

Chapter 1

Claire knew this tree. She remembered climbing it as a child, annoying the boys because, long-limbed, she could do it faster. Not that she hadn't skinned herself doing it - but that had never stopped her. She reached out an uncertain hand to touch its trunk. It was strange to be back. The alder flanked one of the footpaths weaving through the woods to the east of the village, a stone's throw from the banks of the sleepy river which cut the settlement in two. Claire knew all the woods round Bohenna - and the sly tapestry of footpaths that crossed them. It surprised her how little any of it had changed. Strange to be back, but good too.

And yet there was something wrong because she couldn't hear the river and there was no birdsong either; the woods had never been this quiet. Then the piercing scream of a girl split the air and her unease quickly turned to panic. Claire turned, was certain she knew where the scream had come from and ducked away from the tree, starting to run.

She cut right, then left, weaving in and out of the trees, picking a footpath here, one there. She veered right again. This path wasn't one she'd used before but she ran on anyway, blindly, urgently, driven, unable to hear anything save the thump of blood in her ears and the cracking of broken twigs underfoot.

Her headlong search came to an abrupt end. She'd found her: a limp twisted bundle on the ground, her blonde hair filthy with mud, her skinny arms thrown out sideways as they always were when she slept. The little girl was barefoot, wearing just a tee shirt and shorts, and Claire fell to her knees, reaching out to gather the child into her arms and hug her close. She must take her indoors, wrap her in blankets, give her hot drinks, never let the girl out of her sight again.

But Gilly's white skin was covered in bruises, her clothes torn and blood-stained. To the touch her flesh felt frozen. Claire couldn't get a grip on her and now the child was melting into the ground, her features rapidly dissolving away. Claire felt her heart twist inside her chest, as if someone was wrenching it out of her body. She was screaming her daughter's name and turning in circles, anguished, searching for her...but there was nothing she could do because she was falling...falling...

A radio blared into life and music twittered into her head - a stupid, silly little jingle - but that didn't make any sense because there were no radios in the wood. And it was getting louder. Claire opened her eyes and struggled to focus, her heart still thumping, her skin damp with perspiration. She was sprawled along the sofa, her left arm stretched up behind her, the hand tucked beneath her head. For a moment she couldn't recognise the room though the furniture looked familiar. Her hand had gone to sleep and she unfolded her arm and stretched it, trying to make it feel again.

Slowly reality sank in and her heart rate subsided. She'd had that dream again. She remembered moving in - was it only yesterday? - remembered the old man next door watching suspiciously as the removal men carried each piece of furniture into the cottage. She remembered all the cleaning and unpacking and then she'd sat down and fallen asleep.

The stupid jingle was still playing and Claire sat up, shaking her left hand as it started to throb and simultaneously reaching with her right for the mobile phone on the coffee table, wondering why she had chosen such an inane ringtone. Glancing at the name on the screen, she hesitated before accepting the call.

'Hello Neil.'

‘Claire? At last. You’ve finally deigned to answer. What the hell are you doing? Have you gone mad?’

‘Don’t start, Neil.’

‘But what possessed you to go dashing back to Bohenna? If you’re trying to make me feel guilty, it won’t work. I won’t be manipulated.’ He paused. ‘Are you all right?’

She swallowed, taking her time. ‘Of course I am.’

He was silent, long enough for her to wonder if he was still there.

‘How did you know I was here?’ she asked eventually.

‘I called at the house and one of the neighbours told me. So I tried ringing you, and when I couldn’t get a reply I rang Laura.’

‘You shouldn’t have gone bothering Laura.’

‘I wouldn’t have needed to bother her if you’d answered your damn phone. I just wanted to know what was going on. And she’s not happy about what you’re doing either. In fact she sounded quite upset. She’s worried about you.’ He hesitated. ‘What were you thinking?’

