

## Chapter 1

An argument always leaves an echo. Vincent had gone, slamming the study door behind him, but the row was still in the room, a tangible thing.

Eleanor heard the front door bang and turned away, feeling infinitely weary. The box file containing the manuscript he had brought was still there, insolently balanced on top of a pile of other papers, as if claiming superiority.

‘No, I want you to read it,’ he had insisted. ‘Keep it. When you get down from your high horse, you’ll see how good it is. OK, so I should have asked you first.’ He’d held up his hands in mock defeat, looking anything but apologetic. ‘Mea culpa. But you did promise to let me do another adaptation sometime if the story seemed right. I took you at your word.’

‘I promised nothing of the kind.’

‘For God’s sake, Eleanor. After all the work I’ve put in, you could at least have the decency to read it.’

The row had escalated; it had become unpleasant. And now the manuscript sat there, taunting her. It was probably good - Vincent was a fine playwright when he wasn’t dissipated - but he wasn’t to be trusted. The last time she had agreed to let him adapt one of her novels for the stage he had changed the script at the last minute, removing elements she thought essential to the narrative and introducing a new character she disliked. She wasn’t going to be tricked like that again. He was her cousin and always tried to play the ‘family’ card but their bonds weren’t that strong; she wasn’t going to compromise her work for him.

Fretful, she began to pace up and down. The study was a long, bright room with patio doors to the rear garden and a single large window to the front where she now paused to look out.

It was seven o’clock in the evening on a late Friday in June and a golden glow still illuminated the grounds. The house stood on a small coastal headland in Devon, Eleanor’s own private land, which fell away down rocky cliffs and through woods to the sea. An old rambling farmhouse had stood on the site when she’d first bought it but permission had been granted to raze it and build a new house on its footprint. The old farmyard was still there though. Shrubs, paths and trees separated it from the house but Eleanor could imagine what she could not see: the paved courtyard with a long run of low converted outhouses on either side, each now a small apartment; the old barn, tidied up and fitted out with a stage, heating, lights and seating.

The annual summer writing workshops were about to begin and all the old familiar faces would be gathering there to act as tutors, probably bickering as usual over which apartment they had been given. No doubt there would be the same comparisons of royalties and advances and the same complaints about how hard it was to make a living from writing. There would be camaraderie and stories of their youth, retold and endlessly embellished, but there’d be the old rivalries and petty squabbles too. She had heard it all before. She must have known most of them for more than thirty-five years, since they had all been students more or less. She was fifty-six already. Where had the time gone?

There was a brief knock at the half open door and she turned as a man walked in, tall, erect and greying at the temples. It was Lawrence, her personal assistant. His office was just along the hall and he lived in an annexe attached to the other side of the house. She glanced at the clock on the wall. They were both working late.

‘I thought I heard Vincent leave,’ he said. ‘Problems?’

‘Just Vincent being Vincent.’

‘Had he been drinking?’

She managed an ironic smile. ‘He said he’s a changed man. He’s found God. It clearly hasn’t helped his temper but he goes to church on Sundays, he says, and only drinks in moderation.’

‘And pigs might fly. Anyway, I thought you’d want to know that I’ve checked them all in now. Vincent’s in one. Imogen and Mari are in two. Frank Marwell’s in four and Louisa Dunnell’s in five.’

Something clutched in the pit of her stomach. ‘Thank you.’

She could see the familiar tensing of his shoulders and the frustration in the lines of his face, knew only too well what was coming.

‘They all take advantage of you,’ he said coldly. ‘Every year. You don’t owe them anything, Eleanor. There’s no need for them all to be here yet. Some of them don’t have workshops planned for another week or even two.’

‘We’ve been through this before, Lawrence. They use the spare time for their own writing and they like to meet and catch up. We all go back a long way. You should know that. They were your friends too.’ Had she emphasised the ‘were’? She hadn’t intended to.

‘They always argue.’

‘Friends do that too.’

He sighed and wouldn’t quite meet her eye. ‘Anyway, Mari’s already left to take part in a poetry weekend in Exeter.’ He hesitated. ‘And Frank’s gone with her. He’s speaking at the same event.’

‘I see.’

‘Frank and Louisa have got engaged,’ he blurted out.

It wasn’t like Lawrence to lack control so presumably it was an expression of his annoyance: he intended to shock her.

‘I know.’ She vaguely indicated an envelope and its contents spewed out onto the desk beside her computer.

‘He told you? By letter?’

