

## Extract from “A Cottage By the Sea”

### Chapter 1

*Destination,*’ the dulcet tones of the sat nav announces.

*Destination.*’

Harry stamps on the brakes and stops dead in the middle of the road. There is nothing as far as the eye can see. ‘Where, you bloody stupid woman?’ he asks it, holding his hands aloft in supplication. ‘Where?’

*Destination.*’ She is insistent. *Destination.*’

The sat nav has the disdainful, upper-class tone of my old English teacher. She always hated me too. Normally, we call the sat nav Auntie Flossie. Today, neither of us is really speaking to her.

‘Can you see anything, Grace?’ he asks.

I gaze out of the car window. It’s beautiful here. The road stretches ahead of us, unbroken, and there’s not another car in any direction. The verdant green fields lie unspoiled beneath the unbroken acres of sky. There isn’t a single man-made building in sight to mar the view. It’s untamed, remote. And I guess that’s the crux of our problem.

‘Not really,’ I admit. But it’s fantastic and I hear myself sigh happily.

‘Well, she says we’re here.’ It’s clear that Harry is rapidly losing the will to live. ‘Can you just look at the map, please?’ I scrabble at the road atlas on my knee. It’s a tattered wreck and what remains of the front cover tells me that we bought it from a supermarket in 1992. Helpfully, inside it has a little red circle where all of their branches are – but none of the major roads built since that year, of course. Somewhat worryingly, there are no helpful red ‘supermarket’ circles anywhere in the area. According to this map, we are in total supermarket wilderness.

In fact, there’s not very much near here at all. Currently, the only thing I can see are the miles and miles of rolling fields, hedgerows thick with flowers and sheep. Plenty of sheep.

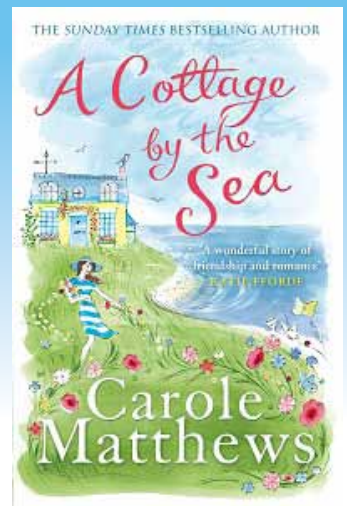
‘Fucking place,’ Harry complains.

He is not a happy man. His hands are gripping the wheel again and his knuckles are white. His handsome face, however, is scarlet, becoming borderline puce. My husband, I know, would rather be in Tuscany or Thailand or even Timbuktu. Anywhere, in fact, rather than on our way to a cottage in Wales for a week.

‘We can’t be far away,’ I offer, keeping my tone placating. The polar opposite to Harry, I’m just thrilled to be here. My dearest friend, Ella Hawley, has invited us to stay with her and her long-term partner, Art. Ella’s spending the rest of the summer in Wales and I just can’t wait to see her. She’s only recently inherited this cottage, but I’ve heard so much about it over the years that wild horses, never mind a grumpy husband, wouldn’t have kept me away. Ella’s also invited our friend Flick, but whether or not Flick will turn up is an entirely different matter. You can never quite pin Flick down. I hope she makes it as I haven’t seen her in ages and it will be so lovely to catch up.

Outside the chilled atmosphere in the Bentley – only some of it due to the effect of the über-efficient air-conditioning – the sky is a blue more usually seen in the Mediterranean and beneath it, on the very edge of the horizon, a silver ribbon of sea shimmers invitingly. We can’t be far away because Ella’s cottage is by the sea and, if we drive too much further, we’ll be actually in it.

*Destination,*’ the sat nav repeats.





She now sounds slightly weary with life. As am I.

‘Get a grip, woman. We’re not at the destination,’ I tell her firmly. ‘Even I’ve worked that out.’

‘Grace,’ Harry says, teeth gritted, ‘do you mind? We can’t stay here in the middle of the road all day.’

To be honest, Harry and I haven’t really been speaking since we stopped at Magor Services just before the Severn Crossing. The service station was like a glimpse of hell with queues a mile long for everything and the place stuffed with families screaming at each other. Harry couldn’t get anything to eat but a plastic ham sandwich on white bread and he’s very much a smoked salmon on wholemeal man. His temper, already frayed by the amount of holiday traffic on the road, shredded to breaking point.

It hasn’t helped that we’ve been on the road since silly o’clock and that there was a ferocious tailback to get over the bridge and into South Wales. On top of that, it cost us nearly a fortune to cross. Cue much muttering under Harry’s breath that people should be paying to get out of Wales, not into it.

‘We could have been halfway to the sodding Seychelles by now,’ he mutters darkly.

In theory, I suppose we could be, but there’s so much else to consider when flying somewhere. It starts with all the vaccinations – nearly the cost of the holiday in itself. Invariably we require malaria tablets too, which make me feel dreadful. The whole experience is just so stressful. All the glamour of flying has long gone. I always feel as if I need another holiday when I’ve flown for thirteen or more hours just to get back from somewhere. Your memories of the island paradise fade very quickly when faced with a four-hour-long queue for passport control at Gatwick or Heathrow followed by a week of hideous jet lag.

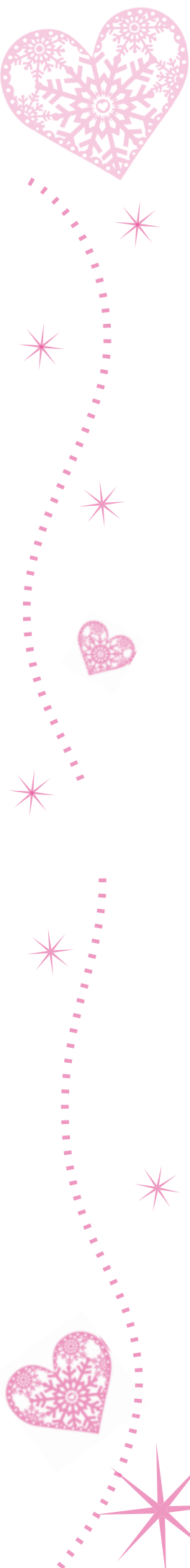
‘I hate long-haul flights nowadays, Harry. You know that. For once, isn’t it nice to throw the cases in the back of the car and just drive?’

I get a grunt in response.

Despite my husband’s reticence, I’m so looking forward to this holiday and am so desperate for it. Work has been nothing but stress this year – the financial climate forcing everyone to tighten their belts, and where I work is no exception. I’m an accountant, the staff partner in a small but successful firm based in north London. We have only ten staff but, believe me, they’re a full-time job to manage. I’ve just had a small mutiny on my hands after we told them that there will be no company Christmas trip this year. Normally, we take the staff and their other halves on a long weekend jaunt during the approach to the festive season. In the past we’ve been to Paris, Rome, Bruges. All very lovely. All on expenses. But this year we’re going to have to do without. Every single one of our clients is watching the pennies and I think it looks right that we should do so too.