Claire shook her head silently and tipped her head back, rolling her eyes up to look at the ceiling. She’d missed a cobweb and she watched it dance in the draught coming under the front door.

‘Claire?’ he insisted in her ear.

‘My coming here is not about you,’ she said slowly. She watched a tiny spider abseil down an invisible silken thread from the edge of the web. ‘It has absolutely nothing to do with you. Why should it? Soon we’ll be divorced. You wanted the divorce as much as I did.’ More, she thought. Much more. ‘You’re in no position to dictate what I should do with the rest of my life. I told you I was planning to come back but you obviously weren’t listening. I wasn’t going to hang around waiting for our house to sell. And our daughter’s all grown up now with plans of her own. Maybe you’ve been too busy to notice? So I’ve come home.’

Claire stopped short. It was the first time she’d put it that way. Home. She nodded. Yes, that was exactly right.

‘Anyway,’ she added, ‘I explained what I was doing to Laura and she was fine about it. You’re using her as emotional blackmail. It’s typical of you. You say you want a new life so get on with it and leave me alone. How is Samantha by the way?’

‘Damn it, Claire. You know very well our marriage had fallen apart way before Sam came on the scene. You were impossible to live with. You wouldn’t move on. And look at you now: you’re back chasing shadows.’

Claire said nothing. Neil constantly put the blame on her as if he’d done nothing, as if he had been easy to live with, and it made her angry. But she was tired of all the arguments and recriminations and didn’t bother to retaliate. She was tempted to cut him off – he’d done it to her several times over recent months – but couldn’t quite bring herself to do it. She was pleased to hear his voice and that made her cross too.

She got up stiffly and walked to the window, looking out to the front. The old man from next door was standing on the rough ground opposite the house, staring into the interior of her car as if it was an invention he hadn’t seen before.

‘Claire...darling...’ Neil’s voice in her ear now held something of the old familiar warmth. It was easy – tempting – to believe he still cared. ‘Stop blaming yourself. Please. It wasn’t your fault. You know these things happen. She’s gone. You’ve got to let her go.’

Claire hesitated, squeezing her lips together hard, feeling tears prick at her eyes but refusing to let herself cry.

‘You think you understand me,’ she said. ‘But you have no idea why I’m here. None at all. And I’m not convinced you care, Neil. I think it’s about your pride. You think Bohenna is your patch, the Pennymans’ patch, but it’s mine too, remember? Well, I’ve made the choice to come back. That’s all there is to it.’

He grunted. 'I'm sure you didn't tell me and I wish I'd known before.' He now sounded sulky; she could imagine his expression perfectly, the pout of his lips, the frown making the top of his nose crease up.

'I did tell you. We discussed which furniture I could take.'

'I thought that was for the future. I didn't expect you to run away like this. It's insane.' He sighed. 'Does mum know you're there? I'd better tell her.'

'There's no need. I'm going to tell her myself.'

'It might be better coming from me... Claire, are you listening?'

'Neil, it's my life. Butt out.'

This time she closed the call without giving him a chance to respond and stood for a moment, painfully aware of the sudden silence and the pressing insistent heaviness of it. If there was birdsong now, she didn't hear it. She was back in the past, a succession of painful images running through her head. That dream had unnerved her but she had known it would be like this. It was never going to be easy to come back.

She saw the old man walk away from her car with his bent, lurching gait and the movement brought her back to the present. Old Eddie. She had known of him growing up, had seen him round the small Cornish village, but had never had a single conversation with the man. He'd been an agricultural worker, she dimly remembered, lived alone and didn't bother much with anyone except maybe a walk to the pub now and then. And he kept chickens. She knew that because the cock kept crowing all hours.

And now the weak October sun was already setting; gloom was descending. The nearby bank of trees appeared to suck what little light remained. She moved away from the window, hesitated, then brought up Eve's number on her phone. But no, she couldn't face it now. Neil's mother could wait. It was hardly urgent and, despite what the Pennymans might think, the woman did not rule the world. She put the phone down.

