

TRUST YOUR HEART, DESTROY YOUR PAST



CHASING STARS

HELEN DOUGLAS

BLOOMSBURY

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LONDON NEW DELHI NEW YORK SYDNEY

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PROLOGUE

Then

She ran, her long red hair billowing behind her. The harbour wall was high and narrow, its surface slick from the recent rain. Yet still she ran. As she neared the end of the wall, she risked a look behind her. He had slowed to a walk. She had nowhere to go. Below her, the swollen sea churned.

‘Wait, Eden!’ he shouted. ‘I’m not going to hurt you.’

She hesitated, throwing a quick glance over her shoulder, before launching herself into the air. Arms flailing frantically, she fell. The sea sucked her under.

Travis stopped and studied the surface. The sea was too rough to tell where she had landed. He kicked off his shoes and tugged off his jacket, all the while watching patiently for her to surface. The moment her head bobbed among the waves, he dived in.

It could have been worse. His forehead just scraped the jagged rocks concealed beneath the water. Blood streamed from the wound, but he was pretty sure it was just a graze. He surfaced and searched around him, the high rise and fall of the waves making it difficult to see much of anything.

As he floated to the top of a large wave, he saw her, swimming in a splashy front crawl towards the opposite headland. He dived beneath the surface, where the water was calmer and the wind less of a problem. Opening his eyes in the grey light, he began to swim in the same direction. He would catch up quickly. Her trainers and her clothes would weigh her down and she was not an accomplished swimmer. This would be easy.

He saw her feet kicking up and down in front of him, almost within reach. One strong push from him and he was able to reach out and grab her shoe. She jerked to a stop and kicked out at him, but he simply grabbed the other foot. He’d got her.

Her frenzied kicking and thrashing reminded him of a fish out of water and he smiled to himself at the strange irony of his imagination. He surfaced briefly for a lungful of air, saw the wild panic in her eyes, the realisation that she was going to die.

It didn’t usually happen this way. Travis preferred to kill people unexpectedly, so they didn’t have time to feel fear or fight back. He wasn’t a sadist. He liked to imagine that those he killed had a happy thought in their mind at the end – or failing that, nothing more disturbing than a plan to pick up toothpaste on the way home or take the dog for a walk.

It was different with Eden. She’d been clever enough to realise that he was going to kill her and she had run. Nearly got away with it too.

He reached forward and placed one hand on the top of her head, forcing her under the water. She was surprisingly strong for a young girl, though he knew that the survival instinct made people discover hidden reserves of strength. He began the methodical counting – training told him two minutes was enough in most cases – and began to formulate his story. Eden was helping him take photos of his restaurant when she fell in. He dived in to save her, but the sea was too rough. He couldn’t find her until it was too late.

Suddenly he was dragged from his reverie. Her hand grabbed at his shirt and pulled him under. He hadn’t expected this, hadn’t prepared his lungs for a lengthy spell underwater. She was trying to hit his head, but the water took all the force out of her punch. He could tell she was weakening, that this had

been the last desperate attempt of a drowning girl.

~~He admired her, actually. She had spirit. In another time she would have made a good agent.~~

He watched as her mouth opened and she sucked water into her lungs. Bubbles made their way towards the surface.

Grabbing her arm – if he let go of her now it could take hours to find her again in this unsettled sea – he swam towards the beach, grateful for the onshore wind.

When a big wave finally crashed him on to the sand, he felt a huge wash of relief. This had so nearly gone wrong. Had she survived, had she lived for several more decades, chances were at some point she would have inadvertently said something about the future. But now the timeline was safe once more.

He checked her pulse, made absolutely certain that she was dead, before heading into town to call the emergency services.

Now

The tunnel wobbled. Ryan focused all his concentration on keeping the ship centred. It threw a sudden curve to the left and his heart jerked. He'd only ever encountered curves like that in time-travel simulations. It usually meant the imminent collapse of a portal.

This had to work. He had to make it. Everything – nine months of anguish, of begging, borrowing and stealing – had been about this.

The tunnel was narrowing. He swore. If it collapsed, he was space dust. A quick glance at the control panel told him he needed just ten more seconds. There was a chance it would hold that long. There was nothing more he could do anyway. It was too late to alter course. He squeezed his eyes shut, afraid to face the end with his eyes wide open.

Counting backwards in his head, he wondered each moment if this second would be his last. When he reached zero, he unpeeled his eyelids and saw the green of the farmhouse garden.

He'd made it.

The question was: had he made it in time?

He released the hatch and ran down the steps to the garden. Rain fell in torrents, bouncing off the ground and forming streams on the hard surfaces. Turning to the house, he quickly observed that there were no lights on. There were no cars in the driveway. He was either too early or too late.

She had drowned in the harbour in Perran. Five miles away. It would take him the best part of an hour to run there. Too long.

He raced up the lane to the hamlet of Penpol Cove. He could see nothing but the flickering blue glow of television screens behind curtains and a row of neatly parked cars. The residents were all locked safely away in their homes, out of the storm. This was a tiny dead-end place. Someone would have left their car unlocked with the keys inside. He tried the car doors. The fifth one opened. He checked the usual places – sun visor, glove compartment, CD storage area – before realising the keys were in the ignition.

Gunning the engine, he raced along the bypass into Perran. Squinting through the rain and into the darkness, he searched for any sign of her, but there was none. He jumped out of the car when he reached Perran and ran towards the harbour.

There she was. He could see her standing at the end of the harbour wall. She threw a look over her

shoulder at Travis, who was walking – with the confidence of someone who knows he doesn't need a hurry – towards her. He would reach her in twenty seconds, at a guess. Ryan would need a minute.

How had it come to this? How had nine months of planning and plotting brought him to a place where he was perhaps forty seconds too late? He sprinted harder, trusting his feet to find the right place on the narrow wall, hoping that he'd find traction on the wet surface.

She jumped.

'Eden!' he yelled, unable to prevent himself.

Travis turned.

'No!' yelled Ryan, pounding the distance between them.

Staring at the water, Travis removed his jacket and shoes, then dived in.

Was he too late? How long did it take to drown? He was nearly there. Pulling off his jacket as he ran, he tried to remember what Eden had told him about the rocks near the wall. Which side were they? He knew he needed to throw himself far out if he was to avoid them. Pausing just for a moment, he used the toe of one foot to hold down the heel of the other, as he kicked off his shoes.

