

JENNY JAMES

IS NOT A

DISASTER

HARPER
MUSE



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Jenny James Is Not a Disaster

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Chapter 1



THERE ARE SOME THINGS THAT would be so useful in modern life, I often wonder why nobody has bothered inventing them yet. With so many clever people in the universe, surely someone should have come up with more quick fixes? More ways to smooth out the niggles of everyday existence?

For me, this list includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Shoes that come with retractable high heels—one minute you're all tall and swanky and looking professional; the next, you pop the pointy bit into a cunningly designed compartment concealed in the sole, and you're walking on air in comfy flats. No more shoving ballet flats in your handbag.
- A breathalyzer attached to your phone that automatically shuts it down if you're over the limit—no more drunk texts or 3 a.m. phone calls that you eventually remember the next morning; you know, the ones that come back to you in fragments like a dream sequence and are so embarrassing they make you want to put your head in a blender.

- A very specific GPS app that could help you locate things that are missing in the house—for example, “your car keys are in the fridge,” or “the TV remote is down the side of the big sofa,” or “your sanity is in the recycling bin.” You’d be able to choose the voice it used so it could be Chris Hemsworth saying it in his Thor voice, rather than someone who makes you feel like your mum’s nagging you.
- Some kind of video game—possibly social-media based, like maybe on TikTok with some cool music?—that gives teenagers points every time they actually manage to put a pair of dirty underwear in the laundry basket instead of leaving them on the floor. It could be huge—like Grand Theft Auto with boxer shorts instead of guns.
- A delivery system—possibly by drone—that can bring an iced coffee and a box of cheesy chips to your car when you’re stuck in long traffic jams. And while we’re on that subject, a car seat that doubles up as a commode for lady drivers—I know, that’s a bit gross, but there’s nothing worse, is there? You’re stuck in traffic, wondering when you’re going to get home, wondering if you’ll ever get off the motorway, and even worse you’re absolutely busting for a wee?

I think I’ve peaked with that last one, now I come to think of it. Anyway—your list might be different, depending on your circumstances, and some of these might even have already been invented without me being clued up enough to notice, but I’m sure you see what I mean. There are just so many ways life could be improved.

I'm the sort of person who struggles to assemble flat-pack furniture, so I'm never going to become an inventor. If I was, though—if I had a sudden change of fortune—I'd give it a go. I have so many ideas.

Even more tempting than the ones on my list, the thing I'd really love to have is some kind of early warning system for what your day is going to throw at you. Like a weather forecast but for living. Not so much "Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs," but stuff like "mainly boring, but with a sudden spike in adrenaline at 8:00 p.m. during the National Lottery draw," or "predominantly stable but with some tears edging in after dinner."

We wake up every morning, and we go about our business. We eat, we wash, we dress, we get grunted at by our children, we go to work. We do these things over and over again, without ever knowing what that day has in store for us. How the hours between opening our eyes and closing them again might unfold.

We don't wake up assuming that something amazing is going to happen, or something terrible, or something so mind-bendingly weird that our lives will never be the same again. If we had some idea, some inkling, some intuition, someone telling us in that Thor voice that we needed to be careful, then maybe everything could be calmer. We could take a different turn in the road and avoid the banana skins lying in wait for our unsteady feet.

I say this, but part of me also wonders: What would we miss out on if we never took the occasional tumble? I think that sometimes, just maybe, we need to lose our balance before we can find it again. That we need to take a few steps back before we can move forward.

The day everything changed for me started like any other day—and it ended with me losing everything I owned, everything I planned for, everything I thought I held dear. Everything

I assumed I needed.

Ironically, it turned out to be the best day of my life. I can say that now, with hindsight, and the distance of time and experience. Back then, though, I thought I'd never get up again, never find that balance. Back then, I felt like giving up. Like lying down on the ground in a fetal ball and crying for help that I couldn't ever see coming, waiting for a cavalry that was never going to gallop across the horizon. I felt alone, and scared, and helpless.

Now I feel none of those things, at least most of the time. If I'm stuck in a small place with a wasp, maybe all three, but only on a temporary basis. Now I am stronger and more confident than I have ever been—and it all started on the day I lost everything. I wish I could go back to then-me and reassure myself, tell myself it would all be okay in the end. Just give myself a great big cuddle. But then-me probably wouldn't have listened—I was too lost, too closed off. Clinging too hard to the things I thought kept me stable. Maybe that's another thing I'd like to invent, now I come to think of it. A Hindsight Machine—one that sounds like someone comforting, maybe Oprah Winfrey or Dwayne “the Rock” Johnson or Mrs. Weasley or whoever makes you feel safe—telling you to take a deep breath. Telling you that it's not as bad as it seems. Telling you that everything will be all right in the end—that when you fall, there will always be someone to lift you back up. That, in a year's time, this will seem amusing, or irrelevant, or actually exactly what you needed, even if you don't feel like that right now.

So, this is my story. A story of falling and getting back up again. Of stepping back and moving forward. Read it in whatever voice you like—for me, that will be my own voice.

The voice I've finally found, and the voice I finally listen to.