She needed to go for a run to get that dream out of her system. Jogging was the only thing she had ever found which helped. She went upstairs to change.

*

Standing outside the pub, Adam Thomas shuffled his feet and glanced at his watch again: it was six fifteen and still there was no sign of Zoe. He sighed heavily. She had forgotten again - or maybe not. A small voice at the back of his head told him that she was doing it deliberately, trying to prove some kind of point. But it was rapidly going dark and it had been a long day; he could do without this.

He pulled the phone out of his pocket. There was only one bar. Reception was sometimes patchy along the valley, especially if the weather closed in. He punched in her number but there was no answer and it cut through to the answering service. A couple of men heading for The Swan looked his way curiously and Adam turned away, mumbled a brief message into the phone and closed it down. This was the second time in the last couple of weeks that he'd been stood up. It was becoming more and more difficult not to accept that there was something wrong. At home, Zoe had become increasingly moody, one minute full of some plan or other, the next crabby and confrontational. He felt like he was walking a tightrope all the time.

He glanced at his watch again. He needed a beer but Zoe always insisted that they meet outside because she didn't like walking into the pub alone. For an apparently self-assured Mancunian, she was ridiculously nervous of country pubs. They're too dark, she would complain, and everyone stops talking as soon as you walk in. What Zoe liked was the anonymity of a crowded, raucous city pub where an extra body was ignored and where you had to shout to make yourself heard. The Swan was old-fashioned and cosy: it still had its original lounge bar and a separate public bar and a snug - and a menu where virtually every meal came

with chips and the word *jus* didn't appear once. Adam liked it, though it had occurred to him that, at thirty-eight, he was already turning into his father.

He saw a woman jogging up the road from the direction of the bridge, her long legs sheathed in leggings, a huge long-sleeved tee shirt draped over the top and cinched in with one of those funny little bum bags that cyclists wore. Her curly hair had been pulled into a short, stubby bunch at the back. He was pretty sure he'd never seen her before. Not that he had lived here very long - five months, in village terms, was the blink of an eye, or so one of the locals had told him.

Bored, he watched the jogger stop, panting, in front of the shop on the other side of the road and now she seemed to be reading the adverts in the window. That was a novelty; he didn't know anyone ever read the adverts. He thought they were put up more in hope than expectation, then went yellow and curled up at the corners in the sun.

In the harsh fluorescent light cast from the shop, he saw her scrabbling in her bag, looking for something. Then a taxi drew up not far from him and his attention was distracted. The driver was Nick Lawer and he was alone in the car. He lived in the village and Adam had met him in the bar a few times where he was sometimes friendly and sometimes ignored everyone. He was a surly man with a lascivious tongue and a short fuse. Adam watched him get out of the car then stand, motionless, looking across at the woman who was now writing something down. A moment later she was jogging down the road again with Nick pointedly watching her.

Then he turned and took a few steps towards Adam, a cheap grin on his face.

'Not bad, eh - for her age anyway? Get those legs. I'd maybe give her eight.' Nick liked to rate women on a scale out of ten - Adam had heard him do it in the pub several times. Anyone would think he was God's gift to women. Adam disliked the man and was surprised he ever managed to get any fares. 'D'you know who she is?' Nick enquired, eyebrows raised knowingly.

'No idea,' said Adam.

'That's Claire Pennyman. Neil's wife.'

'You mean like the Pennymans from the vineyard? I don't know Neil.'

'Well you wouldn't. Neil is Tim and Julia's brother. Left here about five years ago. Had two daughters. Then... Don't tell me you haven't heard about the younger Pennyman girl? Thought every last bugger knew about that.'

Adam frowned, reluctant to get drawn into this conversation but curious to know all the same.

'What about her?'

'Disappeared,' said Nick. 'About a year before they left. Came home from school one day, went out to play and never came back. Police were here for ages, questioned everyone. Spent a lot of time with the family, they say. It was all over the telly for days. Where were you, mate? Outer Mongolia or something?'