He could see them, struggling together about ten metres from the wall. He launched himself into a dive, aiming as close to them as he could.

Visibility was low. Opening his eyes, all Ryan could see was churned up sand and seaweed. He pushed to the surface and got his bearings. Travis had one hand on Eden's head. He was pushing her under. Blood poured from a cut in his forehead. Even so, Travis was strong.

Ryan threw himself into a powerful front crawl, while the high waves tossed him up and down. Travis and Eden disappeared and reappeared from view as the sea rose and fell beneath him. Once he was within striking distance, Ryan swung his fist and made contact with the bloody cut on Travis's forehead. Travis's head snapped back and then recovered. Ryan swung again. This time with power. Travis fell beneath the waves.

Ryan wasted no time.

He held his breath and kicked down below the surface. Eden was slowly floating downwards, one hand clutching Travis's shirt. A ribbon of pink rose from Travis's head.

She was sinking fast. He kicked harder and reached for her, grabbing her waist and pulling her hand free from Travis. He had her now. Clutching her to him, he kicked hard for the surface, his lungs burning.

He had to get her to shore as fast as possible. On his back, he floated her next to him and held her under her armpits. The onshore wind helped. He reached the sand and pulled her up the beach.

Water trickled from the side of her mouth, but she was breathing. He'd saved her.

Chapter 1

Cornwall – June 2012, three days later

It was no ordinary cemetery. There were no white granite headstones sparkling in the diffused light, no ancient cracked tombs, no parish church. Just a deep, green woodland tumbling down the steep side of a hill to a stream.

‘First she had you cremated and then she buried your ashes next to a tree down by the stream.’ He looked at me. ‘An apple tree.’

‘My favourite. Blossom in the spring, apples in the autumn.’ I couldn’t keep the shakiness from my voice.

Three days ago I had been dead. Three days ago I had drowned in the swollen waves of the harbor during a storm. Three days ago, Travis, my aunt’s boyfriend, had pushed my head under the water and held me down until my lungs burned and I opened my mouth to let the water in. But now I was alive.

‘Are you sure you want to do this?’ Ryan asked.

I nodded.

We made our way down the hillside, stepping over gnarled and twisted roots, past hawthorn and beech trees, plums and cherries, to an ancient apple tree whose knotted, weather-beaten branches reached across a small stream.

I ran my fingertips down the rough bark of its trunk. ‘So this is where I was laid to rest.’

‘Yes. She buried your ashes next to this tree. I saw it in your file.’

The nearby stream gurgled and the air was sharp with the scent of English apples. As final resting places went, this had to be one of the best. Miranda knew me well. I wouldn’t want to be buried in the ground, trapped under the weight of a granite tombstone. But my ashes nourishing the earth was a comfortable way to end up.

‘I should be dead,’ I said. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was living on borrowed time, that eventually Fate would catch up with me and it would all be over.

Ryan reached for my hand, twining my fingers through his. ‘No, you shouldn’t. That should never have happened. And now it didn’t.’

We left the darkness of the trees behind and followed the stream until it emerged into the sunshine. We were less than a mile from the sea; I could smell the salt on the air.

‘I just worry about the future,’ I said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘You coming back and changing time works out great for me. I get a second chance. But what if you coming back to save my life sends ripples of change through time? What if we bring death and destruction to the future? What if the price of saving one life is too great?’

Ryan smiled. ‘You’re talking about the butterfly effect. When a butterfly flaps its wings in the Amazon, it helps to create a hurricane on the other side of the world. Small actions lead to great consequences.’

I nodded.

‘It’s a beautiful theory. I studied it in pre-college science and philosophy class. Completely wrong though.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s just not helpful when applied to time travel.’

‘When you visited 2012 for the first time, you stopped Connor from discovering Eden and saved the future of the Earth. That was a pretty massive change.’

‘How can I explain?’ said Ryan, half to himself. He pointed at the stream trickling through the orchard. ‘OK, where do you think this stream runs to?’

I shrugged. ‘Probably to a larger stream or a river. And then eventually to the sea.’

‘Right. And there are millions of little streams just like this all running into the sea.’

‘What does that have to do with time travel?’

‘Think of the timeline as a giant ocean. It is fed by millions of tiny streams. If one of those streams runs dry, what impact do you think that will have on the size of the ocean?’

I shrugged. ‘Not much.’

‘Exactly. But if the Amazon or the Nile runs dry, it will have a significant impact on the ocean. Connor was an Amazon. His life changed the course of human history. But you’re just a little stream. Eden. No one in the future will notice whether you run dry or carry on.’

‘I guess.’

‘In any case, Travis changed the future when he killed you. If you’re concerned about the integrity of the timeline, I’m just putting the future back on course.’

We reached a wide section of the riverbank, where the ground was green and mossy. Ryan stopped suddenly.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

‘I want to dance with you.’

I looked around. ‘Here?’

‘What’s wrong with here?’

I laughed. ‘Well, there’s no music.’

‘I don’t care about music.’ His voice was quiet.

He opened his arms and I walked into them, resting my head on his shoulder as he held me. I never felt so alive. I felt the thudding of his heart against my chest, the blood racing through my veins, the mad tingle of electricity in every place his skin touched mine. I’d never felt so aware. Of the stream gurgling and sloshing alongside us, the honeybees, slow and drowsy, buzzing around like sleepwalkers, the soft ground yielding beneath our feet. I’d been given a second chance at life and I was going to make it count.

‘I’ve been waiting for so long to dance with you again,’ he said.

I laughed. ‘It hasn’t been that long. You danced with me last Saturday night at the Year Eleven Ball.’

He shook his head. ‘It’s been four days for you; it’s been nine months for me.’

I knew that of course. He’d already explained to me that he had left me four days ago, after the Year Eleven Ball, and portalled back to his time. It had taken him nine months to find a time-ship and enough fuel to get back to 2012. But he had come back just one day after he had left. Nine months for him. Four days for me.

‘I want to dance with you at night, under the stars,’ he said.

‘We can do that.’

