

The shoes were a big mistake. Her toes had gone numb and every time a stiletto heel crunched on to the unforgiving surface of the pavement, it set her teeth on edge. Once again vanity had taken precedence over comfort. *Nice one, Lana.*

She was tottering up Bessemer Place, which ran along the side of St Theodore's. Decades earlier the lane had been a teenage haunt for them, a place for slurping sweet cider and smoking in secret. She sighed, heart heavy, weighed down by loss and the searing pain of grief. All exacerbated by the discomfort in her feet.

Approaching the corner where Bessemer Place met the main street, she saw several figures dressed in black heading for the church – some solitary, some in couples, some in groups, all united in their loss. The service would no doubt be packed and Lana's heart lurched like a stalled engine at the prospect of what lay ahead: the funeral of her most wonderful friend.

'Lana.' A voice behind her.

Cautious. Sad.

It was Judith.

Inevitable that they should see each other – today of all days. Uncertainty fizzled between them, and they hesitated on the verge of a hug before both deciding against it.

‘Can’t believe it’s happening, can you?’ asked Lana, her voice shaking as she fumbled in her bag for a small bottle of Rescue Remedy and swigged back its contents like whisky.

‘The family wants us down the front,’ said Judith.

‘Oh Christ, I’m not sure I can handle that . . .’ replied Lana, panicking. ‘So close to the coffin and . . . I’m just not very good with—’

Judith trampled over her words. ‘Today’s not about you though, is it, Lana? It’s about Catrin.’

Lana bit her lip and refrained from reacting as the awkwardness between them grew. Then, without warning and with the worst possible timing, Lana felt the familiar surge of heat spread across the back of her scalp and down her neck as if she’d been plugged into a wall socket. ‘Bloody hot flushes,’ she mumbled, and pulled off the black silk wrap that was draped over her shoulders before flapping the neckline of her dress.

‘Here y’are, borrow this,’ said Judith, reluctantly rustling in her bag for a Spanish-style fan.

‘Cheers,’ said Lana, flicking it open with flamencan flair and cooling herself in its welcome breeze. A minute later the flush had passed.

‘Shall we go in then?’ asked Judith, a tad more gently.

‘Yes,’ said Lana as she held Judith’s gaze. ‘We can do this. Can’t we?’

PART ONE
1986

Thirty-one years earlier

1

Catrin

Catrin's father was doing his Sensible Face. This was the face that forty-eight-year-old, half-Welsh, half-Irish Huw Kelly adopted whenever Catrin or her brother were about to embark upon any kind of trip without their parents.

Catrin had first encountered Sensible Face aged five, before her school visit to Coed Celyn museum in Mrs John's class. After that, the Face appeared before all hockey, netball and swimming tournaments, Guide camps or youth-club jaunts to Belgium, church pilgrimages to Lourdes, and sixth-form skiing trips to Austria. Sensible Face was also known as Here-Are-the-Practicalities Face and What-To-Do-in-an-Emergency Face. But underneath it lurked the precariously hidden face of Terrified Dad, looking down at this precious cargo, which grew more valuable with every day that passed, and who was currently thinking, *If anything happens to you, my life will be over.*

Huw had reason to worry, because Catrin was about to head off on the Big Trip – island-hopping for a month in Greece, accompanied by Judith Harris and

Lana Lloyd, her best friends since she was five. The three girls were as different as chalk, cheese and chocolate. But they knew and loved each other inside out and were as close today as they'd been in the first week of infant school. During their thirteen-year friendship they'd barely spent a single day without seeing each other and all three knew that when they returned from the Big Trip, they'd be heading off in very separate directions – Catrin to study medicine at Cardiff, Judith to read economics in London, and Lana to train as a musical theatre actress. So what lay ahead was more than just a holiday. It was their final hurrah, their last chance to stock up on each other's company before beginning the next chapter of their young lives. Deciding where to go on the Big Trip had been far from easy: backpacking in Australia? Campervanning in New Zealand? Fruit picking in France? Judith had suggested interrailing – drawn to the history and might of great European cities like Hamburg and Nice – whereas Catrin longed to see Paris and Rome. 'It's so romantic,' she said wistfully.

'It is if you're loaded!' Lana had warned, instantly dampening her friends' enthusiasm. 'But us three are on a budget of ten quid a day. And I'd rather wash in the sea and sleep on a beach than spend a month in a manky train full of horny stoners.'

'Classy,' Judith had said sarcastically and Catrin sighed.

'Look,' said Lana, softening. 'What about island-hopping? There's shed-loads of history and stuff in

Greece, so that's *that* box ticked for you, Jude. And Cat, if you want all the romantic bollocks, then what's more idyllic than a sunset on Skiathos? *I'll* be sorted with a beach and a bar, so Bob's your uncle. What d'you reckon?'

They had begrudgingly agreed. Both of them were used to Lana getting her own way, but frustratingly she was usually right.

'Excellent!' Lana had said with a smile. 'Island-hopping it is.'

'Now you're to keep it on you at *all* times, d'you hear? Even when you sleep!' said Huw as he held out a highly unattractive khaki-coloured money belt.

'But I can't wear it swimming, Dad, or in the shower. All the travellers' cheques and cash will go soggy,' Catrin replied.

'She've got a point mind, Huw,' said Liz, Catrin's mother, who was peeling a price tag off the sole of a new flip-flop.

'We've discussed this, Elizabeth.' Huw always used his wife's full name whenever he was trying to be serious. 'Catrin is to locate the nearest safety deposit box at every location – be it an Athenian youth hostel, or a taverna in Kos, whatever . . .'