I feel the same about our own holidays abroad. More often than not, Harry and I go away at least twice every year. How can that be acceptable when so many people are struggling simply to pay their mortgages? I’m more than happy to have a summer staying at home, although I don’t think Harry much likes the sound of it. So, when Ella asked us to come down and spend some time with her at the cottage, it seemed like the perfect solution. To me, anyway.

Harry wasn’t keen, of course. Even as we set off he was bemoaning the fact that it would be more ‘basic’ than he prefers. My other half likes to lie on a sunlounger for two weeks and be waited on hand and foot. He doesn’t care if there’s culture or scenery. He just wants heat, a swimming pool and alcohol on tap. He likes a turndown service, a chocolate and perhaps an exotic bloom on his pillow every night. Those things don’t really interest me. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve enjoyed my fair share of luxury holidays too. But sometimes it can be just a tiny bit boring. Does that sound ungrateful? If you’re typically British and fair-skinned, there’s only so



much sunbathing you can do if you don't want the boiled-lobster look. So this year I'm really looking forward to having a holiday in my own country for the first time in many years. I'll get to catch up with my dearest friends. Harry and I will get to spend some quality time together without having to go halfway round the world. It'll be fun. I'm sure. Just the tonic we need.

'Shall we aim to get there before nightfall, Grace?' Harry says tightly.

So I pull my attention back to the map and try to work out exactly where we are.

## Chapter 2

The fact that I get to hook up with my lovely friends is the icing on the cake for me. Again, I'm not sure that Harry feels the same way. My husband isn't overly fond of my friends. He says that I change when I'm with them. I think, half of the time, he doesn't like it when he's not the centre of attention and you know what it's like when old friends get together.

Ella, Flick and I all went to university together in Liverpool over ten years ago and, as such, go way back. We're more like sisters than friends and are inseparable. I feel as if we grew up together. Those formative years shaped us into the women we are today. Ella Hawley, Felicity Edwards and Grace Taylor. I smile to myself. We were quite the girls back then. A force to be reckoned with. Mainly due to Flick, I have to say. She was the one who dragged us kicking and screaming into the thick of student life. I'm sure Ella and I would have stayed at home in our skanky rooms every night, studying, if it hadn't been for Flick. Ella's the arty, thoughtful one. Flick is the fabulously pretty, fickle one. I, for my sins, am the steady and sensible one. Though we're ten years older now and, supposedly, wiser, our roles haven't changed that much.

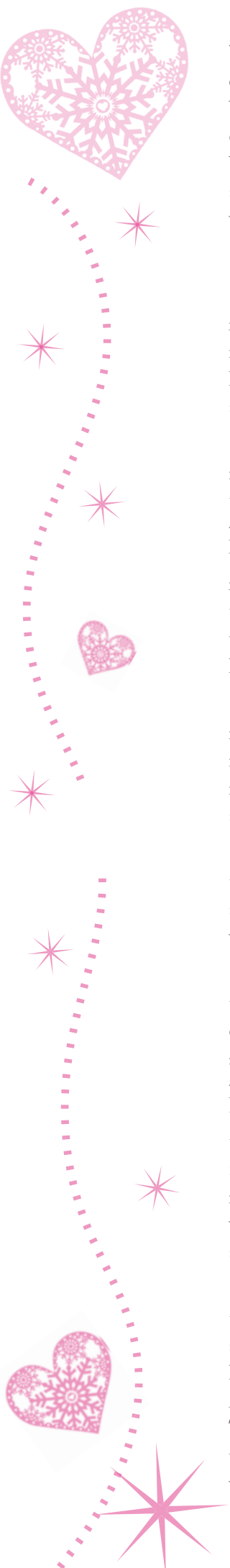
We all took different courses at university, but found ourselves in the same halls. We hooked up at one of the events in Freshers' Week – I can't even remember what now – and have been together through thick and thin ever since.

After that first rollercoaster year when we struggled to get our studying to keep pace with our partying, we escaped halls and moved as a team into a totally hideous flat at the top of a draughty Victorian house in one of Liverpool's less salubrious areas. I only have to think for a minute how awful it was and it makes me shudder. The carpet had that terrible stickiness of a back-street pub and, as we were on the top floor, the windows had never been cleaned. They still hadn't when we left two years later. Learning how to exterminate cockroaches, mice and silverfish together is always going to be a lifelong bonding experience. Though it always seemed to be me, with rubber gloves and dustpan, who had the job of clearing up the resulting corpses.

Not only did we share the same hideous flat, but we also worked in the same hideous bar. Honkers. I don't have to say any more, do I? There's a fantastic, sophisticated nightclub scene in Liverpool. Honkers wasn't part of it. We used to run a sweepstake between the three of us – five pounds at the end of the night to the person who got the most gropes. One point for a bottom grope, two points for a boob grope. Flick had the dubious honour of winning most nights.

We put up with the groping, largely without complaint, simply to earn some extra cash to supplement our drinking – sorry, our studies. If someone got a feel of your tits they tended to give bigger tips. Oh, happy days. Our shared horror only helped to make our little team stronger than ever. Even though we had no money and lived in a fleapit, they were good times. We had fun together. Mostly. But there were heartaches too and we vowed then that nothing would ever come between us. Not men, not fame, not fortune. It's fair to say that it's just the men that have troubled us thus far.

Harry doesn't like it when we spend hours reminiscing about a life and a time that he wasn't involved with. I'll admit that when we get started on the 'good old days' we do get a



bit carried away with ourselves. Once we get going, we can talk for hours. You can't help but do that with good friends, can you? It's not as if we have huge reunions every five minutes. We all have busy lives and often only manage to get together every couple of months for a catch-up. We normally go out for a glass of wine and a pizza, nothing more exciting than that. We haven't had a girls' holiday together since we all went to Prague on my hen weekend over seven years ago now. So, as reluctant as he is, I'm sure that Harry can't begrudge me a week with my friends.

'I'm dying of thirst,' Harry says sullenly.

My heart sinks. What he means is he needs alcohol. I think this interminable car journey is the longest I've seen him go without a drink lately. I don't quite know what's going on, but recently there have been far too many late nights at work, too much restorative red wine. When he does eventually come home, I can't prise him away from his iPad or his mobile phone. It seems as if he'd rather spend time doing who knows what on Twitter than be with me.

It pains me to say that I can't remember the last time we had a conversation that wasn't in raised voices. We've been married for seven years, but I can't see us making another seven at this rate. It's not so much the seven-year itch as the seven-year slump. The last few months in particular have been just awful and, as a couple, we're as far apart as we've ever been. We get up at different times, go to work, eat dinner separately. Sex is a distant memory as I'm usually in bed and long asleep by the time Harry climbs the stairs. The weekends are no better. Harry's taken to shutting himself in his office and I mooch round the house by myself until I too give up trying to have fun and resort to the distraction of paperwork. It's no way to live. It's barely half a life. We are living to work, not working to live.