He pulled me closer to him and then we were tumbling slowly backwards on to the green moss. I fell on top of him, our legs tangled together, my head against his chest. His fingers were in my hair and the sun was warm on my skin. I breathed in his scent, the lemony soap he always used, the metallic

smell of his jacket, the warm, clean smell of his skin. Things were going to be different between us now. We hadn't even kissed until the night he left. Because we knew he would leave and we would never see each other again. Because we knew we couldn't be together. Because we knew how much more it would hurt if we allowed ourselves to fall in love.

But now he was here. For ever.

And he was here because of me.

He kissed me, his lips brushing mine softly, as though we had all the time in the world. This was forever. Limitless. A slow, lazy kiss, our lips and tongues slow-dancing. He rolled on top of me and slipped my hands under the hem of his T-shirt on to the smooth, warm skin of his back, feeling my way up to the wings of his shoulder blades. He lifted his lips from mine and kissed my chin and my jaw and then my neck. I shivered although my body was filled with warmth.

This was what it felt like to be alive.

By the time we stopped kissing, my lips felt bruised, my face rough from the faint stubble along his jaw.

Something occurred to me. 'You turned eighteen while you were gone.'

'Am I too old for you now?'

I pushed myself up. 'Did you have a party?'

He sat up beside me and laced his fingers with mine. 'I wasn't much in the mood for celebrating. But my friends insisted. They rented a party boat and dragged me out for a night on the lake.'

'That sounds fun.'

'I spent the whole time wishing that you were there with me.' He glanced at me. 'I think you'd have liked it. I think you'd like Lakeborough.'

'What's it like?'

He described it in detail, from the shape of the landscape to the best place to eat. The last time I had described his home, it had been a small town bordered by miles of wasteland. Now it was a vibrant city surrounded by miles of forest-covered mountains.

'It sounds beautiful,' I said. 'I wish I could see it.'

'One day we'll go and see what it's like now. In my time it's one of the wealthiest cities in the country. It's where the Guardians of Time are based. My favourite part, though, is the waterfront. There's a boardwalk by the lake with a statue of my great-grandfather, Nathaniel Westland, smashing a huge clock. And my favourite bar – the Watering Hole – is there. It's too bad I can't take you there. I think you'd like it.'

'It sounds like you miss it a lot.'

He shrugged. 'I miss my family and friends more.'

'What were they like?' I realised I was using the past tense, as though they were dead. In a way they were – even though they hadn't been born yet.

'I'm not supposed to talk about the future. I've already said too much.'

I nudged his shoulder with mine. 'It can't be dangerous to talk about the people you know. We'll both be dead long before 2123, so it's not as though . . .'

His face stopped my words in their tracks. I wished I could take them back. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean . . .'

'It's OK. I know I'll never see them again.'

'That must be so hard.'

Pain flashed across his face, but he forced a smile. 'I have some photos. You want to see?'

I squeezed his hand.

He pulled out his wallet. Inside were several photos, slotted into clear plastic sleeves. The first photo was of a man and a woman, sitting in a restaurant, smiling at the camera.

‘My parents,’ said Ryan. ‘This was taken on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Just a couple of weeks ago.’

I stared hard at them, trying to find some resemblance to Ryan, but he didn’t really look much like either of them. His dad had the same colour hair and his mum had the same smile. He was a mishmash of the two of them.

Ryan flipped the wallet to another photo; this one was a group of friends sitting laughing on a dock on a lake, their feet dangling in the water. Behind them was a sign that said *The Watering Hole*.

‘My friends,’ said Ryan. He pointed to a tall, dark-haired boy with a manic smile. ‘That’s Pegasus, my best friend. Best pilot I know. Far more courage than common sense. If you want someone to do something crazy and stupid – like help you steal a time-ship – he’s your man.’ He pointed to the other people in turn. ‘That’s Antoine and his sister, Belle. And that’s Lyra. We all grew up together.’

‘They look like fun.’

He nodded and turned to the final photo, one of three boys. ‘Me and my brothers.’

I took a closer look. ‘You’re the youngest?’

He nodded. ‘Jove is twenty and Jem is twenty-two.’

‘They must miss you so much. Where do they think you are?’

‘I don’t know. I couldn’t tell them I was moving time.’

He snapped his wallet shut and pulled me close to him.

‘You’ve given up so much to save me,’ I said.

He drew back far enough to look into my eyes. ‘I’d do it ten times over. And I think you’d do the same for me.’

Chapter 2

‘Where have you been?’

I was about to defend myself – it was only three in the afternoon after all – but the worry was a heavy weight over Miranda’s face.

‘I went for a walk with Ryan. I left a note.’

‘We have a visitor.’

She stepped aside to let me into the hall and I braced myself. We’d had lots of visitors in the days since my near drowning and Travis’s death. Neighbours we’d been on little more than nodding terms with had shown up with shepherd’s pies and lasagnes, and there had been a steady stream of Miranda’s friends and colleagues come to pay their condolences.

‘She’s in the sitting room,’ said Miranda.

A tall woman dressed in a smart black suit stood in front of the unlit fireplace. Her shiny brown hair was wound into a slick bun and her hands clutched a briefcase.

‘This is my niece, Eden,’ Miranda told the woman. ‘Eden, this is Lauren.’ She paused and then added, ‘Travis’s sister.’

For a moment, I was confused. Travis, obviously, didn’t have a sister in 2012, because he was from the future. He was a cleaner sent back to ‘clean up’ anything the time agents left behind. Which meant that anyone who knew anything about Travis was either an imposter or from the future too.

The tall woman, Lauren, smiled at me and held out her hand.

‘Eden,’ she said, her cold hand shaking mine stiffly. ‘How lovely to meet you. I’m just sorry that it’s under such unfortunate circumstances.’

Adrenalin raced through me. I took my hand back. ‘Travis never mentioned a sister.’

‘My brother was estranged from most of the family. However, he and I had always been close. It saddens me that he never mentioned me to you.’ She unsnapped the catches of her briefcase and removed some papers. ‘I have identification with me. And rest assured, I have no interest in any of Travis’s material possessions. I would, however, like to claim his body.’

Dread gripped me. I took a step backwards. This wasn’t some con woman come to steal Travis’s possessions. This was someone from the future who knew about Travis’s mission. Did cleaners have access to cleaners?

‘But the funeral is tomorrow,’ Miranda was saying. ‘Everything’s arranged. The body is with the undertaker in Perran and I have a plot in the churchyard.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Lauren. She smoothed back her hair. ‘This must be very hard for you. But Travis always made it clear to me that he would want his body to go home in the event of his death overseas.’