'I don't think they have safety deposit boxes in crack dens mind, Dad,' said Catrin's twenty-one-year-old brother Tom as he sloped sleepily into the kitchen in search of Shredded Wheat.

'Not helpful, Tom,' sighed Huw.

‘Weren’t you meant to be in work at nine?’ asked Liz. She loved the fact that her student son had a summer job at the bakery – he brought home all sorts of lovely treats.

‘Taken the day off, haven’t I? To say goodbye to Frog Head.’

‘Oi!’ Catrin laughed and threw a toast crust at him. Tom had called her Frog Head ever since she was brought home from hospital at one day old. Aged three, he’d stared at her in silence for ten seconds, then announced to the world that she looked like a frog.

Catrin Kelly couldn’t look less like a frog if she tried. She’d inherited her grandmother’s pale Irish complexion, ‘which *must* be protected with Factor Fifty when you’re out in that sun,’ Liz had warned her, over and over again. She’d also inherited Nana Kelly’s laughing green eyes – which she liked – and her strawberry-blond hair – which she didn’t. Mainly because it stubbornly grew in an unruly abundance of corkscrew curls. They’d appeared when she was two and had never left her since, defying gravity and copious amounts of hair-straightening products. ‘I wish I had your hair!’ people would say. And Catrin would smile politely, thinking, ‘No you bloody don’t – it’s like walking round with a Highland cow on my head.’ Catrin had a catalogue of complaints when it came to her physical attributes: she thought her nose was ‘pixie-ish’, her legs were too short and her knees turned inwards – none of which anyone else could see, of course. She was also blind to her other endearing features – such as her open-heartedness, her

massive capacity for compassion and her staunch loyalty to those she loved. But Catrin's parents thought she was the most beautiful girl in the world, both inside and out.

'Just think – we may never see you again, you go fallin' in love with some Greek hippie!' Tom continued.

'Nobody is doin' no fallin' in love with no hippies,' said Huw, without conviction. 'And stop throwing food at your brother.'

'Do they even *have* hippies in Greece?' Liz wondered in all honesty.

'Will you *please* take this seriously, the lot of you!' Huw exploded in frustration, the Irish accent of his childhood creeping through as it always did when he was even mildly upset. He passed Catrin the money belt. 'Now try it on so I can demonstrate adjusting the width.'

'OK.' Catrin did as she was told. She'd learned over the years that it was easier to just go along with her father when he was anxious like this. It would at least put his mind at rest, even though she knew she'd be hiding the belt under her bed before she left, with no intention of ever using it.

'Thanks again for last night,' Catrin said as she placed the belt around her waist. 'Everyone had a crackin' time.'

'Ah, it was a pleasure, wasn't it, Huw? You've got such lovely friends.' Liz smiled.

'Aye,' mumbled Huw, whose head was still a little fuzzy from the farewell bash they'd thrown the night before.

‘Judith didn’t stay long,’ said Tom through a mouthful of breakfast. ‘We were gonna have an arm wrestle an’ everythin’.

‘Arm wrestle!’ exclaimed Liz. ‘Dear God, is it any wonder you’ve not got a girlfriend, you go arm wrestling with young women at parties!’

‘She had to get back early,’ said Catrin. ‘You know what her mum’s like – Oww! Dad, calm down, mun! Don’t be so rough.’ Huw was tugging at the money belt with such enthusiasm, Catrin nearly lost her balance.

‘I’m just testing it for strength,’ Huw said, more to himself than anyone else.

‘Judith will be glad of a break from that woman, you ask me,’ said Liz. ‘How she puts up with her I will never know.’

‘Her dad’s all right though – had a game with him down the club the other day,’ said Tom. ‘Don’t say much, but he’s a demon with a pool cue.’

‘Yeah, well don’t go saying anything to her today now, OK?’ said Catrin. ‘It’s been enough of an ordeal getting Jude to come in the first place. Lana’s worked really hard persuading her that Patricia will manage without her. Dad, that’s actually digging into my flesh. I think you’re drawing blood.’

‘Sorry, sorry . . .’

The doorbell rang and Catrin’s parents exchanged a look. ‘Ah, that’ll be Father O’Leary,’ said Huw with forced breeziness as he made his way into the hall.

‘What’s *he* want?’ said Tom.

Liz looked sheepish and turned to Catrin. ‘Well,

your father thought seeing as you didn't make it to Mass on Sunday . . .'

'Mum – seriously, how many times?' said Catrin. 'I don't go to Mass any more!'

'She's a fully fledged atheist now, like me,' said Tom.

Liz flicked his arm with a tea towel, whispering through gritted teeth, 'Hush your nonsense, Thomas Kelly! Sayin' things like that with a priest standing just outside the door!'

And suddenly in a Jekyll and Hydeian attitude switch she became all smiles and grace, turning towards – 'Father O'Leary!' – as he walked into their kitchen. A short, squat, solid little man, who looked like he could handle himself in the ring, never mind the pulpit, was nodding enthusiastically at them all.

'Alrigh', Liz? 'ow's it goin', alrigh'?' Father O'Leary was from Cardiff, and his broad accent and chippy, high-pitched voice always took anyone he met by surprise. He somehow sounded too urban for a man of the cloth.

Huw stood behind him, glaring at his children and daring them to misbehave in the presence of Christ's Representative on Earth. 'Catrin Mary, will you make Father O'Leary a cup of tea now?' said Huw with fake jollity – his accent becoming positively Corkonian. This often happened when he was anywhere near churches, vicars or nuns.

Catrin, still wearing the khaki money belt, stared back at Huw defiantly. 'Sure now, dear Father, I will, to be sure!'