If I'm honest, there are times when I've felt like walking out. The only thing keeping me from doing that is the fact that I remember the Harry who I married – just about. The man who was charming, sophisticated and great company. It's simply a phase, I keep telling myself. It can't be roses round the door all the time. But sometimes it's hard when I look at the stranger sitting next to me.

We're both desperate for this break and I'm so hoping that we can spend some time together, relaxing, having fun and getting back to how we once were. That's all we need, I'm sure. Time. Time to sort things out. Time to have a laugh. Time to work out where it's all gone wrong.

I glance across at him. He's still a good-looking man. Tall, once quite muscular, but now that he's drinking more there's a hint of a paunch as he's never been one to embrace the idea of vigorous exercise. We used to like walking, but now it's all I can do to get him out of the flat at the weekend to go for a stroll down the road. The distance between our front door and the pub is the only walking he likes to do these days. His blue chambray shirt is straining slightly at the seams. I daren't suggest a diet as that would only be another reason to argue, but I'm gently trying to introduce healthier options into our evening meals. Harry's older than me. At forty-four, he's twelve years my senior. Not a lot these days, I guess, but I wonder if it will become more of an issue as the years pass. Still, we have to patch up where we are now before I can worry about the future. I want to run my hand through his hair. It's cropped short, greying slightly at the temples. He hates it when I touch it.

This person was once the life and soul of the party. Harry only had to walk into a room to make it light up and I was in awe of him. He was always so confident, so assured, that it spilled over on to me and I blossomed in his love. We were great as a couple. We might never have had a wild passion as such, but we were solid. Or so I thought. We fell into step nicely. As a couple the whole was better than the sum of two parts. I sigh to myself. Now look at us. Two people circling each other, never quite in time. This holiday will do us good. It will bring us back together, I'm sure. Because, more than anything, I want my husband to fall in love with me all over again.



Harry's voice breaks into my thoughts. 'Found out where we are yet?'

'Yes,' I tell him. Though, if I'm honest, I'm not *exactly* sure.

Anxiously, I twiddle one of my curls as I try to figure out where we are on the lines and squiggles of the map. I wasn't blessed with the map-reading gene, hence our heavy reliance on the sat nav. 'It's just over this hill. I think.'

With a tut, he stomps on the accelerator and we set off again. A few minutes later, over the brow of the hill as I'd predicted, I'm mightily relieved to see a sign for Cwtch Cottage – pronounced Cutch, so Ella tells me.

'This is it,' I assure Harry and we turn into a narrow track. We slow to walking pace as the lane is bordered by high hedgerows on each side, with a tall line of grass right down the middle of it, like a secret passage. We squeeze our way towards the cottage. Already I feel as if I'm entering a different world.

'I hope this doesn't scratch the paintwork,' Harry grumbles. I feel stupid in this car. A Bentley doesn't fit with the scenery. Frankly, it doesn't fit with me at all, but it's Harry's new toy. His pride and joy. He treated himself to it a month or so ago when he had his annual bonus from work. Though I've no idea why anyone would feel the need to spend so much on a car. It's an insane amount of money to blow. To top it off, he bought a personal number plate too. He loves its gleaming black showiness. I just wish that we had something a little more anonymous. Something in beige, so that the local vandals won't feel the need to run a key down the side of it. This car is criminal damage waiting to happen. To me a man with a flash car is like him walking around, waving his willy. Though as I hardly ever drive now – who needs to in London? – I don't feel that I can really impose a low-key choice of car on my other half. If this is what Harry wants, then who am I to argue?

A profusion of wild flowers blooms in the hedgerow, glorious shades of pink, yellow and white. I open the window to let their colourful heads trail over my hand. The scent is heady.

'You'll get seeds and all sorts in the car,' Harry says. 'Next summer there'll be dandelions growing in the carpet and we'll wonder why. Shut the window.'

Reluctantly, I do.

Thankfully, a short and bumpy ride later, Ella's cottage comes into view. 'We're here!'

The sight of it takes my breath away. Cwtch Cottage stands in splendid isolation on a rocky promontory at the entrance to a small, secluded bay overlooking the sea. It's a simple structure, long and low, painted white, and I don't think I've ever seen anywhere quite so beautiful.

'Oh, look at it, Harry,' I say. 'Wasn't this worth that awful journey? It's stunning.'

Ella had shown me photographs of the cottage, but they just hadn't conveyed how spectacular the setting was. There's an unbroken view right to the horizon where the sea meets the sky.

Harry brings the Bentley to a standstill at the end of the bay and stares out of the window, open-mouthed. 'Christ, there's nothing here.'

'It's wonderful.'

The tight band that seems to be melded to my heart these days eases slightly. I think I can actually hear it sigh with relief. Tears prickle behind my eyes. You can keep your Seychelles and your Maldives, this is paradise to me. How I wish we were staying here for two weeks or even longer. A week seems barely adequate.

My husband is less moved by the surroundings. The expression on his face is bleak. 'Where's the nearest pub?'

'I don't know. Ella said that it was quite remote.'



‘You’re not bloody kidding.’

‘Oh, Harry.’ I kiss his cheek. ‘It will be lovely, you’ll see.’

‘I haven’t seen anything for miles.’ He punches his digit at his mobile phone. ‘No signal either.’

Smiling, I offer up a silent prayer of thanks. A whole seven days without having to compete with Twitter!

I put my hand on his arm. ‘I’m really looking forward to this. We can have some time just to be together, to chill out, to put things right.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with us,’ Harry says crisply. But there is, I think. We both know that there is.

### Chapter 3

We park up outside the cottage next to Ella and Art’s cars. I climb out and massage my back. Even in a posh car all the hours of sitting have taken their toll. The breeze lifts my hair from my neck and I can taste the tang of salt in the air. The heat of the sun on my cold skin feels like a loving caress. Ella rushes out to greet us.

‘Hey!’ she shouts and grabs hold of me in as near to a bearhug as someone who is five foot nothing can manage. We do a little dance while still holding tightly on to each other. ‘God, it’s so good to see you. I’ve missed you.’

‘Well, now we’ve got a whole week to gossip to our hearts’ content.’

‘How lovely.’ Ella looks as excited as a child at Christmas.

‘Was it a pig of a journey?’

‘It wasn’t the best,’ I respond wryly.

‘The weekends are always a nightmare. Too many cars on the road.’

‘We’re here now,’ I say. ‘Let relaxation commence.’

Harry is hanging back, fussing with the cases and the gifts that we’ve brought.

She flicks her head in Harry’s direction. ‘Is he in a mood?’

‘Frightful,’ I tell her and we giggle together like schoolgirls.

‘We’ll soon get the old bugger sozzled,’ she promises.

‘That’ll make him loosen up a bit.’

Ella’s not to know that I’m worried about his drinking. Harry has always liked a drink and turns into a total party animal after a bottle or two. But, in the last six months, I feel that it’s become a more regular habit and has tipped over the edge into something else.