Miranda looked stunned. ‘Can I see your identification?’ she asked.

‘Yes of course,’ said Lauren. She handed her paperwork to Miranda. ‘Here.’

Miranda flicked through each document in turn and then passed them to me. The passport was blue. I flicked it open to the photo page. Lauren Deckard, the name said. Date of birth: 8th August 1982. I picked up the birth certificates. One read Lauren Deckard, born Oakland, California, 8th August 1982. The second read Travis Deckard, born 3rd March 1980, Oakland, California. The parents of both children were Scott and Heather Deckard. They looked real enough. I handed the documents back to Lauren.

‘This is just such a shock,’ said Miranda. She sat on the edge of the sofa, shaking her head.

Lauren smoothed her hair back again. ‘This must be dreadful for you. I don’t want to upset you. But you should take a look at his will. It spells out clearly his wishes for his body to be repatriated.’ She passed the other document to Miranda.

Miranda glanced over the document and looked at me. ‘We’ll need to cancel the funeral arrangements.’

‘I’ll take care of it.’

‘I’m going to need to take a look around his flat to see what personal effects he left there,’ said Lauren.

‘Of course,’ said Miranda. ‘Eden and I will drive you there.’

‘I have my own car. I’ll follow you.’

‘I’m just going to nip to the bathroom,’ I said, backing out of the sitting room.

I ran up the stairs and into my room, almost tripping over Katkin, the neighbour’s tomcat who seemed to think my bedroom was his second home. I dug my mobile phone out of my bag and speed-dialled Ryan. He answered on the first ring.

‘Missing me already?’ he said.

‘Ryan, listen. There’s a woman here claiming to be Travis’s sister. She wants his body.’

Ryan swore. ‘Are you at home?’

‘Yes. She showed up about five minutes ago. She wants to go to his flat. Miranda and I are going to take her there in a few minutes.’

‘I wasn’t expecting this yet. Has she asked about me?’

‘No. Just Travis. What’s going on, Ryan?’

He hesitated. ‘This woman will be Travis’s cleaner. There’s nothing for you to worry about . . .’

‘The last time a cleaner showed up, I ended up dead,’ I whispered angrily. ‘I’m worried, OK? Really worried. You need to tell me what’s going on.’

‘Travis died on the job, so the Guardians have sent another cleaner to clean things up. She’ll want to erase any trace of him. That’s it. When she’s done that, she’ll leave.’

‘Did you know this would happen?’

‘Yes, but I didn’t expect anyone to show up yet.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I didn’t want to worry you.’

‘Well, I’m pretty worried now, Ryan. If you’d told me, at least I would have been expecting her.’

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to worry needlessly. I thought we had time. It’s only four days since we portalled out. She took a real risk travelling back so close to when we left. I thought we’d have a few weeks at least.’

‘Eden!’ Miranda shouted up the stairs.

‘Miranda’s calling me,’ I said to Ryan. ‘I have to go.’

‘OK. She’s not here for you or me, just Travis’s body and anything personal to him.’ His tone was soothing and reassuring. ‘There’s no need for you to be anxious. Call me when she’s gone.’

I hung up, pushed my mobile in my jeans pocket and ran back downstairs.

Travis’s flat was above his seafood restaurant in the middle of Perran. The restaurant had been closed since he drowned the previous Sunday. The white blinds were down on both the windows, resting against the black slate windowsills like two shut eyes. Miranda pulled into the small parking space in front of the restaurant. Lauren parked behind us.

‘Are you OK?’ I asked.

Miranda’s face crumpled. ‘No, I’m not. I’m about as far from OK as I’ve ever been in my life. And you know what makes me feel even worse? People asking me if I’m OK. I’m not OK and I’m not going to be OK for a while because that’s the way it is when someone you love dies.’

She wiped her hand across her eyes, smudging black mascara across her cheekbones.

I grabbed a tissue from the box in the glove compartment and passed it to her. ‘I’m sorry. I just don’t know what to say.’

‘So don’t say anything. Accept that this is horrible, but we’ll live through it because people do.’

Lauren was standing outside the restaurant, peering at the menu posted in the window.

‘Miranda,’ I said. I paused, choosing what I said next carefully. ‘I don’t trust this woman.’

‘We don’t have a choice, Eden. From the look of her documents she is who she says she is. We could refuse to let her in and make her go to a lawyer and all that, but then Travis wouldn’t be laid to rest for weeks. Nothing is going to bring him back.’

‘Let’s just not tell her any more than we have to. Let’s get rid of her as fast as we can.’

Miranda nodded silently and reached for her door handle.

‘Is this his restaurant?’ asked Lauren.

‘Yes. It’s very popular,’ said Miranda. ‘Travis was an amazing chef. But I’m sure you don’t need me to tell you that.’

‘My brother was a man of many talents.’

Miranda unlocked the black door next to the restaurant and we climbed the stairs to his first floor flat in single file. Halfway up the stairs I realised that Lauren was behind us and my heart began juddering in my chest. Was she corralling us into Travis’s flat so she could finish us off? I stepped aside at the top of the stairs to let her in first.

‘After you,’ I said.

I had never been to Travis’s flat before. The door opened on to a large living room with views over the harbour. It was sparsely furnished, with just a single couch, a coffee table and a lamp. It reminded me of Ryan’s farmhouse – furnished just enough to be comfortable for a short stay.

‘We’ll go home and give you some privacy,’ said Miranda. ‘You can just drop the key at the solicitors’ office when you’re done.’

‘I won’t be long,’ said Lauren. ‘And I might have a few questions. Would you mind waiting outside?’

Miranda and I walked back down the stairs and into the hazy sunshine. We crossed the road and sat on a bench with a view over the harbour.

She dabbed at the corner of her eyes with a tissue. Neither of us said anything for a moment. I watched a seagull swoop down and snatch an ice-cream cone from a child’s hand.

‘I can’t stay around here,’ she said suddenly.

‘What do you mean?’

‘You heard what the woman said. She’s taking Travis’s body back to America with her. There won’t be a funeral or anything.’

I wished I knew what to say.

Miranda dabbed her eyes again. ‘I don’t want to sit around the house thinking about him. I have to get away.’