Chapter 2



MY NAME IS JENNY JAMES, and I'm having a very bad day. In fact, it's such a Very Bad Day that it probably deserves capital letters.

It started with my son, Charlie, screaming at me because the internet was down. Charlie is eighteen and, more often than not, the light of my life. He is a thoughtful and gentle soul, empathetic and emotionally intelligent beyond his years—unless something gets between him and the information superhighway. When that happens, he becomes a complete bastard.

Even though it's not my fault, I somehow end up being the one who gets yelled at. I suggested sluggishly that he try calling the company that actually provides our broadband, but that had about as much effect as when I ask him to pick his own dirty socks up off the bathroom floor—i.e., zero. Isn't it weird how this current generation is connected to the matrix twenty-four hours a day, but they're scared of talking to an actual human being on the phone?

From that point on, nothing improved. I pulled a run in two pairs of tights trying to dress myself while exhausted, and had to patch the second pair up with nail varnish. Which wouldn't

have been so bad, but the tights were black and the nail varnish was neon pink.

After that, the fun really kicked in—the milk was sour, I broke a nail trying to hook breakfast out of our ancient toaster, and I discovered when it was too late to retreat that we'd run out of loo roll. There was definitely some there the night before, which meant it had disappeared into Charlie's room—and that's something that no sane mother likes to contemplate.

Welcome to my life—8:30 a.m. and already a complete disaster zone.

I open the front door and am greeted with torrential rain. This doesn't come as a surprise, as I have been greeted by torrential rain every single morning for almost a month. It is early July, and the great British summer is probably leading to a rush on ark-building supplies. It's the kind of weather that is so bad, it gets its own segment on the local news every evening—Freak Summer Storm Update, with nifty graphics and the weatherman finally getting his shot at the big time.

Up until now, it's just been rain—but I have a vague memory of there being warnings about today reaching peak crappiness, with strong winds and scary weather symbols pinging up all over his little map.

As soon as I am outside, I feel it. My hair blows up around my face, and I have to hold my skirt down with my hands. The shrubs are shaking, the wind is whistling over the clifftops, and the sea is wild and angry. In fact, it's furious—maybe because the internet is down again, who knows?

Our little cottage is on the coast in Norfolk, and on less disgusting days, emerging from it always lifts my spirits. It's perched near the edge of a cliff, far enough away not to be scary, close enough to feel exhilarating. In front of the house, we have

a long strip of garden that meanders down to join the coastal path, a cute little gate at the end. When the sun is shining, it's breathtaking—endless views out over the sea, dazzling light and shade playing on the waves, the only sounds those of nature. And sometimes Charlie on his Xbox.

We've lived here for the last eleven years, and it is a haven. I grow my own strawberries and raspberries, and have giant sunflowers on the patio in terra-cotta pots, borders bursting with lupins and cosmos and nasturtiums. Beautiful purple-blue aubrieta is rooted in the rocks around us, cascading in a riot of glorious color. We have a vegetable patch, and harvest carrots and potatoes and onions and herbs. I can lose days to gardening, and to sitting out on the patio at the little table, a cup of coffee and a good book on the go.

We're tucked away at the end of a quiet lane, miles away from real traffic, our only neighbors a nearby farmer who keeps donkeys in his field, and occasionally rents space to families on camping trips.

It's a little slice of heaven, on a less disgusting day. Today is not one of those days, and everything looks gray and damp, my flowers flattened by the weight of the rain, the path outside mired in mud. The waves are crashing onto the shoreline so powerfully that spray is bouncing up over the clifftops, pirouetting into the air before it is lost in the downpour.

I glance over at the field next to us, glad to see that the donkeys have all been taken into their stables. I notice the solitary motorhome that's been there for the last week, and hope the man who lives in it has wellies. Actually, I kind of hope he's knee-deep in mud—the first day I saw him, I waved and shouted good morning, because that's what you do when you live in the middle of nowhere. He just returned my wave with a half-hearted nod and

closed his van door, as though horrified at the thought of seeing me. I have this effect on men.

I struggle over to my car, an ancient Nissan Micra. It starts on the third try, which I take as a good sign. It really should be chugging off to its final resting place in the heavenly scrapyard, but, as ever, I can't afford a new one. I can never afford much, to be honest—which is fine. I've never been especially bothered about stuff, about things—but it would be nice to shed some of the stress.

It takes me about half an hour to get to the small town where I work. I'm an office manager for a company that makes carpets. Have to be honest, it's about as interesting as it sounds, but the people are nice and it's steady work.

I was only eighteen when I had Charlie, and soon discovered that my clutch of GCSEs and one year of A levels weren't going to get me very far in the workplace. In the Olden Days—the days before I became the me I am today—I had dreams of being a writer. Maybe a journalist, or a novelist—something creative and important and fulfilling. Now I dream of other things. Things like loo roll and still having some money in the bank at the end of the month.

When Charlie was two, his dad left us to go “find himself.” Apparently he thought he'd find himself somewhere in Europe, and took off with a backpack and the last of our money, leaving me a note saying he'd be back when he was a “better version of himself.” That was sixteen years ago, and he still seems to be a work in progress.