‘Liking’ a drink has suddenly become ‘needing’ a drink, I feel, and I’m concerned about the amount of wine that he gets through in a week now. I’ve even been tempted to hide our recycling box so that the neighbours don’t see the amount of empty bottles in there. Whenever I’ve tried to raise the issue with him, he’s just snapped at me. But I’m frightened that Harry can’t do without alcohol to get him through the day. I haven’t yet mentioned my unease to either Ella or Flick. Somehow by keeping it to myself, I could pretend that it really wasn’t a problem and I don’t want to start the holiday on a negative note by voicing my fears, so I keep quiet.

Harry comes and takes Ella in his arms. ‘Hello, darling,’ he says. ‘How’s life with you?’

‘It’s good. Sorry that we’re in the middle of nowhere,’ Ella gushes. ‘I know that you like



having a multiplicity of bars and coffee shops close to hand. But just look at the view!

‘Fantastic,’ he says in a voice that barely disguises the fact that he’s disappointed that we’re not admiring a white sandy beach in the Caribbean. He eyes the seagulls suspiciously.

‘Brought my own booze. Thought I might need it.’

Harry flicks a thumb towards the boot of the car where there are two cases of wine nestling. Inwardly, I sigh. I couldn’t persuade him that we didn’t need to bring quite so much booze with us. Harry insisted that he needed it to ‘get in the holiday mood’.

‘Let’s take a closer look at the beach,’ I suggest. ‘Coming, Harry?’

‘I’ll stay here,’ he says. ‘See if I can get a signal.’ He waves his mobile at me.

Why? I wonder. Why? Can’t he leave it alone for five minutes?

Ella leads me by the hand to the edge of the terrace. Away from the shelter of the cottage, a stiff wind whips in from the sea. But the breeze is warm and the cool spray spritzing my face feels wonderful, zingy. It’s late June and summer is only just starting to live up to its promise. The weather for the last week has been sweltering, sultry, and it’s so nice to be out of London and its oppressive city heat. I lift my arms and reach out to the sun. I should be in an advert for Ocean Breeze shower gel or something. No doubt my mass of brunette curls, untameable at the best of times, will take on a life of their very own here.

‘God, this is brilliant.’ I want to throw off my clothes and run barefoot in the sand. ‘How do you stay away from this place?’

‘It’s increasingly hard,’ Ella admits.

‘I’m not surprised. I’d never want to leave.’

Ella inherited the cottage when her mum died a few months ago after a stroke. It wasn’t entirely unexpected as Mrs Hawley wasn’t in the best of health and had been in a nursing home for a few years prior to that, suffering from a hefty catalogue of illnesses. But it’s never easy to lose a parent whatever the circumstances. Barely a year earlier Ella had helped to nurse her dad through terminal cancer, so she’s gone through a rough time. Flick and I have supported her as much as we could but, as she was an only child, the weight of the burden had fallen on Ella.

‘You look fantastic,’ I tell my friend. ‘You’re positively blooming.’ She blushes at that. ‘The sea air must suit you.’

Ella favours the Goth look. Today she’s abandoned her trademark black clothes for faded denim shorts and a fitted white shirt. Her dyed black cropped hair is messier than usual and it suits her. Her normally pale face has a smidgen of tan and the pinched look, from nursing ailing parents for too long, has all but gone. She’s put a few pounds on her waif-like frame and – I’d never dare to tell her this – it sits well on her.

‘I do feel like a different person when I’m down here,’ she confesses. ‘Perhaps I’ve found my spiritual home.’

“‘Spiritual home’”, I tease. ‘You’ve been smoking those strange-smelling cigarettes again.’

‘No,’ Ella says, ‘not me!’

‘Well, whatever it is, it suits you.’ I nod back towards the cars. ‘I see that Art’s already here.’

‘He came down last night,’ Ella says. She lowers her voice.

‘He’s a grumpy bastard too. He and Harry can sit on deckchairs and get pissed together.’

‘Is he being supportive?’

She sighs. ‘In his own sweet way. You know what men are like. Art doesn’t do illness or death.’

‘He probably doesn’t know what to say for the best,’ I offer.



‘It doesn’t mean that he doesn’t care, sweetheart.’

‘I know. Sometimes I feel I’m bottling things up for Art’s sake when what I really want is a good blub. He’s just so hopeless at dealing with emotion.’

‘Tell me about it. After all these years of marriage, Harry still has no idea what to do if, on the rare occasion, I actually cry.’

‘I’ve been down here for a few weeks already,’ she tells me.

‘Just making sure that the place is spick and span. With Mum having been in the nursing home for so long, it hasn’t been used for a while.’

‘How are you coping, generally?’ I ask, giving her a squeeze.

‘OK,’ she says. ‘Some days better than others. I miss Mum terribly, but she hadn’t been herself for ages, so it was a relief in some ways. She hated living like that. She’ll be happier now that she’s with Dad.’ We both start to well up. ‘Don’t start me off!’ Ella cuffs away the tears. ‘We’re here to have fun this week, put all this out of my mind for a time.’

‘And fun we will have,’ I assure her. ‘I’ve so looked forward to seeing you. We can have a good catch-up and relax.’

Cwtch Cottage has been in Ella’s family for many years. I think it had originally been handed down to Ella’s parents by an old spinster aunt of her dad’s. Ella spent all her childhood holidays here and always used to tell us how fond she was of the place. Then when her dad fell ill and couldn’t travel, her mum didn’t want to come here on her own without him. Ella used to bring her occasionally, but the visits were few and far between. Then, in turn, her mum became too frail to make the journey and the cottage was pretty much abandoned.

‘The place needs a bit of ‘TLC,’ Ella continues. Much like my good self, I think. ‘I’ve tried to get down at least a couple of times a year, but it hasn’t always been easy. Thankfully, there’s a lovely lady in St Brides who keeps an eye on it for me, makes sure it’s not swallowed up by the sea or too overrun by spiders. Still, I’m going to have my work cut out getting it back up to scratch.’

‘Well, it looks very lovely to me.’

‘Thanks. Inside is a bit bashed and scuffed, but it’s very cosy. We’ll have a great week. I’m so excited to see you. I hope you like it, Grace. I’ve wanted you and Flick to come down here for ever.’

‘Well, I’m glad we’ve finally made it.’

Ella tucks her arm into mine and steers me back towards the cottage. ‘You’re looking very tired, lovely lady. Everything OK?’

‘Work, life.’ We exchange a glance. She knows that Harry and I are having a tough time together, but not the specifics.

‘Nothing that a glorious week by the seaside won’t cure.’

‘We’ll have those roses back in your cheeks in no time.’ She gives my face a friendly pinch.

I breathe in the fresh, salty air and wonder why I live in a flat in the city. Harry, standing behind the Bentley, is still trying to get a phone signal. He gives up when he sees us coming back and busies himself lifting one of the cases of wine out of the boot with a grunt.

‘Can I give you a hand with that, love?’

‘I can manage,’ he puffs as he falls into step behind us.

‘You look as if you’ve come well prepared, Harry!’ Ella teases.

‘I know what you lot are like when you get together,’ he tosses back.

Ella grins at him.