‘OK. Where do you want to go?’

‘I think I’ll drive up to Bath and stay with Tanya for a few days.’

I felt a weight lift from my shoulders. I loved Miranda to bits. She’d raised me ever since my

parents died in a car crash ten years ago. But Tanya was Miranda's best friend. She'd know the right things to say. She'd be much better at helping Miranda through this than I was.

'When do we leave?'

Miranda put a hand on my arm. 'Do you think you could manage a few days here alone? I need to get away from . . . everything.'

My heart constricted. Did she blame me for Travis's death? He'd been trying to kill me, but Miranda believed he'd been trying to save me.

'I'll be fine,' I said. My voice croaked.

'You've never been on your own before.'

'I'm nearly seventeen.'

'I'll ask Mrs Grady to look in on you.'

'You don't need to do that.'

Miranda managed a small smile. 'It's OK for Ryan to come over, but promise me that you'll be careful.'

I felt my face heat up. 'OK,' I said, turning my head in the opposite direction, just as Lauren began marching across the road towards us.

'My brother didn't collect many possessions, did he?' said Lauren. 'I take it the flat and the restaurant are rentals?'

'Yes,' said Miranda. 'The only item of value he owned was his car.'

'I will arrange for the car to be sold and any furniture to be given to charity. Unless you want any of it.'

Miranda rubbed her eyes. 'No.'

Lauren held out a photo of Ben – the leader from Ryan's original mission. 'Do either of you know who this is?'

'Let me have a look,' said Miranda, reaching for the photo. She shook her head slowly. 'Never seen him before. Perhaps he's one of Travis's employees?'

'What about you?' Lauren asked, holding the photo to me.

I tried to think quickly. Ben's cover story had been that he was Ryan's father, an American scientist who had relocated to Penpol Cove to write a book. In reality he had been the mission leader on an assignment to 2012 to prevent my friend, Connor, from discovering a planet.

'I don't recognise him,' I said, handing the photo back.

Lauren passed a small card to Miranda. 'Do you know what this is?'

'It's a passenger ticket to the Isles of Scilly,' she replied.

'Where is that?'

'Just off the coast of Cornwall,' said Miranda. 'This is a return ticket to the islands on the *Scillonion*, the ferry that sails between Penzance and the islands. Funny, I never knew Travis had been there.'

'Did my brother leave anything at your house?'

'He spent most of his time at my place during the last few months,' said Miranda. 'But it's strange. There's almost nothing of his in the house. I have his pyjamas and a toothbrush, half a pack of the cigarettes he smoked and some spare socks. But no photos or anything that really reminds me of him. It's as though he never existed.'

Lauren nodded. 'That sounds like Travis.' She pursed her lips. 'What is the name and address of the undertaker who has my brother's body?'

'Wakfer and Williams. They're the only undertaker in Perran. Located on Bread Street.'

Lauren nodded and began to walk away. She stopped halfway across the road and turned back to me smoothing her hair with one hand. 'I'm sorry for your loss.'

Ryan opened the farmhouse door before I knocked and closed it quickly behind me.

'Were you followed?' he asked.

'Nice to see you too,' I said. 'I don't think so.'

'Stay against the wall.'

Warily, he peered through the glass of the front. It hadn't even occurred to me that Lauren might follow me. A frown creased his forehead and I realised his calmness on the phone earlier had been an act. He was dressed in his boots and jacket and a backpack leant against the wall. He was ready to leave.

'She never asked about you,' I said. 'Didn't even mention your name.'

'Good. Come in, I think we're OK.' He put his arm around my waist and led me into the kitchen.

And then I remembered the photograph.

'There was a photo of Ben at Travis's place,' I said. 'She asked if we knew who it was. We both said no. Do you think that means anything?'

'I don't think so. But I can't take any risks. If she's here for me, this is one of the first places she'll look. I'm going to need to disappear for a few days. Until I'm sure she's gone.'

'Where will you go?'

He shrugged. 'Away from here. Just until the weekend. If she's here to clean up Travis, she'll only need a couple of days. If she's still here next week, then I'll know I'm in trouble.'

I walked to the sink and poured myself a glass of water. It wasn't fair. I'd only just got him back and now he was going to leave again.

'I'll be all alone,' I said. 'Miranda is going to Bath to stay with a friend.'

I didn't tell him that the thought of being the only one around with Lauren in the area terrified me. There had been something detached and robotic about her. Travis, although he was a psychopathic killer, had at least shown signs of humanity from time to time. But Lauren had no warmth. I smiled at myself.

'What's funny?' asked Ryan.

'I was just thinking that at least the man who tried to kill me could make me laugh occasionally. Whereas this Lauren woman just creeps me out,' I said. 'There must be something seriously wrong with me – clocking up Travis's good points.'

Ryan came up behind me and slipped his arms around my waist. He nuzzled my neck; my skin prickled and my pulse accelerated. I still wasn't used to this.

'She's a cleaner,' he said. 'She's not here to make friends.'

I turned around in his arms. 'Now it sounds like you're defending her.'

He shook his head. 'When is Miranda going away?'

'Tomorrow morning.'

A smile appeared in the corner of his mouth. 'So she won't miss you if you come away with me?'

'I like what you're suggesting,' I said. 'Have you anywhere in mind?'

He ran a hand through his hair. 'What I'd really like to do is whisk you away to a deserted island. But right now I don't have a passport. Or a whole lot of money.'

'What about all those credit cards?'

'I was on an official time mission back then. The credit cards were supplied to me. And of course they're totally traceable. If I used a credit card now, they'd be on to me in no time.'

‘You spent all that time in the future and you didn’t memorise winning lottery numbers?’

‘Lottery winners attract publicity. I need to keep a low profile.’

‘I have some savings,’ I said.

‘I have enough to cover a few days away.’ He slipped his hand back around my waist. ‘We just need to decide on a place to go.’

I had a sudden flash of inspiration. ‘Hang on a second. I know just the place. It won’t be tropical temperatures, but it has deserted islands, beautiful beaches and doesn’t require a passport.’

Chapter 3

The woman at the reception desk smiled apologetically. 'It's almost impossible to get a room here in the summer without a reservation.'

'Oh,' I said, feeling foolish. Had I really dragged Ryan across twenty-five miles of stomach-churning sea to the Isles of Scilly just so we could turn around and make the same journey back home that afternoon?