The priest was putting on his liturgical stole and didn't seem to notice Catrin's sarcasm. She headed for the kettle.

Catrin loved her parents dearly, but this kowtowing to the Church did her absolute head in. She wasn't actually an atheist like Tom, she was *something* – she just didn't know what any more. When she was little she'd loved all the drama of going to Mass, the dressing up for her first communion, inventing sins to take to confession and repeating endless Hail Marys in quick succession like a lucky mantra. But as she'd grown older, Catrin's faith had begun to crumble. Sure, she liked the *positive* side of Jesus – he seemed like a nice man with good values: kind, compassionate, forgiving. But the rest of it? No, thanks. All that guilt and retribution. So they came to a family compromise: Catrin would continue to go to Mass until she turned eighteen, but after that it was only fair she should be allowed to make an adult decision. Seeing as she was now, well, an adult.

She'd never told anyone, not even Judith and Lana, but the first week she didn't go to Mass, she lay on her bed and cried. Was she tempting Fate? Was something awful going to happen to her now that she'd become . . . actually, what *had* she become? A heathen? A God-less monster? The Catholic guilt with which she'd grown up was not going to be easy to shift. Her parents never once tried to persuade her to join them on Sunday mornings, and she appreciated that. But then when

Christmas came, she couldn't stay away from Midnight Mass. 'I feel such a hypocrite,' she'd said to Judith, who couldn't understand why.

'I don't see what the big deal is. Can't you just go to church as and when you feel like it? You know, a bit like Aerobics?'

'Maybe,' Catrin had said. But it didn't sit comfortably with her.

The kettle clicked and Catrin made the tea. 'So, it's this afternoon you's off then, is it, Kate?' Father O'Leary had never got her name right in eighteen years.

'That's right, Father,' Liz answered on her daughter's behalf.

'Actually, my name's Catrin,' she mumbled pointlessly, as Liz jumped in over her.

'Huw's taking them to Bristol airport at one and they're flying straight to Athens, would you believe!' Since Catrin had 'abandoned the Church' her mother was presumably nervous of letting her answer the priest of her own accord, in case she began spitting blasphemy in an *Exorcist*-inspired tirade.

'Ah, Athens. Crackin'. Well, now, here's the thing . . .'

Catrin was bizarrely fascinated by the way Father O'Leary spoke. As if he was jabbing them all on the arm with his Cardiffian-accented utterances. Short, staccato and stilted. Like a series of dotted quavers on a music manuscript. He carried on, taking his crucifix out of his bag as he spoke and placing it delicately on the kitchen table. Liz surreptitiously removed Tom's

box of Shredded Wheat. ‘Your mum and dad – they wants me to say a little prayer for you, alright?’ Just to send you on your travels, like . . .’

Tom glanced at his sister, desperate to laugh. She returned the look with mortification.

‘So, let’s all bow our heads a minute, is it?’ And his voice changed gear, sinking down an octave, becoming intense and mysterious, yet still delivering words with machine-gun-like rapidity. ‘Lord-Jesus-Christ you are the light-an’-th’-hope. Deliver oh Lor’ our servant Catherine—’

‘It’s Catrin, it is—’

‘Ssh,’ hissed Liz, her eyes firmly closed.

‘. . . that she may stay safe-in-yer-care, as like Sain’-Chris’pher the patron saint of travels she travels herself to the far’way lands of Greece, an’-that.’

Tom couldn’t control himself and exploded in a snort.

‘Amen.’

Huw and Liz in unison said, ‘Amen.’

‘Sorry, can I ask something?’ Catrin interjected.

‘No. Ssh,’ said Huw. The priest had turned to his bag of tricks once more and was rustling around inside.

‘But how can the prayer work if he got my name wrong? I mean, did he even say my name right when I got baptized?’ Catrin pleaded in hushed tones.

By now Tom was having to stifle his hysteria with his mother’s Tower of London tea towel, stuffing almost half of it inside his mouth.

‘Ta dah!’ announced Father O’Leary, producing a

small blue box. Catrin noticed the vinyl was peeling on one edge. He opened it and nestled inside on a cushion of grey plastic sponge was a gaudy-looking silver-coloured necklace.

Catrin looked closer and realized it was a tacky St Christopher charm, the kind they sold in the dusty cabinet at the back of the church.

‘What d’you think of that then?’ said Father O’Leary with gleaming eyes, as if he was showing her the Koh-i-Noor diamond.

‘It’s to keep you safe on yer hols!’ announced Huw.

‘Lovely!’ declared Liz. ‘Now let’s get it on you, shall we? Let it start doin’ its job!’

Catrin looked at her mother in disbelief.

Tom had tears streaming down his face. ‘It’s absolutely beautiful, Karen,’ he announced. And nobody detected his sarcasm. Except Catrin, of course. Who stood there resplendent in her khaki money belt and nickel-plated St Christopher charm that looked more like an SOS medallion, only not as subtle.

‘Hey now doesn’t that look the real deal!’ declared Father O’Leary.

The phone rang in the hall.

‘I’ll get it!’ Catrin screeched, desperate to get out of the kitchen. She leapt into the hallway and grabbed the phone. ‘5-0-6-5?’ she said.

‘Cat, it’s Lana.’

‘Oh, thank God! Look, the sooner you get here and we bugger off to Greece, the better. My family is actually deranged. My mother has only gone and—’

‘Babe, we got a problem.’

Catrin caught her breath.

‘What’s going on?’ she asked, worried.

On the other end of the phone, Lana sighed.

