shortly after 11.30, Pierre called to take them to the French Village. It was a pleasant drive, a sunny day with a cool breeze through fields of wildflowers and poppies as the road wound away from the sea. Just before twelve, they reached a broad river meandering lazily through fields, and there was the French Village, twenty-five identical mansions, each with its own small park stretching down to boathouses.

“Well!” said Amelia, “we certainly look like the poor relations now.”

“But it’s so pretty!” remarked Jemma, “identical except in different pastel shades. I like the pink one.”

“That’s where we are going ladies,” said Pierre, “Lady Honoria’s chateau.”

A butler was waiting beside the open front door. He led them into the salon, announced them formally, and withdrew.

“Welcome to my little chateau, Jemma and Amelia. So glad you could come. My butler, Percival, came with me to the French Village. He’s been in our service for many, many years, and knows just how I like things done. Come and meet my neighbours – I’m sure you’ll like them.”

Leading them outside to a patio, they saw two couples. Lady Honoria introduced the nearest couple as Mr and Mrs Schmidt from Texas, and then another couple, Martin and Isabel Herriot-Smith. Isabel had flaming red hair. After the usual small talk while sipping lemonade, the party moved inside to the conservatory where lunch was served on embossed Chinese plates.

“As I was saying, said Joe Schmidt, “I inherited a small pig farm from my dad. But it grew, and Daisy suggested we make our own sausages and pates – she’s a great cook - and soon we had a shop, then a factory, and then franchises all over the place and exporting world-wide. Now we mean to relax!” Martin and Isabel were friendly and vivacious. “My ancestors built a castle in Scotland,” said Martin, “the first Herriot-Smith was a lawyer who made wise investments and developments.” “And now here we are, leaving the castle in the care of Martin’s brother – and meaning to enjoy new friends and the Isle of Bliss,” said Isabel.

“Are you going to the church and concert, Isabel?” Amelia asked. “We saw it yesterday."

“Yes,” she replied, “actually I’m singing in the concert.”

“Isabel has sung all over the world,” said Martin proudly. “We have an annual music festival on the Scottish estate, and Isabel was the principal soloist.”

“We met there and quickly fell in love,” said Isabel. “And that was that. I just stayed!”

“I think she fell in love with the estate and not me!” added Martin.

They all laughed.

“Isabel has a great voice,” said Daisy. “And old Chaff’s sermon will be very short.”

“Yes,” interjected Joe. “Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,” his voice dropped to a whisper, impersonating the bishop, “We all love our pets, dear little darlings that they are! But God is a God of Love, and we shall see them when we enter Heaven. Dear Mrs Oldbones, who passed on last week, will be united with her Pretty Polly the Parrot.”

“Who could swear like a trouper!” said Daisy. “I bet those harp playing angels will fall off their clouds when they hear Polly!”

By now the ice was completely broken, and they were firm friends.

“Tell me about your estate in Scotland, Martin,” said Jemma.

“It’s pretty much like the others,” he replied. “A castle, salmon river, grouse hunting and a church. Quite a story there. My younger brother went to Aberdeen to study law and ended up in a theological college. He’s now a minister. He came to the estate and asked if he could renovate the church, which had been closed for about a century. I agreed, and next thing I heard he was visiting my tenants and inviting them to services. Now it’s full every Sunday. We went once, lots of singing, and Robert giving a real fire brand sermon. Takes after our great, great, great, grandfather. Told them there are two ways, and they must choose between Heaven and Hell. Frankly, I was a bit embarrassed.”

Isabel laughed. “You must admit he has a charming wife. Everyone loves her. She’s a doctor,” she told the friends, “and practises in the village. I like her enormously!”

With that, the party broke up, promising to see each other at the church.

CHAPTER SIX

It was a cold wintry morning in the north of Scotland. The winter landscape was beautiful – white with snow falling gently on the trees in the park of the Castle. On the edge of the park was a small village for tenants with the Rectory being the main feature. Sitting before a blazing hearth were Robert, the Rector, and his wife Caroline enjoying their breakfast of Scottish oats and kippers. Caroline was opening the post which had just been delivered.

“This is interesting,” she said. “It’s from a friend of your brother. She has heard that we are going to visit them, and have a treat in the sun, and wants us to bring her a bible secretly. She writes,

I’ve heard that you plan to visit your brother and sister-in-law who are fellow residents on the Isle of Bliss, and with whom I have become friends. I have been trying to obtain a bible here – like the one I vaguely remember from school - but there is none to be had. I have really searched the Isle. Something keeps on telling me to get a Bible. It’s all very strange. Could you do me a favour? And bring one for me, but don’t tell anyone or I fear it will disappear!”