I am past the stage where I harbor any resentment or anger about it—in fact, it was probably for the best. Sometimes, being on your own is easier than being with the wrong person. If you live with someone and expect them to help you, it stings when

they don't. When they're gone, you know you have to do everything yourself, so you just get on with it.

One of the things I got on with was doing a course on office basics—how to use computers and spreadsheets and software, that kind of thing. It was a bit different than going to some fancy uni and lounging around discussing philosophy and Shakespeare, but it was definitely more useful at that stage of my life. It meant I could work, and earn money, and eventually find a job that paid enough for me and Charlie to move here. To this soaking wet corner of paradise.

There is never much spare cash after I've paid the rent and the bills, but it is enough. Charlie has had a stable life, if not a wealthy one. He's been rich in love, I like to tell myself. School trips have been tough, and I've become an expert at hunting down acceptable clothes in charity shops, and, okay, I do cut my own hair—but it's a nice enough life. We have each other, and the cottage, and Netflix. I mean, what more could a girl want?

Well, I think, as I arrive at work—maybe an umbrella.

There is a strange silence in the office as I enter, and at first I think the Big Boss is in, which always makes everyone go quiet. There are eight of us working here, which is just about enough to make the tea round challenging, but it's generally a pleasant atmosphere. The business had been run by the same family for donkeys' years, but they recently sold it to a big national company. Mr. and Mrs. Hedges, the previous owners, are now living in a villa with a pool in Lanzarote, and getting more and more orange every day. They eat out every night, start drinking at lunchtime, and send us all pictures of them singing in karaoke bars on a regular basis. As retirements go, they are living the dream.

It's been an adjustment for us, being owned by The Man. We have things like Performance Reviews and Targets and HR As-

assessments now. We also have a regional manager, a thirtysomething man called Tim who likes to have us all sit in the meeting room and give us inspirational pep talks about the carpet business. Two things you would never expect to hear in the same sentence. We're all supposed to tweet about carpets as well, but so far none of us have bothered—one reason to be grateful for the dodgy Wi-Fi at least. I am hanging my wet coat up on the rack, wondering why it's so quiet, when my colleague Barb walks over to me. She looks pale, and her mascara is smudged. For me, this would not be a big deal—I try to make my makeup last a few days, if humanly possible. For Barb, though, it is a sure sign of impending disaster. She's one of those perfectly tidy women who always has healthy food in clean Tupperware boxes for lunch.

"Are you okay?" I ask, wringing out my hair. "Is Tim here?" I whisper the last bit, looking around as though I might find him hiding behind a potted plant.

"Haven't you seen the memo?" she asks, her eyes swimming with tears. Now that I look at her more closely, I see that the pink combs in her hair are also slightly askew. The end of the world is nigh.

"Erm . . . no. I've only just walked in."

"Oh. I thought you might have checked your emails at home."

No, I think—I did not have the kind of morning that lent itself to a calm checking of emails. I was too busy ignoring Charlie's meltdown and managing my own chaos and using the last strip of paper towels in the loo, even though I know I shouldn't because it might block it, and then I'll have to get the landlord out. Again.

"The internet was down," I say, because Barb doesn't need to know any of that. "What is it?"

"They're thinking of closing us down," she says, each word

laden with disbelief. “Too many overheads and not enough productivity apparently. It’s between us and a branch in Kidderminster!”

“Kidderminster?” I echo, frowning. “Where the f—flip is Kidderminster?”

Barb doesn’t like swearing, and I am a respectful human being, so I try to keep my foul-mouthed tendencies in check around her.

“I don’t know . . . I think the Midlands? Does it really matter? It means we could all be out of a job, Jenny!”

She’s right, of course. It doesn’t matter. Kidderminster could be in Nepal, or on a hellmouth, or at the bottom of the Grand Canyon—it makes no difference. I am still pondering it, though, because questioning the geography of small towns in the United Kingdom is easier for me to handle than the panic that I know will soon engulf me if I let it.

I have made some poor choices in my life, and I have taken some wrong turns. All of them led me to Charlie, which I can never regret, but it has not been easy. Leaving my own family wasn’t easy. Raising a child on my own wasn’t easy. Finding stability in the wreckage wasn’t easy, nor was being both mum and dad to a growing boy. Bringing up another human being when you barely feel capable of looking after yourself is tough; you have to make so many decisions all alone, accept consequences all alone, budget and plan and cry all alone.

The only way I’ve gotten through all that is by employing a coping mechanism I call Just Don’t Think About It. I should probably write a self-help book: “Life getting you down? Just don’t think about it! Facing a divorce, bankruptcy, or an existential crisis? Just don’t think about it!” Of course, I have to think about something else instead—this time, the precise location of

Kidderminster. Our rivals in the cutthroat world of carpets.

“I need to get a coffee,” I say, patting Barb on the arm. I haven’t had any, due to time constraints and the lack of viable milk in my own home. I bet that never happens to Barb. “Then I’ll read the memo. Don’t worry, Barb. It’ll be all right.”

“Do you think so?”