‘It’s Judith. She’s not fucking coming.’

2

Judith

After checking her bedroom for anything she may have forgotten, Judith picked up her bulging rucksack to test the weight and heaved it on to her shoulders. She couldn't wait to leave. Focusing on the trip had buoyed her up through the pressure of exams. A little beacon in the otherwise murky mass of revision timetables, instant coffee, late-night cramming and nervous stress. But now she could put all that behind her: soon she'd be flying to Athens for the adventure of a lifetime with her two best friends.

A loud banging from the back yard disturbed her reverie. Going to the window, she watched as her father called the cats over for their food, clanging a spoon against the tin bowl. He did it with the same rhythm and velocity every single morning. He loved those cats. 'Betty! Betty! Come on! Twister! Breakfast!'

She watched him stretch and look out over their modest back yard, sighing deeply. *I know you're unhappy*, she thought, and a sudden lurch of sorrow clutched at her heart: would he be all right without her? As if

sensing she was there, he turned and looked up. ‘All packed?’ he called.

‘I think so!’ she replied, injecting as much jollity as she could to stop him feeling sad.

‘Got time for a game before you go?’ he said with a smile.

Twenty minutes later they were sitting in the sunshine on two nylon-backed camp chairs, sipping strong Glengettie tea: hers made with three sugars and top-of-the-milk cream, his black with no sugar. The backgammon board was laid out in front of them on an old coffee table he’d once rescued from a skip. Whenever in use it had to be stabilized with a folded-up beer mat. Judith threw the dice and made her move, the two of them sitting in comfortable silence like they always did when they played. Betty and Twister lay on the warm paving stones near their feet, indulging in a post-breakfast nap.

As Judith moved the checker around the board she stole a glance at him: the father she had loved as her own since she was six years old. To any onlooker she could easily pass as his flesh and blood. Her thick dark shoulder-length hair, scooped up now and pinned back with a tortoiseshell clip, was the same colour and texture as his – at least, his when he was younger. And her brown Bambi eyes and gentle frown could give her a very serious look, just like him. Though when she smiled, her joy was infectious.

Adopting the voice of a sports commentator, she whispered, *‘It’s getting tense now, ladies and gentlemen.’*

World backgammon champion George Andrew Harris is worried his crown is about to be nicked!

He laughed, picked up his own dice and threw.

George wasn't her stepdad's real name.

Nor was Andrew or Harris. But when he'd arrived in Wales from Cyprus in 1973 he'd quickly discovered that nobody could pronounce Georgios Andreas Charalambos. Even though they'd had no problem getting their tongues around Rhosllanerchrugog or Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch. Judith had always loved hearing how Georgios became George: how the foreman at the building site where he'd first found work had told him, 'You're gonna have to change it, mate. People are funny round 'ere with foreign names an' that.' And so overnight he became good old George Andrew Harris. And whenever he told the tale, he said it with a laugh in his voice, making it into a joke. But Judith knew her father secretly missed his real name. On more than one occasion she'd heard him saying quietly to the cats, 'My name is Georgios Andreas Charalambos. Pleased to meet you!'

They finished up the game. He had 'allowed' her to win – Judith knew this but she didn't let on. As she started packing the board away, he picked up the red set of dice – *his* dice – took out a small hand-carved box from his pocket and placed them carefully inside.

'Where d'you get that from?' she said, admiring its craftsmanship.

‘Ha, I found it when I was clearing out the shed.’ He snapped it shut. ‘I must have made it years ago when I was bored.’ He handed her the box. ‘I want you to take it with you. Who knows – you may play the backgammon on your travels, eh?’

She knew by this he meant, *You may play the backgammon when you visit Cyprus on your travels*. It was strange how they never really talked about his homeland. She’d often tried to, but her questions were always met with one-word answers or an abrupt change of subject.

From the snippets of information she’d gathered over the years, she knew he was from a place called Kaktoria, and that he had no family over there any more. He was an only child and his parents had died before he’d left. He’d said it was all so long ago, it seemed like another life. ‘I’m a Taffy boy now, isn’t it?’ he’d joke.

She held the little box in her hand, feeling its smooth edges that she knew he’d have lovingly sanded. ‘But if I take your dice,’ she said, ‘you can’t play when I’m not here.’

‘Who else ’m I gonna play with?’ he laughed. ‘No one else is as good as you!’

It was the strangest of moments. Anyone watching would have said he was sharing a simple little joke with his eighteen-year-old stepdaughter, making her feel good about herself before she went off on her milestone holiday. But she knew there was more going on. She just couldn’t pinpoint what.

He reached out and held her hand. ‘You are going to

have such an adventure, Judi-moo,' he said, using his pet name for her which he'd used for as long as she could remember.

'We're gonna pack in a ridiculous amount, I know that.'

He paused, then smiled. 'Not just on this holiday. In life!'

She frowned. 'Dad, are you OK?'

His lip trembled and he looked as if he was about to say something more. Then came an urgent knocking on the back gate. The cats leapt up in defence.

'Hello? Mr Harris, are you there?' said a voice neither of them recognized.

George got up and walked to the gate, undoing both bolts. Standing on the other side was a female police officer.

'Oh, thank goodness. I don't think your doorbell's working . . .'

'What's happened? What is the matters?' asked George. His English always faltered when he was distressed.

'You *are* Mr Harris, I take it?'

'Yes,' Judith and George answered simultaneously.

The police officer took a deep breath. 'Right, sir. Well, I'm afraid it's about your wife.'