'Didn't they ever find her?'

Nick laughed. 'Nah. Police chasing their own tails. Didn't have a clue what they were doing. Anyway, this place is crawling with visitors in the summer. She was probably miles away by the time she was even reported missing. Waste of time searching the village. They admitted as much themselves in the end.'

'How old was the kid?'

'I dunno,' Nick said carelessly. 'Eight or nine maybe.' He leaned forward conspiratorially though there was no-one around to hear. 'Course there were some said Claire Pennyman was to blame herself. I mean, not just careless of the kid but the one who made her disappear - if you know what I mean.' He gave an exaggerated wink and straightened up. 'But, hey, there's some people in this village'd condemn you for farting. And if they don't know the whole story about something, they make it up themselves. Anyway, I need some fags.'

He crossed the road, glanced up the lane in the direction Claire Pennyman had gone, then walked into the shop.

Adam pulled out his phone and checked the screen. There was no word from Zoe. He toyed with going into the pub anyway but wasn't in the mood any more and began the walk home.

*

Claire stepped out of the shower, dried herself quickly in the draughty bathroom, dressed and put a quick brush to her hair. She threw a jacket on, slipped on some shoes and left the house. Running had focussed her mind as it often did. She had decided she had to see Eve that day and get it over with. In any case, there was good strategy in speaking to the woman so soon after her arrival: it showed that Claire was in charge of the situation; it suggested that she didn't feel guilty, that she wouldn't be intimidated. A phone call wouldn't do: it looked weak.

Neil's mother was a widow, the matriarch of the Pennyman dynasty and still the lynch pin of their wine business: domineering, hard-working, astute. It was more than three years since Claire had been back to Bohenna and seen her. Too many missed family gatherings and events had frayed her already tenuous link to the Pennymans. But Eve had never liked Claire much, had never thought her good enough for her eldest boy, and had liked her still less when she had failed to give Neil a son. Even so, she was Laura's grandmother and if Claire was going to live in the village again she would have to face her sooner or later.

There was no moon and it was dark outside, forcing Claire to immediately duck back into the house and grab a torch. She was surprised at herself, at how quickly she had forgotten what living in a small Cornish village was like: the lack of streetlights, the obscurity of the black winter nights. And walking the narrow lane back into the village, she was immediately reminded of the stillness of these evenings in a community of little more than five hundred people. There was the odd bark of a dog, the twitter of a late-settling bird, somebody banging a garden gate closed. She could smell wood smoke in the air. Mains gas didn't extend to places like this so people burnt wood, coal and oil.

Claire reached the bridge over the river, turned right to cross it and kept on walking up the hill. The White House and its accompanying vineyard stood on the northern side of the valley, the white-rendered old farmhouse half way up the hillside, looking down on the village below, virtually surrounded by field upon sloping field of vines. If Claire paused and flicked her torch beam that way she could see the vines now, tall and still bushy with growth.

She reached the turning to the vineyard on her right, but found herself looking to the left instead. The ground on that side of the lane was called Tom's Acre and had belonged to her father. All her life he had run a nursery there. When he'd retired, not long after she and Neil had moved away, he had sold the land to the Pennymans and she'd heard that the courtyard with its ramshackle old farm buildings had recently been turned into a craft centre. The Pennyman enterprise grew each year, it seemed, carrying all before it.

She turned away and walked through the car park to the vineyard buildings. The house was further on but a bright light shone in the winery, its open double doors shedding the glow in an arc across the yard. Voices sounded inside. Claire approached the edge of the doorway and looked in. She could see leaves and stems strewn on the floor, odd grapes too, broken and bleeding. Her nose filled with the sharp, fruity smell of grape juice. Of course, it was October and they had been harvesting. That meant long hours and weary backs and they would be working late. It wasn't the best time to visit.