She asks me this with such sincerity, such hope, that I am momentarily taken aback. I know my life is a whirling dervish of insanity, but she doesn’t—she believes the calm and positive front I put on when I am around other people. I am Jenny James, Office Manager—the woman who always knows where the spare staples are and makes sure the printer doesn’t run out of ink and checks everybody else’s paperwork for them.

“Yes, I do,” I reply, putting as much oomph into the claim as I can. If Barb disintegrates right now, I’ll join in, and we’ll both end up crying. It will be a decision that will work out badly for both of us.

I nod at the rest of the staff but stay silent as I make my coffee, drinking it out of a World’s Best Granddad mug simply because it is the biggest one in the cupboard. If there’d been a bucket handy, I’d have used that instead. I settle down in the small office that is my domain and log on to my computer. First things first, because I have a clear sense of my priorities right now, I google Kidderminster. It turns out to be a market town in Worcestershire. Clearly a hotbed of evil.

Next, I check my emails and open the dreaded memo. I scan through it but learn little more than what Barb has told me. It is couched in corporate terminology to soften the blow and make it all seem more reasonable—benchmarking, economies of scale, blah blah blah, but the cold fact remains: the ax is hovering over our heads, and Tim is wielding it. A decision will be made next

week, it explains, and all staff contacted in person.

I am scared, and I am worried, and I am starting to feel a little tremble in my hands. I have worked so hard for the small life we have, and I sense it starting to crumble around me. It's not like this is my dream existence, but the thought of starting again makes me feel weak.

I tell myself to stay calm. That I am not the same person I was all those years ago. That I have skills, experience, a decent résumé, references. That I will be able to find another job.

Except . . . well, times are tough, aren't they? It always feels like times are tough, but right now it's true. You can't watch the news without there being some story about layoffs or factory closures or the soaring cost of living. There was a piece in the local newspaper—the free one that comes through the door—recently about there being 120 applications for one job at a McDonald's.

What if I end up being one of those people, fighting for a minimum-wage job? What if I can't afford the rent, or petrol, or, heaven forbid, Charlie's Spotify account? I already shop at the cheapest places I can tolerate, and there just isn't much slack—there are very few ways I can cut back without making life a complete misery. I budget for one bottle of wine a week as my own luxurious treat, and right now I feel like I could do with increasing that, not cutting it out.

When Charlie was little and his dad left, we lived in a series of one-room flats that have left me haunted. Most of the people who lived in the same buildings were nice, just down on their luck—but some of them were not so nice. Some of them were scary, and aggressive, and intimidating. Looking back, I understand that many of them had problems with addiction or their mental health, but that didn't make it any less terrifying.

It was a horrible period of my life, and I can't contemplate going back to it. It took me years of hard work and many missteps to get to where I am today, to our cozy cottage and a sense of security that now feels threatened. Even if Charlie is now eighteen and thinks he's all grown up, he's still my baby, and it's my job to give him the very best I can.

I bloody hate Kidderminster. And Tim. And carpets.
And the whole damn world.

The rain is crashing against the windows, and a crisp bag flies up in the wind and splatters across the glass. I stare at it—cheese and onion flavor. My least favorite crisps. A bad omen.

I see Barb looking in at me, a questioning expression on her face. I force a smile onto mine and give her a little wave. I hope it is a wave that says, "Look how calm I am—it's all fine!" not a wave that says, "The end of the world is nigh!"

My phone pings and I pick it up, fighting the urge to throw it through the window. It is rarely good news. I find a smile when I see it is a message from Charlie. "Sorry I was a dick this morning," it reads. "PS—the internet is back. And the milk is off. And we need bog roll."

I reply with a series of random emojis that have no meaning whatsoever. My mood is complicated, in the way that only a stream of small cartoon faces can ever express.

As soon as I've finished my reply, the phone pings again. This time, it's not so pleasant. It's from the bank, informing me that I am seventy-two pence past my overdraft limit, and that if I don't pay in this grievous amount by midnight, I'll be charged twenty-five pounds. I consider replying, but there are no emojis that fully convey the way I feel about this. Now I'll have to go to the bank later and put a pound in, one of the last twenty of them in my purse—but it's payday soon, I remind myself. Though how

many more paydays I'll have is a matter of some conjecture right now.

The day moves slowly, all of us quiet and gently downtrodden, flattened like my lupins in the rain. We are kind to each other, there are more teas and coffees than normal, and we all get on with our work. Heaven forbid our productivity rates should slump at a time like this.

It is hard to concentrate, and I have to redo several pieces of work because my mind has suddenly taken on the characteristics of one of those baboons that tries to pull your windshield wipers off at a safari park. Leaping all over the place, loud, smelly, nimble, bare-arsed.

I keep finding myself dragged back to those one-room apartments, and each time I do, it gets worse and worse. I imagine Charlie falling in with drug dealers or gangs, and myself becoming an alcoholic, and before long we are both just toothless drudges, like the poor people in those Hogarth paintings of gin mills.