3

Lana

Eighteen-year-old Lana Lloyd looked good on the back of Gareth Metcalf's Honda 500. And she knew it. Frequently described as a 'surfing chick' – even though she'd never been near a surfboard in her life – she was tall and willowy, with blonde, layered hair, painstakingly crimped in homage to Stevie Nicks. She had hazy, hazel eyes, a dazzling smile and was perfectly at home in her own skin.

The two of them had gone for one final spin before she left for the airport, taking their favourite route, over the Heads of the Valleys Road. She'd clung on to him tight, thrilled as ever by the speed and power of the bike as it navigated the winding road that offered breathtaking views of the Welsh valleys. It was one of the best feelings in the world.

Lana and Gareth had met almost a year ago when she'd taken her new old banger of a Fiesta out for its second run. She'd saved and saved for this car, scraping together every penny she'd earned from her Saturday job at the sweetshop and Sunday-waitressing at the pub. It was

more than her pride and joy – it was her ticket to freedom, and it – no, *she* – was called Diana, because she was such a princess. Having learned from an early age to be independent, and not wanting to bother her poor dad, who was always up to his eyes either in nappies or shift work, Lana decided it'd be a good idea to learn some basic car maintenance. Because she didn't want to rely upon anyone should Diana ever break down.

So she'd headed over to Whitley's Garage on the little industrial estate just outside town. Pulling into the workshop area at the back, she was greeted by the sight of three mechanics of varying ages, beavering away, either bent over, lying under or sat inside three different vehicles. Radio 1 was blasting forth in the background, and Simon Bates was telling the woeful tale of a tragic couple on his *Our Tune* slot.

She slammed the door for attention and shouted a little too loudly, 'Boys, may I introduce you to Diana? She's getting on a bit and needs a good seeing-to!'

The guy underneath the white van quickly rolled out on his mechanic's creeper and whispered, 'Be with you in a minute, it's nearly finished.' Then rolled back under the van.

Lana stood there, confused, as Simon Bates drew his story to a melodramatic finale. '*The crematorium curtains slowly closed . . .*' he declared over the opening bars of 'Against All Odds' by Phil Collins, '*and Jessie knew she had finally lost him for good. It was time to say one . . . last . . . heart-breaking . . . farewell!*' The music got louder and the lyrics kicked in:

*How can I just let you walk away?
Just let you leave without a trace?*

The mechanic fixing the Maestro cassette player whooped, cheered and applauded, and the older mechanic bending over a blue Cavalier lifted his head and wiped tears from his eyes. ‘Oh, that was a good one! Fair play!’ And finally the guy under the van reappeared on his trolley. ‘Yep, got to give it to him, never a bad story with Bates!’ Then he rolled off, leapt to his feet, wiped his oily hands with a rag and smiled at Lana. ‘Sorry ’bout that, only we listen to it every day.’

Lana stood there, speechless.

‘*Our Tune*,’ he explained. ‘Now, what were you after?’

It took Lana a while to work out why she was lost for words. Was it simply the shock of witnessing three grown men moved to tears by such sentimental tripe, or had she in fact been stupefied by the gorgeousness of the sight before her – this tall, tanned, smooth-skinned, toned-armed, *Our-Tune*-loving mechanic? He looked a bit older than her – early twenties, maybe? – with his oil-covered but beautifully shaped hands, thick dark locks and grey eyes. She was mesmerized until he interrupted her reverie.

‘You want me to take a look?’ he said, indicating her car and still wiping oil from his hands.

‘Yes, please,’ she bleated.

I sound like a sheep, she thought, and tried to pull herself together.

But then he smiled. And she wished he hadn't, because she could feel herself blushing. His was the most bewitching and captivating smile she'd ever encountered.

'Open her up then,' he said, heading for the car. 'I presume you know how to do that?'

'Umm, no, not really.'

'Handle under the steering wheel. Pull it towards you.'

'OK.' She followed his instructions and heard the satisfying *thunk* of the hood latch as it opened. She watched him deftly seek the second latch and lift the bonnet, securing it in place with the hood prop. 'D'you mind if I write stuff down?' she said, brandishing a notebook and pen.

'Go ahead,' he answered, evidently impressed. 'So, who bought you this then? Present from Mummy and Daddy, is it?'

'Hah! You're kiddin', aren't you? We're a family of seven. My birthday, I'd be lucky to get a five-pound Boots voucher!'

'Oh, right,' he said, and began checking out the engine. He showed her how to clean the dipstick before measuring the oil – 'but do it when the engine's cold, OK?' – and how to fill the screen wash and the water. He explained the fuse box and how to use the jump leads. And finally, how to change a tyre.

'Blimey, I hope I never have to do that!' she said, finishing off drawing a complex set of diagrams.

'Tell you what, pass us that,' he said, indicating her pad and pen. She handed them over and he scribbled

down some details. ‘That’s the number here at the garage. Keep it somewhere safe – glove compartment maybe – and you can always call us if you ever break down.’

‘Ah thanks.’ And then she watched as he tore out a sheet from the pad and wrote down another number. Next to a name. *Gareth*.

‘And that’s me.’ He held the pad out to her and she took it, their fingers momentarily touching. ‘If ever you want to take her out for a spin, just give me a call. Play your cards right, I’ll show you how to do a handbrake skid and a jump start!’

Their eyes locked and she smiled.

‘Or we could just skip all that if you like, Gareth,’ she said, ‘and go the cinema tonight?’

Ten months later they were what her father would call ‘going steady’. Was it love? She didn’t know. What she *did* know was that she felt a secret smugness that Gareth was her boyfriend. Unlike the other girls in school dating other *boys* in school, Lana loved the fact that *her* fella was a proper *man*. Older – albeit by only three years – and oh so, so much sexier.