‘Is Flick still coming too?’ I ask.

‘Oh, you know what Flick’s like,’ Ella says, rolling her eyes.

‘She’s supposed to be arriving later. But, as we can’t get a phone signal here, and there’s no landline, I haven’t been able to ring her and double-check. It’s only a ten-minute drive to the nearest phone box, but I haven’t had a chance to get there either. I told her she wouldn’t be able to get in touch with me, but she’s probably forgotten. I bet she’s texting me like mad and wondering why I’m not replying.’

‘I hope she hasn’t forgotten altogether that she’s coming.’ Our friend isn’t known for her reliability.

Ella laughs. ‘I wouldn’t put it past her, but I’ve made the bed up anyway.’

‘I thought she couldn’t make it.’ Behind us, Harry sounds tetchy. He’s not Flick’s biggest fan. He finds her too loud, too attention-seeking. He thinks she’s a bad influence on Ella and me. And he’s probably right.

I shrug. ‘She changed her mind at the last minute.’ She could, however, just as easily change it back.

Harry tuts and stamps ahead of us. Ella and I exchange a glance and a giggle. ‘He loves her really,’ I say.

Flick doesn’t like to commit to anything and, even if she’s said that she’ll come along to some get-together or other, is always liable to change her plans at the last minute. I think it comes with not having a partner to answer to. Ella thinks she’s just naturally born selfish, but she says it nicely.

‘Is she bringing anyone?’

‘I think she must be resting between lovers,’ Ella chuckles.

‘She said she’d come by herself.’

‘Either that or he’s married, as usual, and can’t get away from the missus.’

‘Ah, yes. That’s more likely.’

Ella has never really approved of Flick’s preference for men who are already permanently attached to other women. Neither have I, come to that, but we’ve learned to live with it. Unfortunately, the concept of the sisterhood is an alien thing to Flick. Under sufferance, we’ve met a few of her married lovers over the years. They’ve always seemed unsuitable and shifty. They’ve never hung around for too long though. It would be lovely if Flick, for once, could meet someone nice, solvent and unattached.

‘I’ve hardly heard from her in the last few months,’ I confide. ‘I’ve been texting and phoning, but she seldom replies. She’s not avoiding me, is she?’

‘Oh, you know what she’s like,’ Ella says with a shrug.

‘She’s probably up to no good somewhere.’

‘Yes.’

If Flick’s in a tricky relationship, she sometimes goes ‘dark’. Despite being in her thirties now, she’s still exactly the same as when we were at university: flighty, fickle and very frustrating. But we both love her, nevertheless. Ella’s right, I’m probably reading too much into it. I can’t think of anything that I’ve done that would have caused Flick offence. She’s not one to take anything too much to heart, anyway.

‘We’ll all have a lovely week,’ Ella assures me.

‘Of course we will.’ I get a thrill of excitement. I’m going to put all my troubles behind me and just have fun. ‘It’ll be just like old times.’



## Chapter 4

Ella, Harry and I swing through the front door of the cottage and into a porch filled with outdoor clutter. There are coats, abandoned shoes and a ragtag of sports equipment alongside a couple of tennis rackets that have seen better days. A slightly rusty Swingball leans up against the wall and, beneath it, lie a couple of mismatched golf clubs with a bucket of tatty balls.

‘Daddy used to stand on the rocks and knock the balls out to sea, as far as he could,’ Ella says when she sees me looking at them. ‘Not exactly eco-friendly, but then he’d go and collect the ones that were washed up on the shore and do it all over again.’

‘Good therapy.’

She laughs. ‘It used to keep him amused for hours.’

The porch leads straight into the homely kitchen. It’s roomier than I’d imagined from outside and is all stripped pine cupboards with a big, proper farmhouse table right in the middle. At the table, Ella’s partner, Art Jarrett, has his feet up and is plucking absently at the guitar slung across his thighs. At his elbow stands a bottle of wine, already open.

Harry brightens as he sees it. ‘Ah, a man after my own heart.’ He instantly dumps the case of wine he’s carrying and rubs his hands in anticipation.

My spirits sink slightly. I wish Art had been having nothing more potent than a cup of tea. That’ll be Harry started for the day and, once he’s begun, there’s no stopping him.

Art stands up when he sees us. ‘Welcome, one and all!’

‘Hi, Art.’ I give him a kiss and a hug.

‘Hi, babe. Long time, no see.’

I like Art. He and Ella don’t have the easiest of relationships, but he has a boyish charm that’s appealing and seems to let him get away with murder most of the time.

The reason we haven’t seen him for a while is because Art has been out in Romania or Bulgaria or maybe both. Art is a band manager, mainly for heavy metal bands, and he kind of looks like that’s what his job should be. He favours the grungy image – ripped jeans or, for best, crumpled linen suits teamed with Guns ’n’ Roses T-shirts. His dark hair is long, unkempt and currently appears as if a burgundy dye is growing out. Usually, as now, a couple of days’ worth of stubble graces his chin.

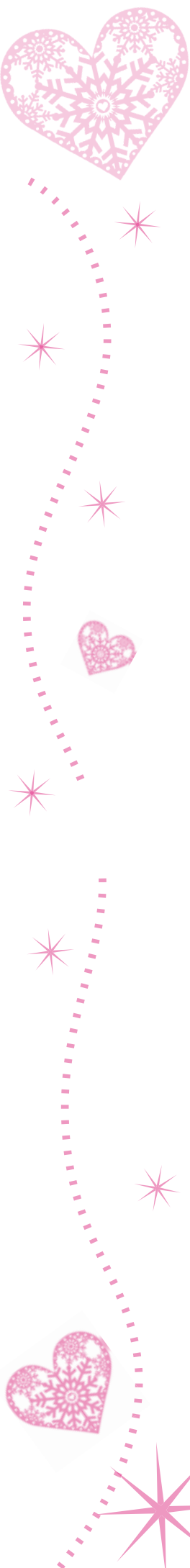
Ella and Art have been together a long time and, after years of splitting themselves between two places, now share Art’s very smart house in Notting Hill. Marriage is a banned word in their household although Ella makes no secret of the fact that she would very much like to be Mrs Jarrett one day. Most of their problems stem from the fact that Art is a ‘free spirit’. He hates to be tied down and, more often than not, they’re not even in the same country. Ella is quite a renowned artist and she does her fair share of travelling, jetting around the world to create big installations of her work. Then, whenever Ella is at home, Art is usually away somewhere else. He can be on tour for months at a time. Heavy metal may not be the big thing here, but on the continent it’s massive and Art has to go where the money is. Besides, he likes his life on the road. Too much, Ella would say.

Art claps Harry on the back and gives a thumbs-up to the case of wine that’s now on the kitchen floor.

‘There’s another case in the boot,’ Harry says. ‘White.’

‘Top man,’ Art says.