My resilience is low, and I am glad to be working in an office full of other people. While I am around other people, I will be able to hold it together. While I am around other people, I will be able to smile and joke and fully inhabit my Brave Face. I will be able to stay strong for their sake, if not my own. I am aware, of course, that eventually I will be alone—that I will be back in my little cottage on the edge of the world, with a glass of wine and a luxurious new multipack of bargain-basement toilet tissue.

Then I will have to face up to this. I will have to think about the future, and finances, and all those sorts of grown-up things that make me want to run screaming into the hills. My life might not be a party, but it is solid—Charlie is solid, and that's what matters. Keeping his life on an even keel, where all he has to

worry about is the occasional internet break, is the most important thing in my universe. He might think his life is boring, but he has no idea how lucky he is—boring is a luxury, a privilege. Boring takes effort.

After what feels like at least ten days, my shift is over. We all troop out of the building, Barb staying behind to lock up, with promises to take care and stay cheerful and not think the worst. I have a weird vision of a group of strangers, somewhere in Kidderminster, doing exactly the same.

Charlie has messaged me to say he is in town, and he will meet me for a lift home. We make our arrangements, and I go about my very pressing business—the bank, the shops, and a luxury spa with full-body massage, detoxifying facial, and a glass of cucumber water. That last one was a lie—the closest I'm getting to a spa anytime soon is standing in the rain and looking upward.

Our small town is nice enough, a strange mix of the usual soulless modern high-street shops and a few rows of old Tudor buildings that have survived from days of yore. Of course, these are the buildings that feature on all the postcards and on the websites of the people here who boost their income by hosting tourists.

There are a few tourists around today, and my heart aches for them. Families with young children mostly, toddlers jumping in puddles, soaking-wet parents looking exhausted and bedraggled as they wander around the shops and the one amusement arcade. This is probably not the holiday they'd hoped for. This is not what England in July should be like.

By the time I get back to the car, Charlie is already there. He is leaning against the hood looking at his phone, shielding it from the worst of the downpour with his hands. As ever, I feel a

little jolt of surprise when I see him.

I know this isn't an uncommon feeling among parents, but it feels like only yesterday that he was a baby. Then, the day after that, he was starting primary school. Maybe a week after he started losing his first teeth, and calling me Mum instead of Mummy, and making new friends at high school. Now he is huge, hairy, and hungry—all three, all the time.

I am a person of averages—average height, average build, average attractiveness. I have long brown hair and blue eyes, and the only thing about me that ever gets commented upon is my smile. I'm told it's a cracker, and was once offered a job as a croupier in a casino purely on the basis of it. I should probably consider a new career as a smile model, as it seems like I might be needing one soon.

Charlie, though, is very much his father's son—at least when it comes to appearances. He is already over six foot tall, still slender from the terrifying growth spurt he had last year, with wild dark curls that make him look like a young Heathcliff. His eyes are deep brown, like his dad's, and he has that half-man, half-boy vibe that kids of his age always seem to display. Keeping up with his need for new clothes and new shoes has been a fun time recently, and I will be financially relieved when he stops doing this growing-up thing.

I still can't believe that this gorgeous young dude came out of my body, and I am flooded with love as I approach him.

"Did you get the bog roll?" he asks, barely tearing his eyes away from the screen. Ah, the magic of parenthood.

"I'm fine, son, thanks for asking. My day was good, nice of you to inquire."

He pulls a face and rolls his eyes in patented teenage fashion but doesn't fight me off when I give him a hug. My coat is a

shabby affair, frayed at the cuffs and repaired at the hem. I am wet and hot and probably look terrible. He is wearing a really nice Regatta jacket that I picked up in the sales that seems to be keeping him toasty. Mama's Little Soldier.

We climb into the car, and I ask him how his day was—because it was definitely better than mine.

"All right," he answers, twisting his long legs to get comfortable. "Met some of the gang. Did some hard drugs, drank ten pints, hooked up with some exotic dancers . . ."

"Ah. The usual stuff then?"

"Yeah. Plus, I was looking for a job."

I pause as he says this, biting my lip. He is eighteen, and it would be good for him to have a job. He wanted one earlier, but I was keen for him to do well on his exams. To be able to go to uni—to build the kind of life he deserves; the kind I turned my back on. It has been a touchy subject between us—we don't disagree about much, but this is one of those things. We had a spectacular row about it, where I pointed out he needed to concentrate on his studies, and he pointed out that I was "an emotional vampire trying to live my life through his." It blew over, as these things do, but the fact that he is looking for work pretty much straightaway after his exams tells me it has not been forgotten. Now, though, I have to accept that it would be good for him—both as a human and as a person who lives with me, the possibly soon-to-be-unemployed mum. Things are different now—and he might not be able to rely on me forever. It hurts to even think that, but it's true.

I hide all of this from him, and simply ask: "Find anything?"

"Not yet. There was a kitchen porter job in the hotel, but I wasn't keen on that. Dangerous."

"Really? How? I mean, I know there are sharp knives and

stuff . . .”

“Nah, Mum, it’s not that. You know when you watch a film or a TV show, and there’s a bad guy being chased? They always run out through the kitchens, don’t they? And the cops chase them, and all the poor staff get knocked over or hit with frying pans or flying bullets . . . dangerous.”