‘You *do* like a bit of rough mind, don’t you, Larn?’ Catrin had teased her as they’d ambled home from their end-of-school party in June.

‘Yeah I do, as it goes,’ she’d answered, matter-of-fact, as if she’d just been asked if she liked sugar in her tea.

‘God, remember that bloke Cormack from the waltzers down the fair,’ Catrin continued, ‘with the pierced tongue and that snake tattoo up his leg?’

‘Shut up!’ Lana retorted, smiling. ‘You could hardly call him a boyfriend! I only saw him for a week.’

‘Whilst simultaneously seeing the assistant manager of Dixies Grill,’ Judith chipped in.

‘Yeah, and *he* was no spring chicken, let’s be honest!’ added Cat.

‘Hey, what’s this?’ Lana had laughed. ‘Have-a-go-at-Lana Night? Dennis was twenty-five! And I don’t remember you complaining at the time, Catrin Kelly – gave you your fair share of free onion rings, didn’t he?’

‘Oh yeah, that’s true.’

‘She just likes to keep her options open, don’t you, Larn?’ Judith had carried on. ‘I mean why settle for one bad boy when you can have a handful?’

They’d all had a few drinks by that stage and Lana knew that if she didn’t laugh this off it could turn into one of their silly rows. So she didn’t rise to the bait and changed the subject.

There was an ongoing antagonism between Lana and Judith when it came to boyfriends. It was no secret that Judith hadn’t taken to Gareth when he and Lana started going out. But by the same token, Lana hadn’t ever had time for Judith’s ex-boyfriend, Matthew Price, who was deputy head boy at school and, in Lana’s eyes, boring, safe and distinctly dull. Though admittedly Lana could see the physical attraction, him being on the chunky side and playing rugby for the county. When Matthew broke up with Judith the previous Christmas, Lana wasted no time in telling her it was a blessing.

‘That bloke was so far up himself it’s a wonder he never got vertigo.’ But instead of appreciating Lana’s support, Judith snapped back, ‘Huh! You’re dating a mechanic with two O-levels and an addiction to Hubba Bubba. You’re hardly in a position to comment on *my* taste in blokes, Lana Lloyd!’

Catrin had had to intervene at that point, before things turned nasty. ‘Come on, girls. Look, we might not always like each other’s boyfriends, but we mustn’t let it come between us, OK?’

Lana and Judith both privately thought this was rich coming from Catrin, who’d never had a proper boyfriend in her life. But they knew it would be cruel to point this out. Dear Catrin. Always the diplomat. And at least *she* thought Gareth was OK, even if Judith found him annoying.

Lana thought Gareth was OK too – and she was really going to miss him over the forthcoming weeks. But she was also going to miss the sanctuary of his little home. His two-bedroomed flat above the ancient launderette in Coed Celyn, which was pronounced *Koyd Kellin* and literally translated as Holly Wood. The flat was a world away from her own household, which was bursting at the seams with an ever-growing family.

Just before Lana’s fourth birthday, her mother had suddenly died. Lana could barely remember her, but she did remember that for three years after that it had been just the two of them – Lana and her dad, Keith. Then, seemingly from nowhere, Janis had appeared

and two became three. Janis was great. She'd always been patient and kind with her little stepdaughter and treated her as her own. But before long there was a baby sister on the way, followed by another, then another, until Lana's status as an only child had become very much a distant memory, finding herself the eldest of five girls.

These days she shared a bedroom with her fifteen-year-old sister, who was incapable of *not* talking. And everything in her family home was *noisy* and *messy* and *dramatic*. It wasn't that everyone was always arguing, but everyone was always SHOUTING. And sometimes Lana hankered for peace like iced lemonade on a dusty bike ride. Which is why she continually sought solace in Gareth's little two-bedroom flat. She loved it. Yes, it was shabby and the décor was grim; there were no radiators, just an old gas heater that they dragged from room to room when it was cold, and there was never enough hot water for a proper bath. Condensation trickled down the windows in winter, and in summer, when they opened them, they were frequently made queasy by the overpowering smell of washing powder floating up from the launderette. But she loved it.

Arriving back in Coed Celyn, Gareth took a shortcut down Victoria Road. That's when they saw the police car, parked right outside Judith's house. He slowed the bike to a standstill. 'D'you wanna go in and check?'

'I dunno – it's probably their neighbours. Judith said they're always fighting.'

But just as Gareth was revving the engine to move off again, a policewoman came out of the house, followed by Judith and her dad.

Lana called out, 'Jude?'

'It's my mother,' she said quietly, her face ashen. 'She's in A&E.'

'Bloody hell!'

'They think it's a heart attack, but they're doing tests.' Judith's father was standing a few yards off, looking eager to get away. The policewoman held open the car door. 'Look, I've got to go.'

'D'you want us to come with you? To the hospital?' said Lana.

'Don't be daft. You've got a bloody plane to catch!' Judith attempted a smile.

It took a moment to sink in, before Lana exclaimed, 'Jude, we're not going without you, you silly cow!'

'I'm not coming, Lana.' She sounded almost annoyed. 'How can I?'

'But we can get a later flight, or go tomorrow . . . next week, even!'

'Babes, don't you see?' Judith carried on. 'My mother's gonna need looking after. There's no way I can leave her.'

Lana sighed. 'It just feels so . . . I dunno . . . *final*.'

Judith hugged Lana tight. 'You and Catrin, you're gonna have a brilliant time. And I want at least ten postcards, OK?'

