

## Chapter 1

June

Shortly before I was forced to stop my pretend life, my best friend was telling me about her Saturday night. We had driven to the beach in Eliza's new electric car, me squashed into the back seat with the two girls, Seth sitting in relative comfort in the front passenger seat. Eliza was driving slowly, with enormous concentration, slowing down every time she passed a pedestrian. She was convinced that she was going to knock someone over, because they wouldn't hear her coming and would step out into the road.

The quietness of the car disconcerted me, too, but at least it didn't burn much petrol.

'Don't you just love it?' Eliza had exclaimed, when we were safely out of Falmouth, and on the road to the north coast, the dangers of unwary pedestrians left behind for the moment. 'I keep expecting us to take off.'

'Is it a rocket?' Clara whispered to me. She clutched my hand. 'Is it magic?'

'It's not a rocket,' I said, reluctantly, 'but it is a *little* bit magic.' I thought about adding a lesson about the environment, but it was a beautiful day, and I was generally reluctant to burden my nieces with the depressing truth about the world they were going to inherit.

The tide was a long way out at Chapel Porth, and the sand was dotted with little groups of people. I looked around. It was a perfect cove, ringed by cliffs. The flat, slightly wet sand stretched out in front of us for what seemed to be miles. The water was a distant line, glinting bright white in the morning sun.

I was happy here. Safe, and happy. Today, at this beach, I had everything in the world that I needed. I leaned back on my hands, held my face up to the sun, and appreciated the miracle.

There was barely a single wave: the water was flat, the air still. I felt that, for a moment, we were frozen in time. Afterwards, I would look back on the moment, and wish that I had been able to elongate it, to stay in it, to preserve it somewhere: a time when we were all together, all of us safe.

Seth's footprints made a straight line which led from the blanket where Eliza and I were sitting, to the very edge of the water. His sandals were on the edge of our blanket; they were black Reef ones, trodden down so the shape of his foot was molded into the plastic. I imagined the waves lapping over his bare feet. He was skimming stones over the motionless ocean, leaving tiny concentric circles skittering across the water.

There were a few surfboards lying on the sand, useless on a flat-calm day like this. The girls were playing nearby, trying to do handstands on the stony sand, falling sideways and giggling. They were miniature versions of their mother, with dark hair, big eyes and smooth pale skin. Imogen, the elder one, had long tangled hair that reached halfway down her back. It trailed in the sand when she was mid-handstand. Clara had a short bob just like Eliza, because she was averse to hairbrushes. Clara was wearing a sundress over her swimming costume, and Imogen had little purple shorts over hers.

I tore my eyes away from their innocence, and looked back to Eliza. 'So,' I said. 'Go on then. Let's hear it.' Seth had jogged away to throw stones in the sea when he realised that Eliza was embarking on the story of her latest date.

'I don't need to know about these things,' he said, holding his hands up, and he left us to it.

She stretched her legs out and started to fiddle with the edge of the tartan rug.

'It's one for the annals,' she said. She turned down the corners of her mouth. 'Possibly a classic. OK. It started well. We met in Toast. Which is a cool place but it's full of bloody students, all loud music and people drinking brightly coloured shots that I wouldn't even know how to order. So I spotted him at once, because he was the guy in his forties - fifties, even, maybe, I don't know - sitting in a corner looking out of place, nursing a pint of bitter and ignoring all the young folk in their outlandish clothes. I thought I should have suggested the Chain Locker.' The Chain Locker was a traditional pub, beloved by Seth and by every man who liked a nice pint of ale.

'And he looked like...?'

'He looked fine. Grey hair. Longish, but above his shoulders, and slicked back in that professorish sort of way. A bit Julian Barnes. Nice jacket.' I looked at her. She was squinting into the sun, avoiding my eyes. I was waiting for the 'but'.

'So,' she continued. 'He got me a drink, a glass of wine. And we sat down and started to chat. I was trying, on the one hand, not to shrink away with terror at the idea that I was in the company of someone halfway presentable and, on the other, not to jump ahead to planning when he could meet the girls.'