The men, in many ways, are so different, but they rub along well together. My other half is as straight as the day is long. Harry is an actuary, specialising in pensions management for a huge global corporation. I’d like to say that his work isn’t as dull as it sounds, but I’m afraid that it is. Even I, as a fully signed up and sensible accountant, can glaze over within seconds of



Harry starting to talk to me of his working day. Art has absolutely no chance. Even the word ‘pension’ is a complete anathema to Art’s life ethos. He’s used to dealing with monumental egos who dabble in drugs or put televisions through windows of European hotel rooms or turn up late for photo shoots. He’s not that interested in the minutiae of final pension schemes or the dwindling benefits of annuities. Can’t say that I blame him. Thankfully, Art knows how to handle Harry and, once they get the drink flowing, they become great mates. I think it comes with Art having to manage tricky artists for a living that he can get along with anyone.

‘Pull up a chair you two, get yourself some glasses,’ Art instructs.

Only one of us lights up at the thought. Ella brings two glasses from the cupboard and puts them on the table.

‘Not for me,’ I say. So Art fills just one glass.

Harry grasps it gratefully. ‘Devil of a journey,’ he says.

‘Need a bit of a snifter?’

‘There’s a load more stuff in the boot, Harry,’ I remind him. Some of it is perishable and we’ll need to put it in the fridge.

‘Later, Grace,’ he says dismissively.

Harry knocks half of it back in one swallow and smacks his lips gratefully. That’ll be me getting the presents and cases out of the boot, then.

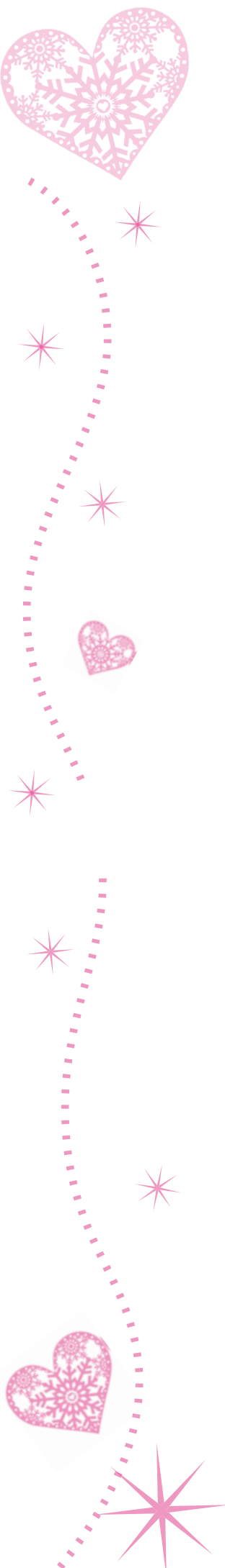
Sometimes when I look at him now, I’m not really sure quite how I came to be with Harry. We met at a function organised by a financial advisor who turned out to be a mutual acquaintance – so far, so boring. Over the champagne and canapés we chatted and, later, when the jazz band started up, Harry asked me to dance with him.

I liked his maturity. Compared to other men that I’d dated – and there were very few of them – he seemed so sophisticated, so urbane, so stable. Unlike Flick, I haven’t had vast experience with men. At university, I hated the whole dating scene. I think I only ever went out with anyone because she cajoled me into it. I’ve never been Ms Popularity. I was an only child, terribly shy, who morphed into a swotty teenager and ever since then have preferred a good book to a man. Even in the thick of the college scene, I was a very reluctant dater. I could never have been like Flick, waking up with a different man every weekend, sometimes not even remembering who they were. She always had complicated relationships and, to be honest, some of the things that happened in our flat nearly put me off men for life. I think the wilder she was, the more determined I became not to go down that route.

When I first started work, I had two half-serious relationships – men that I dated for a few months rather than a few weeks. One was a teacher. One was a social worker. Both were entirely needy and in dire financial straits. They both needed a babysitter more than a life partner. I dated because I was expected to, rather than because I actually wanted to. I was actually a lot happier on my own.

Then Harry came along, my intellectual and financial equal. That sounds terrible, doesn’t it? I don’t mean it to, but it was nicer to be with someone who could afford to take lavish holidays rather than want to drag me round Europe in a tent. Someone who could afford to eat in real restaurants rather than McDonald’s.

He was reliable and didn’t play games. If Harry Lincoln said he would telephone, he did. If he said he would pick me up at eight o’clock, at five to eight his car would pull up outside my flat. He didn’t grope me like the men my own age. He didn’t rush me. He seemed to have got his life together. There might not have been giddy romance with Harry, but there was no high drama either. I was never swept away by passion for him. I didn’t go weak at the knees when I saw him. I never felt the fevered heat of love stories. I’m not the sort of person who believes they need that as the foundation of a relationship. Harry and I simply got along well.



We shared a love of the theatre and good food. We didn't argue. It seemed enough. When he asked me to marry him, I couldn't see a reason why I shouldn't and said yes. He loved me. He was solid, dependable. I assumed I loved him too.

My parents were delighted. They too had a quiet marriage – one without fireworks and falling out. I thought if I could be like them, it would serve me well. They were pleased with Harry. They thought we made a good match. They brushed over the fact that he'd been divorced and had two teenagers in tow. In their eyes, the fact that he had his own house and a good job more than made up for that. They were probably right. Though, with hindsight, I wonder if they were just relieved that I'd finally taken someone home to meet them and hadn't turned out to be a lesbian. They wouldn't have liked to explain that down at the golf club.

And I've been happy with him. It was a sensible decision. Harry has been a good husband. I've always tried my best to be a good wife. We're financially secure and have wanted for nothing. We have rubbed along well perfectly together. It's only now that the veneer is starting to chip, that things are unravelling. He's not the same man that I married and I wonder if he's having a mid-life crisis.

Now I watch him as Art pours him some more wine. Harry seems tired too. Perhaps both of us are simply exhausted and this break is long overdue. If we can just kick back and relax, maybe we can put these last few months behind us. Harry's blue chambray shirt is teamed with crisp jeans and trainers. He's put his jacket on for the journey from the car to the cottage and I'm not sure it's a look that I like, even though it's Harry's standard 'casual' attire. Particularly next to the laidback Art, he comes across as far too buttoned up. But I'm being unnecessarily critical; this is how Harry has always looked. This is how he was when I met him, so I shouldn't start to complain about it now.

One great thing that has come out of our marriage is Harry's two wonderful boys. They're really great and I've never, not for one minute, regretted being involved in their lives. I've heard other stepmums beef about their partners' children and all the awful things they do and the problems they have. But I've never had that with Harry's kids. I've always treated them as if they were my own. Freddie's now twenty-two and Oscar is twenty. It was more difficult when Harry and I first got together as they were still teenagers and we had to fit our blossoming relationship round his access visits, but it wasn't long before we formed a unit. They were both so accepting of me that it was very easy to love them.

Now the boys are away at university and are so wrapped up in their own hectic lives that we hardly ever see them – on high days and holidays or when they are seriously short of cash. But I remember what it was like and even though I miss them terribly and phone them both regularly, I want them to have fun while they can, while they have no responsibilities to grind them down. Plus they do spend a lot of time on Twitter with Harry too – which, at least, accounts for some of the hours he spends on there. Not quite like sitting round the kitchen table together having a good old chinwag, but I guess that's the way of modern relationships.