Lana nodded, too choked up to speak. The trip they'd been planning so meticulously for a year had

been smashed apart in a matter of minutes. It was all so unfair.

‘Come on,’ said Gareth quietly. ‘You better let Catrin know.’

There was no point in saying any more. Lana nodded and climbed back on to the bike, clinging to her boyfriend even harder now, for comfort.

4

Judith

According to the ambulance team who'd brought her in, Patricia Harris had been found collapsed on Coed Celyn high street at ten o'clock that morning. Walking home from her shift in the kitchen of the Sandringham Hotel, she'd 'felt this overwhelming pain in my arms and chest and thought oh God it's happening again.' The ambulance arrived within minutes of a passer-by calling 999 from the shoe shop outside of which she'd fallen, and when the paramedic did the usual medical-history interrogation, Mrs Harris had explained she'd suffered three cardiac arrests over the past ten years. So the chances were this was no ordinary fainting or low-blood-sugar incident.

'Stay with me, darlin', will you?' Patricia had begged Nolly, the student nurse. 'Just until my family get here.'

Nolly hadn't dared say no. She found Mrs Harris to be both terrifying and fascinating: a fifty-one-year-old white female, a little below average height at five foot three and a little above average weight at ten stone two, attractive in a jaded, defeated sort of way – with a face that had definitely seen better, sexier days. The grey

roots of her far-from-natural auburn hair were defying the home-kit colour she so rigorously applied each month, peeping through her scalp as if to say, *You can't escape us, lady!* Her make-up was dated: a heavily shaded top lid and false eyelashes that appeared to have been recycled several times. Her lipstick looked like it had started the day a frosty peach, and the deep-red varnish on her nails was tired and chipped. She reminded Nolly of the 1960s lampshade in her grandmother's best room.

But her main fascination with Mrs Harris came from the fact that the doctor could find nothing wrong with her, even though the patient *insisted* she was dangerously ill. After carrying out an ECG, and checking her blood pressure and oxygen levels, there was no sign whatsoever of any problems with her heart. So Patricia was told to take it easy and visit her GP if she felt unwell again. She complained that she couldn't stop shaking and would someone please find her a wheelchair as she feared she may collapse if she tried to walk.

'There they are!' she exclaimed with a faint smile when George and Judith arrived an hour later. 'My husband, my lovely daughter, thank God!' and she choked back the tears. 'Oh George, I've had such a fright!' she cried out as they approached. 'This little one has been an angel,' she said of Nolly, who smiled at them politely and began to explain the diagnosis. But before she could get her words out, Patricia interrupted. 'Darling, don't let me waste any more of your precious time!

Come here!’ And in a flamboyant show of gratitude, she kissed the nurse firmly on both cheeks before thrusting a pound note into her hand.

‘Oh, we don’t accept tips,’ said Nolly.

‘Take it!’ Patricia urged, with the tiniest hint of a threat.

The nurse did as she was told and said goodbye.

Judith and George stood there staring, not really sure what to do next.

‘You took your time,’ Patricia said in a low voice, a far cry from the weak, emotional, tip-thrusting patient she’d been just seconds before.

‘The police came,’ George said. ‘We didn’t know you were—’

‘I was lying on that pavement for a good ten minutes – another five and I’d have been dead! That’s what the ambulance man told me!’

‘How come they’re not keeping you in?’ asked Judith.

‘You’re a doctor now, are you, Missy? A medical expert!’

Judith opened her mouth to answer but was interrupted by Patricia hissing, ‘Just get me home, will you, for God’s sake. I’m to have twenty-four-hour bed rest for at least a week.’ She didn’t look at either of them when she said it.

‘I’ll go and call a taxi,’ Judith offered, and exchanged a sad smile with George.

As she approached reception she saw the student nurse putting Patricia’s pound note into a charity box on the

desk. *'To make sad children happy . . .'* it said along its base. Judith picked up the handset of the dedicated taxi phone-line and waited for a reply. 'Excuse me,' she said to the student nurse, 'can I just ask . . . my mother – did she have a heart attack?'

Nolly smiled back. 'Er . . . no. Didn't she tell you? We think it was something hormonal . . . We only checked the heart because of her previous history.'

'What previous history?'

Nolly glanced around – she was still very new to this. Was she breaking patient confidentiality? Surely not – this was the woman's daughter, after all. 'Well, she told the ambulance man she's had three previous heart attacks,' she said quietly. The look of confusion on Judith's face undermined the nurse's confidence. 'So . . . that's why we checked?' she said slowly, and it came out as more of a question than a statement.

'My mother's never had a heart attack in her life,' Judith said.

Celyn Cabs. Where to you goin', please? The voice of the taxi operator came crackling down the line.

'Er, yes, Victoria Road, please,' said Judith, shaking with what felt like rage. 'Three passengers. Name of Harris.'

The nurse gave her a sympathetic smile and watched as Judith replaced the handset and headed back to her parents.

In the taxi on the way home, Judith didn't speak. Not that she ever said much in the company of her mother,

but this time she remained completely silent. As did her father. Patricia was oblivious, chatting away – some would say flirting, even – with the driver from Celyn Cabs, divulging the drama of her morning, and explaining she'd had a mild heart attack and would have to go back for more tests but *they'd treated her like royalty there, thank God for the NHS*. The driver was completely taken in. He thought Patricia was charming. They always did.

Sat in the front, Judith struggled hard with her anger, wanting to scream out loud at the injustice of having a mother like hers. A mother who would purposefully sabotage her daughter's much-longed-for holiday. A mother who would so shamelessly lie in order to prevent her daughter finding any kind of happiness.