‘Frank? No. Frank didn’t tell me. A friend did.’ Lawrence was expecting some reaction, anger perhaps, something he could feed off. She refused to give one. ‘Look, there’s no need for you to do any more tonight, Lawrence. It’s late. You should go. It’s the weekend.’

‘You seem on edge. I don’t mind staying around if you’d like some company.’ He offered a conciliatory smile. ‘We’ve got a game of chess to finish.’

‘I know, but not tonight...thanks.’

Still he didn’t move, looking at her with an aggressive lift of the chin, then he turned abruptly and walked out of her study and down the hall, leaving something unsaid.

She waited for him to be gone and listened for the sound of the distant door closing, thought she heard it then turned back to the window.

So Frank and Louisa had arrived. Louisa was the only newcomer, the only one who didn’t have that shared history. This was her second summer of running workshops and already she and Frank were a couple. They had been allocated separate rooms but that had been before anyone knew. It didn’t take much imagination to see how that would play out. Was Frank planning to tell her? When exactly?

She turned away and walked back to her desk where she picked up the cutting a friend had sent her from a poetry magazine. Headed *Engagement of poet Frank Marwell to novelist Louisa Dunnell*, there was a photograph of the two of them, standing in his study, his arm around her waist. It didn’t matter how many times she looked at it, she felt the same slow chill, as if her body was shutting down. It shocked her that he was able to keep things from her like that, especially after all the years they had spent together... How naïve she had been.

In a fit of anger and impotence, she screwed the cutting up in her hand, squeezing it tight, crushing it, then threw it across the room. She paced again, taking deep breaths, regaining control, chiding herself for being childish. She retrieved the ball of paper, flattened it out and folded it in half then glanced along the bookshelves for somewhere to put it. This wasn't the moment to throw it away; she needed time to process it. It was what she did. She kept things, putting them out of sight but to hand, available if she felt the need to look at them again.

A few minutes later, phone in hand, she left the study for the tranquillity of her sitting room. She badly needed a drink. She poured herself a large gin and tonic and stood by the patio doors, looking out over the garden: a paved terrace and a broad expanse of lawn leading the eye to a shrubbery, descending treetops and a purple-blue haze of sea.

The phone rang and she turned quickly, grabbing it from the top of the drinks cabinet, checking the screen avidly. Lifting her head, straightening her shoulders, she paused to collect herself before answering.

'Joselyn,' she said simply. Her niece.

'Hello Eleanor.'

'Long time, no see.'

'I know. How are you?'

'Oh I'm OK.'

There was a heavy pause. When Jo spoke again, her voice seemed to have shrunk.

'I'm sorry. I was in the wrong.'

Eleanor was silent.

'I'm ringing to apologise, Eleanor. I messed up. Big time.'

'Yes darling, I know. I'm sorry too.' Eleanor hesitated. She wanted to have this conversation but not right now. 'Are you all right Jo?' she asked, genuinely concerned.

'Yes, I'm fine. I've broken up with Richard.'

'Ah. Good.'

Another silence.

'Look, is this a bad time to call?' said Jo. 'Because if it is...'

'No. No, of course not. I'm glad to hear from you. I am really. It's just...'

'I was out of line.' Jo's voice was higher pitched than usual, squeezed with tension. 'I mean, I know I've made some bum choices in the past but I thought he was going to be different. How wrong can you be? We even got engaged. Then I was too proud and too stupid to admit my mistake.'

'Richard didn't like me, did he, thought I was a bad influence on you?'

'Yes, that pretty much sums it up.'

'But then I didn't like him either. He's a pompous prig.'

'You said.'

'Is that what started the row? I can't remember now.'

'It doesn't matter. I said some awful things too. In any case, you were right: he is pompous *and* narrow-minded. And I've missed you. So much. Can you forgive me?'

'Of course. Don't be silly. I didn't handle it very well. I've missed you too. You know, Jo, some men are like an addiction. You can't bear to be without them but you can't live with them either. Still, I'm sure you're hurting. You should go out and see friends. Travel. You work too much. Life's too short...'

Eleanor stopped abruptly and allowed the silence to lengthen.

'Eleanor? Are you...?'

'Normally I'd say come and stay,' Eleanor cut across her, 'but it's bad timing. The summer workshops are about to start and all the crew have descended again. You know what it's like.'

'Sure. And I'd love to see you, but I've recently got a rescue cat. Sidney. I've got to stay here to let him settle in.'

‘Really, Jo, you should be going out, not babysitting a cat.’

‘I suppose. Are you writing at the moment?’

‘Yes, off and on. The usual. Look, I must go. I am glad you called though. Remember, you’ve got through worse than this. You’re tougher than you think. And Jo?’