'Do you know of anywhere else on the island that might have a space?' asked Ryan.

The woman pressed her lips together tightly and looked at us in turn. 'I might be able to sort you out a room. But I warn you, it's not really ready for letting. We only finished painting it yesterday. You'll need to keep the windows open until dark or you'll suffocate on the fumes.'

'I'm sure it'll be fine,' said Ryan. 'We just need a room for a couple of nights.'

The woman gave us a look. 'It is a double room.'

I looked at the floor.

'Double is fine,' said Ryan.

'And the name is?'

Ryan and I looked at each other. He couldn't risk using the name Westland.

'Shall we book it under my name?' I asked.

'I'll need both names.'

'Right,' said Ryan. He hesitated.

The woman cocked her eyebrows. 'Will it be Mr and Mrs Smith?'

'Yes,' said Ryan. 'Mr and Mrs Smith.'

We followed the woman as she led us to a room at the back of the guest house.

'The air should be clearer by this evening,' she said, as she unlocked the door and stood aside to let us enter.

The room was simply furnished with two wooden bedside tables, an armchair, and a large double bed made up with crisp, white bedding. I looked quickly away from the bed and focused instead on the doors that looked out on to a small enclosed patio with views of the sea beyond.

'This is perfect,' said Ryan.

'The bed is made up, but I'll need to go and get you some towels,' the woman told us. She strode across the room and opened the patio doors. 'I'll leave the doors open to clear the air. The room is perfectly secure. I'll be back in a couple of minutes.'

We stood awkwardly in the centre of the room until she'd left.

'So, what do you think?' asked Ryan.

'It's great,' I said, trying to ignore the big double bed that took up most of the room. My voice trembled. 'Perfect.'

'Hey,' he said, closing the space between us. 'What's the matter?'

I shook my head. 'Nothing.'

'We're safe here,' he said, running his fingers through my hair. 'The cleaner is back on the mainland dealing with Travis. She'll be gone soon. There's no need to be afraid.'

But it wasn't the cleaner that I was scared of. It was everything else. Here we were. After months of wanting this, we were together. A room of our own. No adults conspiring to keep us apart. No friends

to gossip and stare. No Fate to get in our way. Just Ryan and me.

~~And then we were kissing and all my fear floated away. I fell softly backwards on to the bed, Ryan beside me. My heart drummed against my ribs so hard that the bones ached. My limbs were tangled with his, my fingers in his hair. We were going to spend the whole night together. And then the whole of the next day. And then after that . . . for ever.~~

There was a knock at the door.

Ryan sighed. While he collected the towels, I jumped off the bed and walked through the doors on to the small patio, letting sunlight and warmth flood over me. The water was choppy; white foam sprayed and danced playfully above the waves. I breathed in deeply. The briny smell of the beach lingered in the air.

‘Where were we?’ he asked, as he pushed open the bathroom door and chucked the towels inside.

‘Let’s go and explore the island,’ I said. ‘Those paint fumes are still strong. I think we need to let the air clear.’

We hired bicycles from a shop overlooking the harbour beach. Dozens of boats were moored in the harbour, their masts clanging musically in the light breeze.

‘How come you never told me there were a bunch of subtropical islands a couple of hours away?’ Ryan said, as we set off along the seafront road.

‘It never came up,’ I said, wobbling as I tried to get the bike moving.

‘Eden, have you ever ridden a bicycle before?’

‘No.’

‘How can you get to sixteen without ever riding a bike?’

‘I don’t know. I just haven’t.’

‘The first few seconds are the hardest,’ he said, pulling alongside me. ‘Once you get going, it’s easy. Push down and start pedalling hard.’

I grimaced. ‘One day I’m going to discover something that I can do better than you.’

The bicycle gained momentum and I was off. The warm air blew my hair back from my face and I breathed in the scent of flowers and seaweed. We left the harbour behind and began climbing a steep hill, past a blur of tall, green hedgerows and fields of cows. My thighs burned with the effort.

‘You’re doing great,’ Ryan said, looking back over his shoulder at me.

‘Don’t patronise me,’ I yelled back at him.

It bothered me that I had no real skills. I wanted to be prepared for everything and anything. Ryan might be convinced that now that Travis was dead we were safe, but I wasn’t so sure. And if Lauren posed no danger to us, why had Ryan decided to run and hide until she’d left?

The narrow road that encircled the small island took us past farms and fields, a couple of duckponds and craggy beaches framed with brown granite. We were never very far from the sea and the gritty combination of salt and sand hung in the air, a constant reminder.

After a while we came across a sandy cove with a small slipway and a couple of sailing boats tied up above the high water line. Ryan pulled off to the side of the road. ‘Do you mind if we lie down and rest for a while?’ he asked, yawning. ‘I’m still suffering from time lag.’

I hopped off my bike and laid it carefully on the ground. ‘What’s time lag?’

Ryan rested his bike next to mine. ‘You know what jet lag feels like, right?’

I shook my head. ‘Sorry. I’ve never been further than Paris.’

‘You’re even more sheltered than I thought.’

‘It’s not like I don’t want to travel,’ I said.

Ryan held my hand in his and we walked down the slipway to the beach. It was a rare sunny day, the air hot.

‘I wasn’t judging you,’ he said. ‘I’m glad you haven’t done much travelling. We’ll get to see the world for the first time together.’

‘Anyway, I know what jet lag is. So tell me about time lag?’

‘The human body isn’t designed for time travel. It throws your body clock completely out of whack. For the first few days, you get these sudden bouts of sleepiness. It’s a bit like narcolepsy. The best cure is to have a short nap.’ He yawned again as if to prove his point. ‘I’ll probably only need twenty minutes.’

We strolled along the shoreline, shoes in our hands, feet just in the water. The helicopter from the mainland buzzed across the sky. A mother and her two young children were walking across the wet sand, collecting shells in a bucket. We waited till we’d passed them before looking for a patch of dry sand to sit on.

I laid out my hoodie and sat down. Offshore lay two other islands, rising from the ocean like turtles just breaking the surface.

Ryan squinted out to sea. ‘These islands don’t look that far apart. I wonder if it’s possible to rent a sailboat for the day. We could go and explore the other islands. Maybe dive on some shipwrecks; I bet there’re loads of wrecks around here.’