Jemma

“Praise the Lord!” exclaimed Robert, “the ways of the Lord are indeed mysterious!”

It was a bright and sunny day when Jemma and Amelia arrived at the chateau. It was the light blue one on the left of Honoria’s. The butler led them into the park where a table was set under the oaks. Everyone was there including Robert and Caroline. A delicious lunch of smoked salmon cooked in front of them, fresh vegetables tossed in butter and lemon juice,

crème caramel and a vintage wine was served. They all leant back in their chairs replete.

The butler brought a couple of large bags and handed them to Robert. “I’ve brought a little gift from the estate shop,” he said. “Some of our biscuits and sultana fruit cake.”

“Lovely. Thank you.” they all said.

Jemma took hers with trembling hands. She could not wait to get home.

Opening the box in the privacy of their chateau, she found the Bible. Curiously, parts of it were underlined in red. A note from Robert and Caroline read: “May God bless you as you study his Word”

CHAPTER SEVEN

At the first opportunity Jemma got to read the Bible while Amelia was asleep, she sat on the patio. Opening it, she saw a note.

Dear Jemma, you will see I have underlined the most relevant pages of the Bible in red. There is also a bookmark in one. These are the two most important verses in the Bible. Caroline and I are praying that the Lord our God will give you understanding as you read.

With love

Robert and Caroline

Jemma spent some time thinking about how she could read the Bible without Amelia seeing her. In the end, she decided to read it at night, and tell her friend she was going to bed early as she was tired out. She repeated this excuse every night.

On the first night, trembling with excitement, Jemma opened the Bible to the bookmark placed by Robert and Caroline and read, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him, should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved.” (John 3:16,17)

Jemma read the passage many times. In the end, she concluded that there must be a Heaven and a Hell, and that everyone must decide for themselves where they wanted to be. She wondered for a long time about how one became one of those who chose Heaven. She started at the first book in the Bible titled Genesis and read the story of how God created the

Earth, and of how he created humanity in his own image, and of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and how they sinned, and how God punished them.

And then she thought about sin. Had she sinned? Not really – the odd white lie or two. She'd led a good life – been kind to Peter's and her staff, paying them well, and giving them generous bonuses.

Paging through the Bible, she found another note from Robert and Caroline which read, "Read this. It's from 1 John 1: 5-10. Jemma saw that verses 5-10 were underlined in red. "This then is the message which we have heard of him…that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not know the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Jemma read this again and thought about it long and hard.

Over the next month, Jemma read feverishly - she was fascinated and read all the other passages Robert had underlined. She loved the Psalms, especially Psalms 23 and 91. Psalm 23 was beautiful with the metaphor of God as our shepherd. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside still waters, he restoreth my soul, he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the shadow of the valley of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they

comfort me… Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

Psalm 91 told Jemma of God's love for his children. She read, "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most high shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, he is my refuge and my fortress: my God, in him will I trust. "He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and thy buckler.

"What an amazing promise!" thought Jemma.

The next evening everything seemed to come together, and she prayed for the first time in her life.

"Father God, I have sinned because I have neglected you all my life. Please forgive me. For the rest of my life, I will follow your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ who I have read about in the Gospels. He is my Lord and Saviour." And a sense of peace and joy, and the presence of God came over her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Unknown to Jemma, Amelia had seen Jemma opening the Bible and wanted to read it herself. So, when Jemma went out in the day, she asked to be excused as she was not feeling well. This was true.

One day when Jemma returned from visiting Honoria, she said, “Jemma, I have a confession to make! I saw you opening the Bible, and I wanted to read it too! So, when you went out in the mornings, I read it. I am now a Christian and I love the Lord Jesus Christ.” With that, she fell backwards in her chair and died.

Jemma was distraught and devastated. Father Chaff called to commiserate and say he would arrange the funeral. “No” replied Jemma, “it will be in the town hall and Robert, the Earl’s brother will officiate.” Father Chaff walked out in a huff.

The funeral was held on the following morning. Honoria had decorated the Town Hall with huge bowls of flowers from her garden. The mourners entered quietly. Amelia had been well-known on the Isle, even loved, and every seat was taken. Robert preached a powerful sermon based on the Gospel of John, 3:16 and 17. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son so that whosoever believeth in him, should not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.” This time the Earl and his wife were not offended but converted, as were all those in the Town Hall. A sorrowful service had turned into one of thanksgiving and rejoicing. They formed a church, held a service on Sundays, bible studies led by Robert, and prayer meetings and put forty

copies of the King James Bible in the library. More residents on the Isle were converted, and the Isle of Bliss became the true Isle of Bliss.