‘Yes?’

‘Be yourself. Don’t try to be someone else to please anyone. If they don’t love you for the way you are, they’re not worth bothering with.’

‘OK,’ Jo said slowly. ‘Thanks for being so forgiving. Love you. Speak soon.’

Eleanor closed the call but continued to hold the phone. An image of the young Jo came into her head: her niece, barely ten years old, turning up at Eleanor’s first house along the coast near Dartmouth, standing on the doorstep with a small suitcase in her hand, eyes bright with pent-up emotion but with a gritty thrust to her jaw. Eleanor pushed the image away and the memories that came with it. Jo was thirty-five or maybe thirty-six now. She was smart and able but kept too much bottled-up inside. And she kept confusing intense, self-absorbed men with dependability and strength. Eleanor blamed her sister, Jo’s mother. She might be dead but Candida could still be blamed. Even the way she’d died had been part of the problem.

She checked her phone for messages, put it down and opened the patio doors. Cloud had developed in the west, dulling the light and misting the air. Knocking back the last of her drink, she went back to the cabinet and refilled her glass, took another large mouthful of gin and wished she was better at taking her own advice than giving it.

A break appeared in the clouds and suddenly a low shaft of sunshine cut through the treetops and lit up the patio. Eleanor drifted outside with her drink then glanced at her watch again, stopped, and came back for her phone. A few minutes later she walked off the patio and into the green of the garden. She wandered and lost track of time. She was sitting on the bench on the lower terrace and the sun was creeping low to the horizon when she heard the creak of the hinges on the side garden gate and turned her head, surprised. A figure appeared and paused, framed by the rose archway.

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For several minutes after the call ended, Jo sat holding the phone, staring into mid-air. It had taken her days to pluck up the courage to make that call. It was eighteen months since the row with Eleanor - the only real row they’d ever had - and it had long since ceased to be important. When had she first realised her mistake? It was impossible to say now but she had persisted in the relationship with Richard for far too long, trying to persuade herself that it would work out. At least she had finally seen sense. Though to estrange Eleanor like that, after all she had done for her, was unforgivable.

The bundle of grey and white fur on the table beside her laptop got up, stretched and came across to her, stepping down onto her lap, rubbing his head against her hand, purring, coaxing her to stroke him. She put the phone down and reluctantly rubbed his head.

‘Hello Sidney.’

Her friend, Trish, had insisted she get a cat - ‘to help you get over that man’. Trish sometimes helped out at a nearby cat shelter.

‘We’ve got some lovely cats who badly need a home,’ she’d said.

‘I don’t want a cat. I’m busy. And I don’t like cats. They’re temperamental. Temperament’s the last thing I need right now.’

‘Of course you like cats. They’re not all temperamental. And you’re busy doing what exactly? Sitting at home all day at your computer, editing other people’s books? It doesn’t stop you having a cat, Jo. The company would do you good. Stop you navel-gazing.’

‘I’m not navel-gazing.’

‘Yes you are.’

Trish had insisted on taking Jo to see the cats and Sidney had come to her, stalking across the room to curl himself round her legs, demanding her attention. He had been abused: his tail had been cut off, one ear had been damaged and he'd been starving and nearly dead when he was rescued. 'He never goes to anyone,' the girl on duty had said, eyes wide, slack-jawed. 'He's normally too nervous.'

That had been three weeks ago. And now here he was, in Jo's little Edwardian terraced house in Sussex, cautiously exploring and claiming it as his own. He hadn't been temperamental so far, it was true; he was affectionate and timid and stayed close. Too close: she kept falling over him. But she still wasn't convinced. And Trish, recently made redundant, had gone off to France, helping someone do up a house in the Dordogne. Clever girl, Jo thought wryly. Sidney was not her problem.

Jo swivelled in the chair to look at a photograph on the wooden mantelpiece, a picture she had only recently put back on display. In it she and her aunt stood side by side on the beach below Eleanor's home, both with trousers rolled up above their knees. It was Eleanor's private beach, small and pebbly but a magical haven all the same. They had found a dead crab on the shingle and were holding it up, posing for the camera, looking absurdly proud and pulling silly faces, as if they'd just fished it out of the sea themselves. Jo had been maybe fourteen, staying over for the summer as she often did. Frank had probably taken the picture. He and Eleanor had been an item, off and on, for as long as Jo could remember.