'Even though he was so old?'

'Even though. And we did the awkward getting-to-know-you thing for a bit. You'd think I'd be OK at that by now, but it doesn't get easier.'

She tailed off.

'And then?' I prompted. There was a gentle breeze from the sea. It made the little hairs on my arms stand up.

'And then he asked if I was Cornish. I said yes. He said "good". He doesn't mind people moving here "from England", just as long as they're not what he calls "The Ethnics". "I'm not racist," he said - he actually used those words. "I just don't think this is the place for them. It's tradition." At which point I wanted to throw my drink down my throat and howl at the moon. Another fucking dud. Can you imagine?'

I sighed. We had pored over this man's emails together, and he had seemed promising. Self-deprecating, charming, funny. 'So what did you do?'

She sighed. 'I fiddled with my wine glass for a bit, without saying anything, and then I thought, fuck it, I can't just sit here because that implies that I agree with him. So we fought. It got heated. I think he was a bit drunk already. He said I'm a crazy PC bitch who betrays her homeland with every breath she takes. I said if he doesn't like seeing black faces around town that *does* actually make him a racist. I think I said: "You are not just a racist, you are a racist fuck."' She smiled. 'All the students stopped drinking and stared at us. I got a round of applause at one point.'

I lay down on my stomach and rested my chin in my hands.

'Well done. Sorry you had to go through that, though. So, who was worse? The racist or the alcoholic from April?'

She considered this. 'The racist was more objectionable, and he has to take the crown for the moment, but the alcoholic chased me down the street until I ran into a pub and locked myself in the ladies'. So it's hard to say.' She looked at me. 'Patrick was every bit as bad, too, because I actually already knew him and liked him, and I thought that we could have a future of some sort.' She narrowed her eyes. 'But all he wanted to do was to talk about you. And now I have to see him all the time at school, and I skulk around avoiding him because I'm so embarrassed. He tries to talk

to me and I wave at imaginary people on the other side of the playground and stride away from him.'

I waved Patrick away with a sweep of my hand. That had been stupid of him; a big mistake.

'But,' she continued, 'the ones who are secretly married are worse than any of them.'

I nodded. I knew all about that.

The sky was a perfect light blue. There were a few wispy clouds. The air was getting warmer. It was shaping up to be the most beautiful day of the year.

I passed Eliza the flap jack, and looked at her. She wasn't meeting the right man because it was too soon, in my opinion, but I was not planning to tell her that. She had been on her own for over two years, but in her head, she still lived with Graham. His clothes still hung in her wardrobe. There were photographs of him all over the house.

That had to be the reason, because she turned heads wherever she went. Her hair was black without a hint of grey. Her skin was creamy, her features perfectly even. She was small but curvy, and she was three years younger than I was.

I looked back at Seth, distant, in his fisherman's smock and long shorts. He and Eliza were the most beautiful pair of siblings. Seth still looked to me as though he had stepped out of a Thomas Hardy novel. He was rugged and gorgeous and I could stare at him all day long. I liked to look at him while he was sleeping. He had faults, plenty of them, but I was as profoundly attracted to him today as I had been at the moment we first met.

As I watched him, I deduced that he had run out of skimmable stones, and so had moved on to lobbing the chunky ones into the sea. I could picture the concentration on his face. He stepped back,

took a little run up, and gave it his best over-arm bowl. I hoped there were no swimmers or seals in the vicinity.

Seth wanted me to marry him. I should have leapt at the opportunity to snare someone so gorgeous. He kept trying to talk about it, sounding me, out, looking at me with a cheeky smile and looking away again, pretending to be coy. He probably still thought that a wedding was every girl's fantasy, and I was afraid that, one day soon, he would stage a big romantic proposal and present me with a ring.