A jet of water sprayed on the ground in front of her and she jumped aside with a yelp of surprise as it splashed her and ran pell-mell down the slope into the broken gravel of the yard.

'Sorry.' The hosepipe was switched off and a man appeared in the doorway, the nozzle still in his hand. He stared at her, frowning. 'Claire? It is you. I'm sorry I didn't know you were there. I was just washing down. Are you OK?'

‘Hi Tim. I’m fine, thanks.’ She glanced down at her jeans but they were barely damp. ‘Just took me by surprise.’

She smiled warily. Tim was Neil’s younger brother, a bit introspective sometimes but he was all right. Once upon a time they’d been friends. He threw the hosepipe down and, after a blink of hesitation, leaned in to give her a peck on the cheek.

‘I got a text from Neil,’ he said, ‘saying you were here. I wasn’t sure if he was joking.’

‘No, no joke.’ She looked him over. ‘Short hair Tim? I nearly didn’t recognise you.’

‘We decided it was about time he lost the hippy look.’

Julia had joined them. Her wiry frame was covered in juice-stained dungarees which looked too big for her, her short hair now more steely grey than brown. She produced a strained smile. ‘Hello Claire. Long time, no see.’

‘Hi Julia.’

Julia jerked her head in her brother’s direction. ‘The earrings and leather jewellery frightened the punters. They had to go. I hadn’t heard you were over. Where are you staying?’

‘I’m renting Woodbine Cottage, down on Dark Lane.’

Tim frowned. ‘That’s somewhere by old Eddie isn’t it?’

‘Right next door. The last house before the woods.’

‘You’re renting?’ said Julia, frowning.

‘Yes, just until...’

‘Who is it?’ The voice was authoritative and female. A small, slightly stooped woman came forward, her steps stiff, her eyes keen. She frowned heavily. ‘Oh, it’s you, Claire.’ She managed to make her sound like an illness.

‘Hello Eve. I see I’ve chosen a bad time but I wanted to see you.’

Eve had aged since Claire had seen her last: the skin of her face sagged more and she had shrunk. The gimlet eyes were as sharp as ever though.

‘You wanted to see me?’ Eve sniffed disdainfully. ‘If you’re going to tell me that you’ve come back, I already know. Neil rang me.’

‘Come back?’ Julia exchanged a look with Timothy. ‘You mean, like, permanently?’

Claire nodded. ‘I’m sure you’ve heard about the divorce. We’re waiting on the sale of the house. When I get my share of the money, I’m hoping to buy somewhere.’

‘And yet you were so keen to go,’ said Eve, her lip curling. ‘Taking the family with you.’

‘That’s not true, Eve. I wasn’t keen to go. I was confused and desperate. So was Neil. That’s why *he* suggested it.’

Eve made a derisive noise and fixed her flinty gaze on her daughter-in-law. Claire stared back, unflinching.

No-one else spoke.

Julia shifted uncomfortably. ‘I suppose Laura’s at Oxford now?’ she asked loudly.

Claire pulled her eyes from Eve and smiled. ‘Yes. She started a couple of weeks ago.’ Again there was silence. ‘Anyway...I can see you’re busy. The harvest is late isn’t it?’

‘I’m surprised you noticed.’ Eve was already moving stiffly away towards the house. ‘You never showed any interest in it before. Come and see me before you go, Tim.’

Julia waited pointedly until Eve was out of earshot.

‘You’re right: the harvest is late. We had a good, sunny autumn so we held back. We’ve only just finished.’ She glanced towards the sky. ‘Just as well since they’ve forecast rain for tonight.’

Claire nodded, fidgeted. ‘Right... well, I’ll be off then.’

‘Claire?’ Julia flicked Tim another look. ‘Have you heard about the Craft Yard? Only the builders found a couple of things belonging to your dad when they were doing the conversions. If you’ll just wait, I’ll get them for you.’