'Look at those two,' Ella says, nudging me. 'Stuck in already.' Sure enough, Harry has stripped off his jacket again and has settled down at the table next to Art. The second glass of wine also hardly touches the sides and he's pouring out his third. Harry sets the bottle down on the table next to his own elbow. It's practically empty already.

'No signal.' He taps forlornly at his mobile. 'How do you manage, mate?'

Art shrugs. 'I can just about cope for a few days at a time. Drives the office mad.'

'Mine too,' Harry agrees readily and, while they complain about the lack of technology, I take in the rest of my surroundings.

The kitchen has huge, full-length windows at the back – clearly a later modification – that look out on to the terrace and the magnificent sea beyond. The rhythmic ebb and flow of the ocean is mesmerising. It's like watching a constantly shifting painting. I feel that I could stand



and look at this view for ever and never grow tired of it.

‘Let’s bring your cases in,’ Ella suggests. ‘Then we can join them for a natter.’

I was hoping that we might all go out for a walk on the beach while the weather is so glorious. It looks so enticing. After being cooped up in the car for hours, I’d love to stretch my legs, feel the sand in my toes. Who wouldn’t want to? I’d like to feel that warm wind in my hair again more than I’d like a glass of wine.

So, leaving the men to their drinks, we go to unload the boot. I lift out our suitcases, but I’m going to leave the other box of wine for Harry to bring in. He can at least do something.

‘I’ve brought you some of those cupcakes that you like so much from the bakery in Notting Hill.’

They’re nestled safely on the back seat along with a bouquet of white lilies for Ella, which I know are her favourite flowers. I’ve brought a selection of nice cheeses too, which we can have after dinner. They’re all in the cool box alongside a couple of tubs of really special olives, which I know Art has a soft spot for.

‘Oh, Grace, you’re always so thoughtful,’ Ella says. ‘Mmm. Those cakes look delicious. Perfect excuse to have afternoon tea now.’

I hand her the lilies too.

‘Now you’re spoiling me,’ she says. ‘It’s a long time since anyone bought me flowers.’

‘Me too.’ We giggle at that.

We carry our booty back to the cottage. I don’t think that Harry and Art even noticed that we’d gone. They’re both laughing heartily, clearly in storytelling mode, and I’m relieved to see that Harry’s bad mood has lifted. Ella and I roll our eyes at each other. She deposits the lilies and the cupcakes in the kitchen. When the cheese and olives are safely tucked away in the fridge, we tackle the cases. I lift mine and Ella takes Harry’s. Together we lug them upstairs.

Thankfully, the narrow staircase to the first floor is short. There are three bedrooms up here, the main one with an en suite, and a nice bathroom shared between the two guest rooms. All of them have low ceilings as they’re set into the roof. Big Velux windows have been fitted into the eaves in the bedrooms, flooding the space with light. The tiny, original windows have been left in place, though you have to bend down to look through them for a tantalising glimpse of the sea. It will be lovely to lie back on those soft pillows and hear the soporific sound of the waves crashing on the rocks.

Each room has been decorated in the same style, with the beds covered in plain white quilts, and coloured rag rugs on the sanded floorboards. It’s elegant in its simplicity.

‘Will you be comfortable enough in here?’ Ella asks, showing me into one of the rooms.

I hug my friend. ‘Of course we will. Thank you again for asking us.’

‘I just wanted to see you,’ she says. ‘We don’t spend enough time together.’

‘I know.’

‘I don’t know where the years go,’ Ella says and her voice is tinged with sadness.

‘They just fly by.’

‘We haven’t changed much, have we?’

I shrug. ‘I don’t know.’

Am I the same woman that I was ten years ago? Perhaps I am. But I hope not.

‘I’ll leave you to freshen up,’ Ella says. ‘I’ll get the kettle on. I’m sure you’d rather have a cuppa first instead of getting stuck into the booze. Plenty of time for that later.’



‘Tea would be wonderful.’

‘We can sample those fabulous cakes too. See you in a minute.’

‘Ella,’ I ask as she’s ducking to go through the door. ‘What does Cwtch mean?’

‘It’s like a cuddle. A loving embrace.’

‘Oh, how lovely.’

She winks at me. When she’s gone, I lie down on the bed, spreading out my arms and legs in a star shape, and look up at the blue sky through the window, letting the rhythm of the sea soothe me.

A cuddle. A loving embrace. I curl into a ball, wrap my arms around my chest and hold myself tightly. Just what I need right now.

## Chapter 5

Ella and I sip our tea, watching Art and Harry from our armchairs by the fireplace in the kitchen. One bottle is already empty. Another is open and dwindling fast. I look away. I have to stop counting. That way madness lies. I should just loosen up and go with the flow. We’re on holiday. Everyone drinks more when they’re not at work, don’t they? Though I can’t, for the life of me, understand the reason for having to be completely drunk to enjoy oneself.

‘Great cakes, Grace,’ Ella says, massaging her tummy.

‘You have buttercream on your nose,’ I tell her.

‘I might leave it there and lick it off later,’ she laughs.

Ella has arranged the lilies in a vase and their sweet scent hangs in the air. Art, an accomplished guitarist, is strumming away, singing Black Sabbath’s ‘Smoke on the Water’. Harry is slapping the table with his hand not quite in time with the song. It’s endearing and slightly annoying at the same time.

‘Does anyone mind if I go for a walk?’ I say brightly. The tight band round my heart is back and I need to get out and fill my lungs with fresh air.

Harry waves his hand in acknowledgement. I don’t think Art has even heard, he’s so into his song.

‘I’ll come with you,’ Ella says. ‘It’s windy but warm out there. You shouldn’t need a cardigan.’

The only downside of not holidaying in St Lucia or Thailand is that for a break in Britain in late June, you still need to pack for every possible weather combination. The boot of the car was stuffed full of gear for any eventuality – just in case.

‘I’ve brought half of my wardrobe with me. I’ll get one just in case.’

At the back of the cottage, there’s a small terrace but, in essence, you’re straight out on to the rocks and then it’s just a short scramble down to the beach. When we reach the sand, I unlace and tug off my Converse high-tops while Ella kicks off her flip-flops. Together we walk along the deserted beach, hugging the edge of the water where the band of smooth stones and shingle gives way to soft, pink sand. We link arms and wander through the edge of the freezing surf, letting it tickle our toes.

The breeze teases and tangles my curls, but I don’t care. If I could simply spend enough time here, I’m sure my troubles would just float away.



‘Oh,’ I say, ‘this is the life. No wonder you love it here so much.’

‘I do,’ Ella says. ‘I’m glad you do too.’ Then she’s quiet.

‘And?’

‘Art doesn’t.’

She looks at me under her dark lashes and smiles ruefully.