I was doing my best to fend him off. Whenever talk turned to weddings, I would be as dismissive as I could. 'We're not so bourgeois as to need a piece of paper telling us how we feel about each other, though, are we?' I would say, with a chuckle. Or: 'Think of the carbon footprint!' (an argument which stood up to no scrutiny whatsoever).

The idea that we could get married, have an unconventional wedding and a party on the beach, with all our friends, was something that tore me apart. I could not do it. I would have done anything to have been able to, but I couldn't.

It was quite likely that my identity would not even withstand the bureaucratic process. I would be exposed as a fraud. And there was another reason too. I would never be able to tell him why, but I definitely could not marry Seth.

Seth thought I was someone who was uncomplicated, free-spirited, obsessed with the environment. Someone who had moved to Cornwall on a whim, because I liked it. He thought I had had a couple of serious relationships in my twenties and a long period of single life, culminating in my meeting him. He knew there were family issues, and that I never talked about them, and he carefully left them alone because he knew that was what I wanted.

'Was he always like that?' I asked Eliza, indicating Seth with my head.

She nodded and picked up a handful of sand, let it run through her fingers.

'Thirty years ago,' she said, 'he'd stand right there and do exactly what he's doing now. It's a bit freaky, actually. The years pass but nothing changes. It does, of course, and that's why it feels so weird when some things stay the same. Namely, my big brother thinks all the stones should be in the water. It's his version of tidying up.'

'It's the only version he has,' I said.

A family nearby passed foil-wrapped sandwiches to each other, even though it was far too early for lunch. Their teenage boy watched them through his camcorder. I looked at him scanning the beach with his lens, wondered whether he was playing with a new toy. A man on his own, a little way behind Eliza, poured a brown milky liquid from a thermos flask and sipped it with his eyes closed. The sun shone on his face.

'So. More fish in the sea?' I asked. She snorted.

'Yeah. Loads of fish in the sea. Unfortunately for me, they're all those ugly ones with bulging eyes. The ones that live on the seabed and have spikes on their chins. I don't know why I bother. All the good ones leave and go to London, and then they come back when they've got a wife and a baby, and even then, only if they can work down here, which most people can't. And anyway, an aging widow with small children isn't the most attractive prospect in town.'

'Yes she is, Eliza. Because you're forgetting that you're gorgeous.'

'Oh, shut up. Maybe I should try lesbianism. That could be the way forward. Anyway I'm going to dip my feet in the sea. See if I can bear to let the girls swim.'

She stood up and walked away from me, leaving footprints in the soft sand as she headed towards the water's edge. I filled my lungs with the bracingly clean air, and smiled. There was no way the water was going to be even slightly warm.

I looked around. The girls had moved over to the bottom of the rock face. Imogen was chatting to a little girl with white-blond hair. I looked around for Clara. Imogen pointed up the cliff, talking behind her hand, giggling. They both laughed. I became aware that a few other people were looking up at the cliff, too. I followed their gaze, wondering what they were looking at.

My mouth tried to form a word, but I couldn't make the sound come.

I had no idea what I was doing, but something propelled me to my feet. I was at the foot of the cliff, pushing past Imogen and the blonde girl. Then I was off, up it. I knew I could do this, and I could see that nobody else was going to try. Eliza was far away, now, at the water's edge. Seth was with her. By the time either of them got here, it would be too late. At first, the climbing was easy, as the cliff sloped gently away from the beach. Then it became steeper, and finally, vertical.

She was far above me, standing on a ledge. She seemed quite calm, and looked incongruous, halfway up a rock face, wearing a white cotton dress over a pink swimsuit, and canvas shoes. As I watched, she reached up for another handhold, and set off again. I could not see her face, but I could imagine it; the determined frown, the pursed lips.

It was a long way to the top, and there was no way she could make it. If she got there, the first handful of grass she grabbed would send her falling straight down, crashing past the rocks, smashing herself on outcrops.

I was getting closer, measuring my progress purely in terms of hand holds and foot holds. I wanted her to wait, but I didn't call out, because I was terrified of making her look down, lose her nerve, loosen her grip.