‘So you can sail and scuba-dive?’ I said with a dramatic sigh.

‘I grew up by a lake,’ said Ryan as though that explained everything.

I didn’t remind him that I’d grown up by the sea, but still didn’t know how to dive or sail a boat.

‘And when I come from, the sea levels have risen,’ said Ryan. ‘Lots of towns are underwater. My friends and I liked to scuba-dive in the drowned cities. It’s eerie, swimming along what were once roads, seeing fish swim in and out of the windows of buildings that were once apartment blocks and offices.’

He scrunched up his hoodie to make a pillow and lay back, an arm over his eyes to block out the sun, his muscles bunching and lengthening beneath his skin. I wondered what it must be like to be able to do so many things, to feel strong and capable.

‘I want to learn something new,’ I said. ‘I feel like I’m not good at anything.’

‘You’re good at Scrabble,’ he said sleepily. ‘And chess.’

‘Great. Next time I come up against one of your cleaners I’ll challenge them to a game of chess.’

He rolled on his side and opened his eyes again, narrowing them slightly against the bright light. ‘You’re good at running.’

‘That’s just the problem. I don’t want to run away from things. I want to be able to fight back.’

Ryan raised an eyebrow. ‘Like a ninja?’

‘Don’t make fun of me. It bothers me that if you hadn’t risked everything to travel back through time and rescue me I’d be dead. I should have been able to defend myself better. And now Lauren’s here and once again I’m relying on you to protect me. I want to learn new things so I can take care of myself.’

Ryan smiled to himself. ‘You’re what – about a hundred and twenty pounds? Travis was about two hundred pounds of pure muscle. You could be a black belt in every martial art going and you still wouldn’t have had a chance against that sort of bulk. Running was the right thing to do. It’s what you would have done too.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes. And you managed your encounter with Travis brilliantly. You outsmarted him. You

understood when to play along with him and when to run. And you outran him! He was a trained killer but you managed to drive away from him, outrun him and then you had the smarts to lead him to his death. You did ninety-nine per cent of the job – I just came in at the end to take the credit.'

'Don't patronise me, Ryan.'

He sighed. 'I'm not patronising you. Having your wits about you and the intelligence to think on your feet is worth a hundred black belts.'

He rolled on to his back again. I watched his breaths grow slower and deeper, the small shadow of his long lashes cast beneath his eyes, the faintest hint of stubble under his skin.

He opened one eye. 'I can't sleep if you keep staring at me.'

'I wasn't staring at you,' I said. I bit my lip. 'I was just thinking.'

'Thinking what?' He yawned loudly.

'What are you going to tell everyone else about coming back to Cornwall? What will your cover story be?'

He closed his eye again. 'I'm not going to tell them anything.'

'But they'll think it's odd. A few days ago you told them you were moving back to New Hampshire with your family and now you're back again.'

'They can't know I'm here. You'll need to tell Miranda that I've left again. Tell her that our departure was postponed by a couple of days if you need to. And don't tell Connor or anyone else that I'm back.'

'They'll find out in September when you enroll at college,' I said, confused.

'I'm not going to college, Eden. I can't. I can't appear as myself anywhere. I mustn't leave a trail for the future.'

'So what will you do?'

'I'll find a job. Something casual like flower-picking where they won't ask to see identification to start with. I'll get some fake ID, but I will still have to keep away from anyone who knew me as Ryan Westland. Once you're at university in a town where no one has ever seen me before, I'll be able to come out of hiding.'

'You can't hide away for two years!'

'I can and I will. If I start appearing as myself, the Guardians will pick it up and send a clean sweep straight back to get me. I have to become someone else, and I can't do that until we move to a place where no one has seen me before.'

It had never occurred to me that Ryan wouldn't just slot back into his old life. I'd pictured him hanging out with the old crowd from school, studying for his A Levels alongside me, going off to parties together. Not hiding away at the farmhouse and working on the land.

'But you're missing out on your education.'

'I can read books,' he said through a yawn. 'In any case, I'm already eighteen. I've had a pretty good education.'

'You'll be living like an outlaw.'

He smiled sleepily. 'I'd sooner spend a lifetime living as an outlaw with you, than a single day of freedom without you.'

We had a table for two by the window, with a clear view over the harbour. We'd finished eating and Ryan had gone to pay the bill. Through the window, the moon hung like an oversized pearl, white and luminous, in a pink and turquoise sky. The perfect backdrop to a romantic evening.

That was what scared me. How exactly did Ryan expect the perfect romantic evening to end? For

that matter, how did I want it to end?

‘Ready?’ he asked.

‘I think I might need to walk off dinner before we go back to our room,’ I said.

‘OK.’ He held my hand and we strolled down towards the pier.

Despite the late hour, there were still boats returning from daytrips. A line of chalkboards tied to railing advertised sightseeing trips to the other islands. One of the signs caught my eye.

Available for private hire.

Visit the uninhabited isles.

See seals, basking sharks and hundreds of birds.

Ask for a quote.

‘Shall we?’ I said, pointing to the sign.

And that was when I saw her. At first I thought I was seeing things, because she was dressed very differently. The suit was gone, replaced by a pair of shorts and a body-hugging T-shirt. She looked like a tourist. Her hair, which had been slicked back into a bun when I saw her last, now hung loose down her back. But the way she walked, head straight, face unsmiling, limbs quick and efficient, gave her away. She wasn’t looking for a pleasure cruise; she was on a mission.

‘Ryan,’ I whispered, steering him away from the harbour. ‘Back up.’

His hand tensed in mine, but he said nothing. Once we turned the corner, he stopped.

‘What is it?’

‘Lauren.’

Ryan swore.

‘How did she track us here?’ I said. ‘We used cash to pay for everything and we haven’t used our real names.’

Ryan peered around the corner. ‘What does she look like?’

‘Tall, long brown hair.’

‘I see her.’

‘How did she find us?’

Ryan turned back to me. ‘We don’t know that she has found us.’ He leant around the corner again. ‘What’s she up to? Why is she talking to the skipper of a boat?’

‘Maybe she wants to take us to one of the uninhabited islands and kill us there. Maybe she already knows where we’re staying and she’s just sorting out where to finish us off.’ I struggled to keep the panic out of my voice.