She regarded the photo wistfully. They had shared some fun times. Eleanor was strong-willed and a little eccentric with a taste for eye-catching hats, but she was a no-nonsense sort of person and generous to a fault. Jo turned to look at the photograph on the other end of the mantelpiece: her mother. Candida had never worn a hat, though she did sometimes wear jewellery in her hair. Or flowers. Jo stared at it a moment then turned away. Putting Sidney back on the table, she returned to her computer and tried to work but odd sentences from the phone call kept coming back to her. She had formed the strong impression that her aunt had been waiting for a call from someone else when she rang and that she had been disappointed. That was hardly surprising in the circumstances but there had been something odd about her behaviour nonetheless. Even for Eleanor.

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Lying in bed the next morning, still inhabiting the half-world between sleep and wakefulness, Jo could hear rain drumming against the window. Sidney won't go out then, she thought dully; he didn't like rain. Her thoughts drifted to Eleanor again. Was it raining in Devon too? She remembered standing in her aunt's garden as a child, getting wet, shocked and fascinated at the suddenness of a rain shower that had blown in off the sea. She had been living with her mother then in a flat in Greenwich, East London. The weather there was equable and changed subtly and slowly. It was muggy. She wasn't used to the freshness, wind and sudden mood swings of the southwest.

Once more the previous night's phone conversation played through her head. Maybe her aunt was more cross than she had seemed. It wasn't like Eleanor not to want her to visit. Jo had stayed over during the writing workshops before and there had never been an issue of accommodation. The tutors all stayed in the yard apartments and Lawrence did most of the day to day organising. But Eleanor hadn't sounded cross, nor was she one to shy away from confrontation. If she was angry, she told you straight.

Sidney mewed pitifully outside her bedroom door. Unaccountably ill at ease, Jo gave in and got up.

It was late morning when the house phone rang and Jo was working at the computer again, Sidney curled up nearby. He opened one eye as she got up to answer it.

'Joselyn? It's Lawrence. You know, Eleanor's PA?'

Lawrence never rang her and her heart skipped a beat.

‘Yes. I know. Is something the matter? Is Eleanor all right?’

‘I realise you haven’t bothered with your aunt lately but I thought you’d want to know all the same.’

His tone was offensive. She tried to ignore it.

‘Know what? I spoke to Eleanor just last night actually.’

‘Really? You’ll forgive me if I sound surprised. How was she?’

‘Fine. Why?’ She started to feel clammy. ‘What is it Lawrence? Go on, tell me.’

‘Bad news, I’m afraid. Eleanor’s had a fall...in the garden. She’s seriously hurt but she is at least alive.’

‘What do you mean: she’s alive? A fall? I don’t understand. What sort of fall?’

‘From the cliff steps. You know, the ones down to the private beach? There’s a hell of a drop there. It’s a miracle she didn’t tumble all the way down the cliff. I found her this morning, half way down on a sort of sloping shelf. There’s some greenery there - perhaps you remember?’

He paused, making her wait.

‘Yes, yes, I remember. And?’

‘She’d got caught up in a bramble bush. I couldn’t reach her but she was unconscious and in a terrible state when the emergency people finally got to her. It took them ages to bring her up.’

Jo started pacing up and down, phone rammed to her ear. ‘How did it happen?’

‘No-one knows. She was still unconscious when they took her to hospital.’

‘Where?’

‘Plymouth. She’s in surgery now. They did say there was a chance she mightn’t make it so I thought you should know.’

Jo stopped pacing, frozen. Her mouth felt like blotting paper. She tried to lick her lips but had no saliva. This was some kind of horrific nightmare, unreal, and she couldn’t take it in.

‘I’ll come,’ she managed to get out. ‘I’ll come, Lawrence. Now. Straight away.’ She looked round wildly, thoughts pell-mell, unable to fix on anything.

‘There’s no point rushing Joselyn. You can’t help her at the moment. She’s in the hands of the doctors and they said it could take some time.’

‘No, no, of course. I need to plan.’ She glanced at her watch: it was eleven-forty. ‘Damn, I’ve got Sidney to sort out.’

‘Who’s Sidney?’

‘It’s a long story. I’ll think of something.’

‘Can you give me your mobile number? I couldn’t find it.’

She said it, thoughts dazed.

‘Lawrence, how could this have happened? Eleanor isn’t ill is she? She’s never had any problems with the paths or the steps before.’

‘I don’t know. They’ll do tests, they said, once they’ve got her stable.’

She got the impression he was hiding something. And then it came.

‘The thing is, Joselyn, it’s been suggested that she might have jumped.’

‘No way. Eleanor jump? No.’ She wanted to laugh but couldn’t quite. ‘I don’t believe it.’

The phone went dead. Jo stared at it, still shaking her head.

‘No...no. I don’t believe that.’