He winks at me to show he is joking, and I reply: “Yeah. You’re right. Lots of brutal gun chases in small towns in Norfolk. What’s the real reason?”

“Pay was rubbish and the nights were late. Like, after the bus late.”

“I’d always come and get you, you know that!”

“Mum, you’re usually in bed by ten!”

“I know . . . but I’d wait up for you, Charlie. You know I would.”

He pats my hand and nods. “I do know, Mum. Thanks. And once I get a job, I can pay for driving lessons, and that will be cool. Can we go home now? I’m really soggy.”

I turn the key in the ignition, realizing that it is that weird temperature where it’s too warm to put the heat on, but too wet to feel warm enough. It’ll be a jiggle with the buttons all the way home, balancing tropical heat against a steamed-up windscreen. Life, eh? Full of challenges.

Except, I soon find out, getting the air right won’t be one challenge I need to face today—because the car doesn’t start. I try again, and again, and again. I swear a bit, and remind myself that I filled it up only a week or so ago, and wonder if I’ve somehow got a flat battery. This is, unfortunately, the extent of my mechanical knowledge.

“The car isn’t starting,” says Charlie, frowning.

“Really? You think?”

“Um . . . is there enough petrol in it?”

“Of course!” I say, a bit too sharply.

He raises his eyebrows and wisely remains silent. He is, I know, thinking about a time a few years ago when I was trying to budget a bit too carefully and driving on fumes for a day. We ended up stuck at the side of a country lane in weather very similar to this while I walked to the nearest garage—which was four miles away. Happy times.

I try the key again, but nothing happens. No sound, no gas, nothing at all. I sit still and feel my fake sense of “everything’s okay” float away from me. My hands are gripping the steering wheel so tightly that my knuckles are white, and I have bitten my lip so hard that I taste blood.

“Do we have . . . I don’t know . . . like, roadside assistance or something?” asks Charlie quietly.

I shake my head, feeling tears start to sting. No, of course we don’t. That would be an unnecessary expense. I’m sure that’s what everyone thinks until they’re stuck in a parking lot in torrential rain with a broken-down car.

“It’s okay,” I say, shaking my head to clear away the impending panic. “I’ll sort it tomorrow. Or the day after when I get paid. For now, my darling child, we will have to get the bus!”

He makes a gagging noise, but laughs as he gets out of the car again. I grab the shopping, button up my wet coat, and join him.

He stares at the car—Nina—and pulls a face. “It’s a bit of a crap car, isn’t it, Mum?”

“Don’t say that, you’ll hurt her feelings!”

I stare at Nina, with her dents and scratches and muddy undercarriage. With her complete lack of cooperation. I feel annoyed now—I mean, what use is Nina if she can’t fulfill her primary function?

“You’re right,” I say, giving one of her tires a kick, “it is a crap

car. Come on, let's go."

I start to think my luck has changed when we manage to get the bus with a minute to spare. The route that goes the nearest to our house only leaves once an hour, so it feels like a better omen than cheese and onion crisps. I don't usually believe in things like omens, but it's been that kind of day. I wouldn't be surprised if a giant crow flies through my window tonight and drops dead at my feet.

I embarrass Charlie by getting him a child's ticket, and we snag a couple of seats, settling in for what I know will be a bumpy ride. It takes ages to get out of town, then we go up and down winding country roads that often present many exciting entertainments—small floods, maverick sheep, overgrown hedgerows that block the path, passengers who get on and try to pay their entire fare with small change and bubble gum.

It's not especially comfortable, especially as every human being on the bus is wet and steaming. It's like being in a grimy sauna. I use my hand to wipe a patch of window clear, but all I can see is rain.

"So, did anything else happen today?" I ask, keen to distract myself from my own thoughts.

"Kind of. You know Eric?"

"Yes. You've been friends with him since year five—of course I know him."

"That was rhetorical. Anyway, he came out on Snapchat."

"Oh. But hasn't Eric always been gay? I mean, didn't most people already know that? What difference does saying it on social media make?"

Charlie gives me a disgusted look and replies frostily: "Yes, we knew, Mum—but now it's official. It's not just something his friends and family know about; it's something he's proud of. And

I think it's a pretty brave thing to do."

"Okay, love," I say quickly. "I suppose I still think of Eric as the kid who ate all the doughnuts at your tenth birthday party and threw up inside the bouncy castle, so I struggle to engage with his sexuality. Or coming out on Snapchat."

I am only thirty-six myself, but I often feel the generational gap between me and Charlie's pals. The way they live a lot of their lives on social media, their obsessions and passions and the fact they have a whole new language. It's not that I'm right and they're wrong—I just don't quite understand it.

"Well, it's a big deal, Mum. It's not easy to be different, is it?"

"I don't know, love. I'm very boring myself. But look, that's great—I'm all for whatever makes him happy. Should we send him a card or something?"

I'm not quite sure if I'm joking or not—I don't really know the protocol for Charlie's era—but he assumes I am.

"People have been oppressed for hundreds of years, Mum, just for being who they are, and it's important that we all try to change that—you don't have to make a joke out of everything, you know? Some of us actually give a shit about other people." With this, he inserts his earbuds with an element of fury that surprises me.