I was hardly able to breathe for the last part of the climb.

Then I was alongside her.

Her head turned. She was entirely unperturbed at the sight of me. Her black hair was slicked back from her face with sweat, and her cheeks were pink with sun and exertion. She had a sprinkling of freckles that I had never noticed before.

'Hello, Lucy,' she said. She smiled.

'Hello Clara,' I replied. I tried to keep my voice steady. 'Where are you going? Can you step back down onto that ledge for a moment?'

She thought about it. The sun was strong now. I could feel it on the back of my neck.

'OK,' she agreed, and she bent her knee and felt downwards with her left foot, until she located the flat rock. I watched her lower her weight back down, ready to reach and grab her if she fell, but knowing that if that happened, we would both crash all the way to the beach, and there was nothing I could do, no manoeuvre I could perform that would keep us balanced.

When she came to rest, I exhaled. She was on a ledge that was wider than the length of her foot. She was as safe there, for a moment, as she could be. The fact remained, however, that we were, perhaps, thirty metres above the ground, and that we had a cliff to descend together.

'Clara?' I asked. 'What are you doing up here?'

'I'm going to the top,' she told me, her face determined. 'Because Imogen said I dare you, and if someone says they dare you, you *have* to.'

'No you don't,' I told her, quickly. 'You definitely don't. It's too dangerous up there. You've done some amazing climbing, and now we need to go back home. Imogen's going to be in trouble.' Her face brightened. 'Is she?'

I reached out and gripped her around the waist. It was precarious, but as long as she didn't fight me, it could work.

'I'm going to try to carry you down. OK?'

She stared at me, and said nothing.

I was shaking as I tried to hoist her onto my shoulder. It was a manoeuvre, I realised at once, that would not work. I began to lose my balance, lurched suddenly outwards, felt our weight being pulled by the irresistible force of gravity. I leaned forwards, suddenly, desperately, and held on as tightly as I could with my fingertips. I put Clara in front of me, and looked down, willing Seth, or anybody, to have followed me up, to be behind us, ready to save us both.

The beach swam before my eyes. There was a crowd of miniature people down there, gathered close to the bottom of the cliff, staring at us. No one was climbing. We were stuck, a thousand miles from anyone or anything.

I swallowed hard. I needed a new plan. Just the two of us, in the sunlight, halfway up a cliff. Sooner or later, we would fall.

'Hold onto my front,' I said. It was the only thing I could think of.

'Pretend you're a baby koala. Can you manage that?'

'Course.' She turned carefully around, and reached up for my neck.

This felt marginally more stable. I reached down with a shaking leg, and found a foothold. Then I found another, and a handhold. Each step that worked, I told myself, was a step closer to sandy beach beneath my feet, to safety.

I could feel Clara getting restless. Her arms were sticky and sweaty, pulling hard around my neck. She was hot and bothered. Our descent was precarious, and seemed endless.

'Shall we sing a song?' she asked at one point. My foot slipped and I had to lean up against the rock to keep our balance. She cried out and burst into tears. 'That hurt my back!' she said, angrily.

'Sorry,' I said through gritted teeth. My foot was bleeding; I could feel it. 'Look, why don't *you* sing us a song?' I said.

'Don't want to now. This is boring. I wish I'd gone up to the top. It was fun before *you* came.'

She whimpered and sniffed and moaned all the way to the ground, and I felt like joining in. Our descent continued, and I began to zone out. There was nothing in the world but me, and Clara, and the jagged rock face. Her mutterings and grumblings kept me company. Then, when I was not expecting it at all, my foot found the sand, and I realised we were there. I lifted Clara down to the ground, looked blankly at the crowd that was all around us, and let Seth take me in his arms. I folded up. All I wanted to do was to lie down and cry.

I looked up and saw the lens, pointing at me, the sun glinting off it. I thought nothing of it, nothing at all.