‘There has to be another reason,’ said Ryan. ‘We’ve been careful.’

Suddenly my mind flashed back to Travis’s flat. ‘It’s something to do with that ticket,’ I said. ‘It’s what made me think of coming here.’

‘Slow down,’ said Ryan. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘When we went to Travis’s flat, she found a return ticket to the Isles of Scilly on the *Scillonion*. She asked Miranda about it.’

‘Travis had a ticket to the Isles of Scilly? Why would he have that?’

I shrugged. ‘I don’t know. He hadn’t used the return portion. I guess he saved it in case he wanted to go back.’

‘Maybe that’s it,’ said Ryan. ‘She’s following one of Travis’s trails. Cleaning up any trace of him. This has nothing to do with us. It’s just a coincidence because you thought of coming here from seeing the ticket, right?’

I thought about it. What an idiot. I'd led us into danger again. 'I guess I did.'

~~'Perhaps his time-ship is here somewhere. He could have ended his journey from the future on one of the uninhabited islands and hidden his ship there. He isn't able to come back and retrieve it, so his cleaner has.'~~

That made sense. My heartbeat began the journey back to normal.

Ryan looked around the corner again. 'She must be hiring a boat to take her to the islands tomorrow. She'll destroy the ship and then go back.'

'So we're safe.'

'We're safe. But I think we should follow her. See where she's staying.'

My stomach rolled over. 'Do we have to?'

'I'd sooner know where she is.'

'What if she sees us following her?'

'She won't.'

'Ryan -'

'Look, you head back to the guest house. I'll follow the cleaner. As soon as I know where she's staying, I'll come back. I won't sleep if I don't know where she is.'

The only thing worse than following Lauren was the thought of sitting alone in my room, worrying whether Ryan was OK.

'I don't want to be apart from you.'

'It will be easier to follow her if I'm alone. She knows you, but she doesn't know me from Adam. He pushed the room key into my hand. 'I promise I'll come straight to the room as soon as I know where she is.' He took another look. 'She's coming this way. Go.'

I slipped the room key into my pocket and walked briskly up the road towards the guest house without looking back. This was not how I'd imagined our evening ending.

Back in our room, the smell of paint had faded and been replaced by the fresh laundry scent of the bedsheets. I closed the windows and the curtains and sat on the edge of the bed. Ryan seemed confident that Lauren being here was just a horrible coincidence. I needed to put her out of my mind.

I brushed my teeth and checked my breath and then dug through my overnight case for my pyjamas. They were a vest top and cropped bottoms with pink and white love hearts all over them. They were cute, girly, the opposite of sexy. If I'd had more notice about our little trip away, I would have bought myself something more sophisticated. Did Ryan expect to find me draped across the bed in a silk negligee? Or did he expect me to be tucked under the duvet in my girly pyjamas? And what if I was undressed and went to bed and then Ryan came running to tell me that Lauren was after us and we needed to leave right now? I sighed. There was no way I was getting into bed until Ryan was back and I knew what was going on.

Silence. There was no television in the room to distract me. Not even a coffee-maker to hiss and bubble and make friendly noises. The double glazing kept out the sound of the sea, although it was just metres away. No one was walking along the thickly carpeted hallway outside my door. There was nothing but the rush of blood through my ears and the unnerving quiet.

I kept reminding myself this woman was a cleaner, and cleaners clean. And kill. Methodically. Efficiently. Probably quietly too. I swung around and looked at the door. Nothing. Just the sound of silence freaking me out.

I searched for something I could use as a weapon. Just in case. There were few furnishings in the room. I considered the wastepaper bin by the dresser, but when I picked it up it turned out to be made of thin metal. If I bashed someone over the head with it, all it would do was leave a dent in the bin.

There was a New Testament in the bedside table, but it was a flimsy paperback.

I was about to give up when I noticed a set of fire irons in an alcove next to the boxed-in fireplace. I had a brush, shovel and poker. I lifted each one in turn. The poker was easily the heaviest of the three tools. Long and made from a heavy, black metal, it could probably do some serious damage if I hit someone on the head. I clutched it in my hands and stood by the door.

Right on cue there was a friendly *rap-tap-a-tap-tap*.

‘Who is it?’ I called.

‘It’s me,’ said Ryan.

Feeling slightly stupid, I unlocked the door.

‘Good thinking,’ he said, eyeing the poker as he slipped inside. He locked the door behind him.

‘So?’

He strode across the room and pulled the curtains open. Through the window, the daylight on the patio was nearly gone; the picnic table, the wall and the palm tree were blending into the shadows. I pulled the curtains shut again.

‘You want the good news or the bad news?’

I felt a shiver scuttle up my back, like a spider. ‘The bad news.’

‘She’s staying in this guest house.’

‘You have got to be kidding me!’

Ryan sat on the edge of the bed. I stayed standing.

‘The good news is that I’m certain the time-ship theory is correct.’

‘Why do you think that? Did something happen?’

He ran his hands through his hair. ‘After she left the harbour she walked up the street and went into the Co-op. I followed her in and bought a newspaper. She bought a lighter and some liquid paraffin. She’ll use the paraffin to try and make it look like some kids set fire to something. It’s a cover. She’ll use the leftover gas in the fuel tank to destroy the ship. From there she came directly back to the guest house. I stayed several metres behind her, but when I walked in the front door she was deep in conversation with the receptionist. She was asking for a map of the most isolated islands. It all added up.’

‘Did she see you?’

‘No.’

I hadn’t realised I’d been holding my breath until I slowly released the air that had been trapped in my lungs. I sat beside him on the bed.

‘I don’t think we have anything to worry about,’ he said.

‘So, it’s a coincidence.’

He put a hand on my leg. ‘Yeah. But I don’t like coincidences. I think we should leave the island tomorrow.’

‘The boat sails at four.’

‘We’ll keep a low profile until then.’

We stayed where we were for a minute or two, listening to the absolute quiet. It felt as though the room itself were trembling. My heartbeat. The booming silence. Knowing that an assassin shared our home for the night.

I turned and placed one palm over Ryan’s heart. It beat a frantic rhythm against my skin.

‘You’re scared,’ I said.

He placed his hand on top of mine. ‘This has nothing to do with Lauren.’

He stood up, opened his overnight bag and took out his toothbrush and toothpaste. He opened the

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