Wow. I've somehow managed to alienate my beloved son in about three sentences, without even trying. I know from experience that once the earbuds are in, the arms are crossed, and he is looking in the opposite direction, there is no point in trying to converse with him.

Anyway, I think, closing my eyes and leaning back, *maybe he's right*. Maybe I do make a joke out of everything, even when it's the wrong thing to do—even when there is absolutely nothing funny going on at all. In fact, that's what I've been doing all day.

It's another coping mechanism, and sometimes it even annoys me, never mind the people around me. But Charlie isn't quite old enough or experienced enough to understand that sometimes, if you don't laugh, you cry—and if I start crying now, I might never stop.

Charlie blanks me for the whole journey, and I take it. No point arguing with a sulky teen—they have a way of dragging you down to their level anyway. Before long I'd be snapping, "Whatever!" and sticking my tongue out at him. My phone is out of charge, so I amuse myself by making up fictional life stories about my fellow passengers. Absolutely scandalous what some of them get up to, I tell you.

We get off the bus, Charlie still quiet, walking the regulation five paces behind me to show me he's still at battle stations.

The bus stop is almost a mile from our house even with shortcuts, and the weather is still as delightful as it has been for the whole of the day. For weeks and weeks on end. I can't even remember what sunshine feels like—it's a vague memory, like a flashback in a film, the way your skin glows and the light lifts your mood. Plus the exotic way your hair actually stays dry all day.

My work shoes aren't ideal for this kind of trek, some of it down a muddy footpath craggy with tree roots, but I've done it enough times to know it passes quicker than you expect as long as you don't think about it too hard.

I put my head down, into the rain and the howling wind, and tell myself that it will all be okay soon. Before long, we will arrive at our little cottage. It will be cozy and welcoming and safe and dry. We will hang our coats up over the bath, and I will make us beans on toast for dinner, and I will have my glass of wine. I will look up what it means to be pansexual, and I will talk to Charlie

about it in an open and curious way that shows that I am, deep down, an empathetic and emotionally evolved human being—not just an old lady in a tatty coat who makes inappropriate jokes all the time.

He is a good lad, and he will accept that, and it will also be true. We will be friends again, and all will be right with the world. I'll start looking at other jobs, just in case, and we will find a way out of this mess.

It will all be okay once I am home, I know. Once we're inside the walls of the cottage, our refuge from the weather and the worry and reality.

Except, of course, for one small fact. As we emerge from the end of the footpath and into the field, my sense of relief almost palpable as I visualize kicking off my shoes and unhooking my bra and pouring that wine, I see one very strange thing.

My little cottage, or at least the version of it I left this morning, simply isn't there anymore.

Chapter 3

I FREEZE, AND CHARLIE WALKS straight into the back of me. He tugs out his earbuds and looks as though he's about to make a snarky comment until he sees my face.

He follows my gaze, and his mouth drops open.

We are about a minute's walk away from our house—or at least the place where our house used to be.

Now there are crumbling walls and a roof tilted sideways and sliding away down the side of the cliff, which has encroached all the way inland. It's a skewed, slanted fun-house version of our house, as though time has fast-forwarded a hundred years to when it is falling apart. I can't quite believe what I am seeing. It is like something from a disaster movie, and I blink rapidly in case I am having some kind of stress-induced hallucination. It doesn't help. My home is still a wreckage of bricks, pipes, and shattered tiles. The cliff face has moved.

The wind is screaming and the rain seems even more intense than before, my feet getting sucked into the mud of the field because I've been still for so long.

A wild gust lifts the roof momentarily, and it seems to float in the air like a kite before crashing down again. The tiles shatter and

break, slipping away and down, into what would once have been my garden but is now just the new edge of the cliff.

The whole cottage has sunk low, parts of the walls completely gone, the rest reduced to crazy paving leaning and shaking to one side.

“Mum . . . ,” murmurs Charlie, grabbing my hand. “What the fuck has happened?”

I grip his fingers and shake my head.

“I don’t know. The cliffs . . . they’ve eaten our house!”

“But the cliffs weren’t that close! There was the garden, and the vegetable patch, and the coastal pathway that everyone waves to us from when they’re walking past . . .”

I nod. There were all those things, once. But now they are gone. No more garden, or vegetable patch, or pathway. Just the sludgy brown edge of the cliff, and our home slipping away—down, down, down, onto the beach, into the sea, out of existence.

I drop my shopping bags and run toward the house. I have no idea why—I don’t think I’ll be able to stop it, but some instinct just makes me run anyway. I cover the field in about thirty seconds, water splashing around my legs with every step, hair plastered to my head, wind whooshing like thunder in my ears.

As I get closer, I see the entire front of the cottage is gone. The rest has collapsed and is inching down in the same direction. The chimney has sunk in the middle of it all, and only one doorway is left standing. It’s the door into the back kitchen, the one we use when we come home this way, and it is so odd, freakishly upright in the middle of the carnage, bright red and wavering in the wind. A door we’d have been walking through minutes from now, sighing with relief at being out of the rain. Now it is a door that leads nowhere, nothing behind it but smashed glass and twisted metal and ruined plasterwork.