I hate her, she said inside her head, over and over like a mantra, twisting the little box of dice in her hand from pure frustration. She'd kept it in her pocket like a lucky charm since George had given it to her that morning.

They pulled up in front of the house and George got out, paying the driver and opening the door for Patricia.

Reverting to victim mode for the benefit of any watching neighbours, Patricia took her husband's proffered arm and let him lead her slowly indoors.

Judith went ahead of them, wanting to put as much distance as she feasibly could between herself and her mother. She walked straight through to the kitchen. Her rucksack sat by the fireplace, waiting patiently to

leave home for its big adventure, like an eager puppy longing to be walked. She went to the sink and poured herself a glass of water from the tap. Through the window she could see the backgammon set in the yard outside, half put away as it had been when the police had come knocking.

From the living room, she heard the familiar sound of her mother chipping away at George: *Don't do this . . . Make sure you do that . . . nip, chip, nag, sneer . . .* The well-worn soundtrack of Judith's home life. She took a deep breath, steeling herself to go back into the other room.

'I'll put the kettle on,' George said, passing Judith as she came back in. Her mother, slumped now in an armchair, had her eyes closed, her head back.

'So what happens now?' Judith asked her quietly.

'Going back next week, see the specialist,' Patricia mumbled, monotone.

Judith nodded. Biding her time. 'And they said it was a heart attack, did they?'

'George, bring me in some Alka-Seltzer, will you, love?' Patricia called out to the kitchen. Sometimes her mother could sound so sweet and normal. 'And a couple of Veganin. I've got a migraine coming on.' The dexterity with which she could avoid an unwelcome question was remarkable.

'You'll need to get on to Beryl at work for me. Tell them what's happened . . .'

'And what *has* happened, Mother?' Judith asked, her voice level.

Patricia avoided the question. Again. ‘Course, *you* could offer to do a few shifts instead of me. Ring Beryl now, sweetheart, and tell her. I’ll be off for a good couple of weeks, the doctor reckons.’

George came in with the Alka-Seltzer and painkillers and handed them to Patricia, who took them without thanks. She swallowed and sighed. Then stared at her daughter, challenging. ‘Well, what are you waiting for? Sooner Beryl knows, the sooner she can organize cover for me.’

Judith steadied her shaking hands and launched straight in. ‘Mum, you do know I’m meant to be on my way to the airport right now, don’t you? To catch a plane. With my friends. For the holiday we’ve been planning for the last two years.’

Patricia looked at her. Cold. Unsympathetic. ‘And what d’you expect me to do about it, Missy?’ she asked. ‘I can’t help it if I had a bloody heart attack in the middle of the town centre! Oh excuse me for being ill, excuse me for being at death’s door!’

‘Yeah, but you weren’t ill, were you? And you didn’t have a heart attack. Nor have you had three previous heart attacks, like you told the doctor you had!’

‘What’s she talking about, Pat?’ George asked.

‘I have absolutely no idea,’ Patricia answered. ‘Now will you please phone Beryl before it’s too late. I don’t want to mess the woman around.’

Judith looked at the wall clock above her mother’s head.

And made the decision in a demi second.

She took two strides towards the fireplace, picked up her purse and her passport from the mantelpiece, and heaved the rucksack on to her back.

‘What the hell d’you think you’re doing?’ Her mother was incredulous.

‘I’m going on holiday.’

Patricia, suddenly match-fit again, was on her feet, attempting to pull the rucksack back on to the floor.

‘You are not leaving this house, young lady!’ she shouted, but Judith’s defiance and determination had made her strong. Patricia didn’t stand a chance.

‘Oh, but I am,’ Judith replied, striding towards the door. ‘You’ve ruined enough things in my life, Mum.’ And she turned to make her way through the small hallway, difficult with the cumbersome luggage on her back.

‘Well don’t just stand there, George, for Christ’s sake!’ Patricia screeched, and George made his way towards Judith.

‘Don’t, Dad, there’s no point in—’

But George wasn’t attempting to stop her leaving. He was opening the door to let her go.

‘Oh I see, like that, is it?’ Patricia laughed, the sneering laugh Judith knew so well. ‘As usual – ganging up on me! You should both be ashamed!’ she cried, and in the same breath turned on the tears.

Judith looked at George, fighting back the temptation to cry herself. ‘Bye Dad, I’ll see you in August, OK?’

George threw his arms around her, speechless,

holding her like his life depended on it, looked her directly in the eye and finally let her go.

‘You walk through that door, Judith Harris,’ Patricia hissed, ‘it’ll be for the last time, you mark my words.’

‘Good luck at the doctor’s, Mum! Get well soon!’ Judith shouted, bordering on hysteria as she stepped outside. And as she took a few steps away from the house she heard the sound of the Alka-Seltzer glass being hurled at the living-room wall.

‘DON’T YOU EVER COME BACK, D’YOU HEAR?’ Patricia screamed.

Judith headed off down the street, feeling like she’d just been punched. She was crushed, defeated and very, very alone.

Fifteen minutes later she was standing at the bus stop, staring in shock at the timetable, tears streaming down her cheeks. Suddenly a voice called out, ‘How’s your mum?’

It was Gareth on his motorbike, the car behind him beeping impatiently at the hold-up. For some reason she felt irritated seeing him there. He pulled into the bus stop.

‘I’ve just missed it,’ she said, her voice shaking. ‘The bus, I mean. Could’ve got to Cardiff in time and a train to Bristol centre and then, I dunno, a taxi maybe, but now I’ve missed the whole bloody . . .’ and she started crying afresh.

‘Oh. Right.’ He paused. ‘But I thought . . .’