I think that Ella is the most naturally pretty of us all. Her hair is a spiky gamine crop, and only someone with a tiny, heart-shaped face could carry it off. I’m not exactly a strapping lass, but Ella’s a little, elfin thing who looks as if a puff of wind would blow her away. Though it’s a mistake to think that Ella is in any way a pushover. She’s got a steely core of determination that has seen her climb from penniless art student to respected artist in ten short years. She’s the type of artist who favours the bold, abstract school of art. Her paintings are generally large, almost like graffiti. She works with aerosol cans in vivid colours and splatters of silver paint. They’re quite angry creations, slashed with vivid lines and jagged objects. You won’t find any twee landscapes in Ella’s portfolio. But there are enough people who enjoy paying high prices for graffiti and angry lines that she now commands a healthy five-figure sum for each of her paintings.

‘We had a blazing row last night,’ she says.

‘Oh no.’

‘I shouldn’t burden you with this, Grace. You look as if you’ve got enough troubles of your own. But who else can I tell?’ We walk along in silence until Ella is ready to speak. ‘He hates Cwtch Cottage. With a vengeance.’ A weary shrug of her shoulders. ‘I adore it here, but Art can’t stand it. You know what he’s like. This is all a bit too low-key, too rural for him. Art likes the high life. Anything rustic brings him out in a rash.’ She tries to make light of it. ‘Five-star hotels are more his thing.’

‘Harry too,’ I sympathise. ‘I can’t see it myself. Why would anyone prefer that above this? Cwtch Cottage is like a slice of heaven on earth. Give Art time. He may come to love it,’ I suggest. ‘Is this his first visit?’

‘Yes. You know that I’ve been trying to cajole him to come up here for years, but he always managed to wriggle out of it. It took all my powers of persuasion to get him to agree to spend this length of time at the cottage. If it was up to Art we’d have stayed one night and then would be on our way back again to the fumes and congestion of London. He says the air is too fresh here and it hurts his lungs to breathe.’

‘Poor lamb. He’s probably just one walking mass of toxins.’ We both laugh at that. ‘Well, you can only wait and see what happens. You’re not easily deterred either. I’m sure you’ll be able to grind him down eventually.’

‘I don’t think so.’ Despite the carefree laughter of a few seconds ago, her voice wobbles and her words are snatched away by the breeze. ‘Not this time.’ She stoops to pick up a shell and washes the sand from it in the sea, holding it up for me to admire. It’s creamy with whorls of raspberry pink, a minute universe of perfectly executed pattern. ‘There’s a lot of inspiration here. I could graduate from angry slashes.’

‘Angry slashes are very profitable.’

She shrugs. ‘So they are, but maybe it’s time to move on. Try something new on the unsuspecting public. Not everything can stay the same.’

I’m only too aware of that.

Ella sighs. ‘Art wants me to sell up here, put the money into a place in Spain. Marbella or somewhere.’ We both wrinkle our noses. ‘He says that we could go there in the winter, escape the relentless British rain and snow. I can’t argue with that.’



‘I’m struggling to imagine you in Marbella.’

‘You know Art,’ she says. ‘Beneath that heavy-metal heart, he likes glitz and glamour. The things that go with it.’ She glances at me again. ‘But you’re right, Grace. I can’t picture myself there at all. I can think of nothing worse.’

‘You must do what you want to do. This place has been in your family for generations. I’ve been here only a short time and I can see why you love it. Can’t Art?’

‘No. Not at all.’ She scuffs her toes in the sand and I can just picture her doing that on visits to Cwtch Cottage as a child all those years ago. I bet it’s hardly changed since. ‘It makes you reconsider things when you lose both of your parents. Neither of them reached their seventies. That seems terribly cruel and so young, these days. What if I’ve got their genes? The Die Young gene?’

‘Don’t be silly.’

‘It makes you think, though. I’m thirty-two. I could be halfway through my life and I haven’t done hardly any of the things I want to do.’

‘Oh, Ella.’ I sling my arm round her shoulders and we touch our foreheads.

‘I want to settle down,’ she confides. ‘I love the studio I have in the garden at Art’s place, but the house belongs to Art, not me. It’s never really felt like my home.’

Ella does have a small and very scruffy flat in Camden, which she’s rented out since she moved into Art’s fabulous place in Notting Hill. And, she’s right, she has a great studio space in a specially built wooden summer house. It’s lovely. She might struggle to give that up.

‘I’d like children, Grace,’ she confesses. ‘I want to get married, settle down. Have the life that my parents did. They adored each other to the end of their lives. One day, I’d like to think that I’ll come to the cottage for holidays with my own family and they’ll love it as much as I did. We were always so happy here. It’s such a simple place to be.’

I met Ella’s parents only a handful of times over the years, but I remember them always holding hands and both grinning from ear to ear as they posed for pictures with her after her graduation ceremony. Both her mum and her dad were as tiny as Ella. Quiet, humble people who just got on with life without complaint. They’d run a haberdashery shop together and, as Ella said, they were so happy with each other until the day that her father died and her mother slipped into confusion. They pampered Ella, but didn’t spoil her. A fine line that they managed to tread well as they turned out a beautiful, considerate daughter.

‘Can you see Art wanting that?’

At the moment I can’t, and my friend takes my silence as agreement. I think Art is far too rock’n’roll for the peace and quiet of Pembrokeshire.

‘I know that he’s unfaithful to me when he’s away.’ Ella lowers her eyes to the sand. ‘I don’t blame him. Not really. The temptation must be enormous. There are always groupies around happy to spend some time with anyone related to the group – even the manager.’ She raises an eyebrow at that.

‘In my twenties, I could put it to the back of my mind, turn a blind eye. What happens on tour, stays on tour and all that. But now it’s different. I want a man who wants to be with just me. I’d like someone who can be in one place and doesn’t hanker to always be on the move. I don’t want someone who’d rather be in a hotel in Budapest or Berlin with some female with no name that he’s picked up for the night. That’s not good, is it?’

‘No.’

I have to agree with that. I don’t think I could handle it if Harry was cheating on me. He might have his faults, but that isn’t one of them. It makes me feel bad that I get on to him about his attachment to red wine and Twitter. What harm is that doing, really, in the scheme





of things?

‘I want someone who adores only me as my dad adored Mum. They were so in love right to the end after more than forty years of marriage. His name was the last word that my mother spoke. Is that too much to want for myself?’ Her eyes fill up. ‘My body’s changing, Grace. I’m having urges. Starting to look at babies in prams. Will Art want that when he can have a different nubile nineteen-year-old every night instead?’

‘While you’ve got some time here together, you need to talk to him.’

‘That’s exactly what he’s avoiding. He knows that I want something deeper and he’s pushing against it all he can.’ Ella’s laugh is brittle. ‘What Art really wants is uncomplicated sex. Even after all this time, I’m not sure he’s convinced about the value of monogamous, lasting relationships.’

At the far end of the beach, we huddle on a rock, our chins on our knees, and stare out to sea. The ever-changing ebb and flow of the waves is mesmerising.

Ella’s eyes fill with tears as she turns to me and says,

‘Nothing stays the same, does it?’