She hurried to the office next door, leaving Claire alone with Tim. He rammed his hands in his pockets and shifted the gravel with the toe of his shoe. She cast about for something to say.

‘Have you seen Neil recently?’

‘In the summer. He came over and helped with the stall at the fête.’

There was another awkward silence.

‘And you?’ she said. ‘Are you still with Monica?’

He laughed. ‘You’re out of date, Claire. Monica’s ancient history. I’ve had another girlfriend since then. And that finished months ago too.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Hey, you know me,’ he said dismissively. ‘I’m not the settling kind.’

She saw him study her face speculatively, a smile teasing at his mouth, a mischievous glint in his eye.

‘You know, you should take a look at the Craft Yard,’ he said. ‘Jane’s got a unit there.’

Her mouth fell open. He’d caught her out and he knew it.

‘Do you mean Jane Sawdy?’ she said. ‘I didn’t know she was back in the village.’

‘A few months ago. She’s living in her mother’s house out on the road to Lostwithiel. Her mother died a while back.’ He produced that taunting smile again. ‘I take it you two have never made up then?’

Julia’s return saved her the need to reply. She handed Claire a plastic carrier bag. ‘There’s a watch in there and a few other odds and ends. I thought you’d want to have them.’

‘Thanks. I do.’

Claire raised the bag in a half-hearted gesture and gratefully said her farewells. Julia managed a smile. Tim just nodded. She walked briskly away, suspected that she was being watched, was sure she was being talked about.

Reaching the bridge, she stopped to lean on the rough stone wall and look down into the river, though it was much too dark to see anything. The breeze rustled the trees along the river banks and sent a flurry of falling leaves drifting past her and down onto the water below.

She took a few slow breaths, then turned for home, relieved. She had negotiated her first hurdle.

*

Julia finished her last check in the winery, came outside and turned to lock the door. It was after nine now and pitch dark, not a single star in sight. Standing here she was out of range of the light sensor on the barn restaurant and she stayed there, happy to be enveloped by the night. She looked down the valley towards the village. Illuminated windows showed the extent of the straggling settlement either side of the river and made a faint halo of light. Pale smoke drifted up from a chimney here and there and a tawny owl hooted somewhere below her, sounding absurdly loud in the stillness. A car engine started and lights flashed on the road towards Penmarna. It looked peaceful, a village at rest.

But Julia didn’t feel peaceful. Her mind was occupied with Claire, her thoughts automatically flicking back through the years: Claire the curious and overactive kid, then Claire, the gangly-limbed teenager, enthusiastic, funny, stubborn, independent, awkward. Brave even.

‘You all right there?’

She recognised her husband’s smoke-gravelled voice and turned as he came alongside.

‘Just enjoying the quiet.’ She hesitated. ‘And I was thinking about Claire.’

Phil grunted in a non-committal way.

‘Are you surprised she’s back?’ she asked.

‘Not really. She was born and bred here. You don’t get it out of your system as easy as that. Can you imagine leaving?’

She frowned and shook her head. ‘You off to the pub?’

‘Just for a pint. Won’t be late.’ He leaned across to kiss her then strode off, torch in hand, though she was sure he’d know the way blindfold.

Her thoughts returned to Claire. Julia’s father had found her once in the lower part of the vineyard with a toad sitting, glassy-eyed, on her hand. ‘She’s like a Gerald Durrell with curls,’ he’d joked, slightly disconcerted. If she saw something interesting, she always had to follow it, be it a moth, a beetle, a mouse, even ants. She was dogged about things, persistent.

Julia was ill at ease. In many ways, she liked her sister-in-law, always had. She even liked the way she stood up to Eve. But she didn’t feel good about the woman being here. It might not be her fault, but trouble seemed to follow Claire around like a shadow. And now, with Jane back in Bohenna too, Julia couldn’t shake off the fear that Claire’s return was like putting a light to a tinderbox.