I see flashes of color against the deep poison-gray of the sky, bright pops of vibrancy that catch my eye. The cushions of our burgundy sofa, now covered in rubble. The remnants of our pale blue curtains, the ones I made myself. Smashed plates and mugs, yellow and cream. Flapping gingham material that used to be a tablecloth. It's a rainbow of destruction.

There is a trail of the weirdest items scattered around: paperbacks from my bookshelf, open, pages fluttering in the wind; the toaster I was battling with this morning lying on its side; clothes flying and flapping; a torn box of cornflakes, its contents dancing in the air. CDs and DVDs I'd picked up cheap at charity shops are lodged in the mud. My bed, along with its pretty floral duvet cover, is hanging half on land, half over the cliff, and the toilet has somehow landed on top of it.

I see Charlie's Xbox rolling away toward the edge, his old school textbooks and his desk, legs snapped, the only things remaining from his room.

I am paralyzed by all of it until I notice the photographs. Loose, flying, whisking through the air—precious pictures that I can never replace. Pages torn from albums, the stray ones I'd tucked inside the covers, spiraling in a chaotic dance, caught in swirling wind currents. I can buy a new sofa. I can make new curtains. I can sleep anywhere—but I can't ever get those pictures back. I run toward them, trying to snatch them from the air, grabbing at random and trying to collect them. I am jumping and stretching and crying, desperate to save as many as I can.

I hear Charlie's voice somewhere nearby but a million miles away, shouting: "Mum! Stop! Leave them . . . you're getting too close to the edge!"

He doesn't understand. These pictures are pre-digital. These pictures are priceless. These pictures are all I have to remind me

of Charlie's childhood—there is no dad around, no family, nobody to reminisce with. Nobody else with a camera. It has always just been me and him, and if I lose those photos, I lose those memories. I lose that part of us. I have to get them.

I'm aware of one of my shoes coming off, getting stuck in the squelching mud, a strange sucking sensation as I leave it behind. I see a picture of Charlie on his fourth birthday, wearing a badge that is almost as big as his chest, and I try to snatch it. I miss and it flutters away, flying out of my reach.

I feel my balance deserting me, and have that dizzying moment when you know you're going to fall, the adrenaline surging up into my brain. I stagger, throw my hands out in front of me to break my descent, barely aware now of Charlie's voice and the relentless drive of the rain.

I am grabbed from behind, held, lifted, pulled back to collide with someone's body. "It's okay! I've got you . . ."

I glance over my shoulder. It isn't Charlie. Charlie is yards back, a look of horror on his face, dark curls squashed flat to his head.

I look up into the face of a stranger . . . or maybe not.

He looks familiar, but I can't place him.

"My photos!" I protest, struggling to try to get free.

His arms are firm around me, and he physically lifts me up into the air and starts to walk backward. I am half carried, half stumbling, watching forlornly as I see Charlie's birthday badge picture blown away into the bleak distance.

"We'll get them," the man says, having to shout to make himself heard over the wind. "I promise. But for now you need to be safe. You need to stay away from the edge, and you need to talk to your son."

Part of me wants to fight him off, to push his arms away, to scream at him. But the rest of me knows that he is right. I look

up and nod.

“Come on,” he says, taking my hand and leading me away from the chaos. From the carnage. From my entire life.

I reach out to grab Charlie’s hand in my other, and together the three of us make our way across the field. It is a battle every step of the way, impossible to predict which way the gusts will come from, our bodies assaulted from every angle.

The man leads us on, and I see that he is taking us up toward the big barn where the donkeys live. Next to it is the long white motorhome that has been here for a good few days now, and the pieces fall together—this is his motorhome. He is the man who has the little dog, and sits on his steps with a mug of tea every morning, even in the rain. The one I have categorized as “rude and to be avoided” in my mind. And now here I am, clutching hold of his hand, breathless, soaked, confused. After what feels like an hour, we finally make it. He lets go of me and opens the door to the van. He holds it firmly, stopping it from flying wide, and gestures for us to get inside. I push Charlie through first, then stagger up the steps myself and follow him.

As soon as the door is closed behind us, the silence almost hurts my ears. I can still hear the storm, but it is removed, it is distant, it is shut out. The windows are rattling, and the place is rocking gently—nothing that feels like it might result in us flying away like Dorothy’s house in *The Wizard of Oz*, but a gentle sway that reminds me of the force of the weather out there.

All three of us stand, still and silent, caught for a moment in our communal shell-shock.

That moment is broken by a blur of movement from one of the other rooms, a flash of black as a tiny creature hurtles toward us. My eyes snap wide, and I step in front of Charlie, going purely on instinct, dropping into some kind of weird boxer’s stance.

“It’s okay, Mum,” says Charlie, laying a hand on my shoulder, “I think I’m safe.”

I look down and see a black-and-tan dachshund jumping up at me. It has its front paws on my shins, and is most definitely longer than it is tall. I reach down and pat its head. It snuffles its muzzle into my hand, and my fingers find the silkiest, softest, floppiest ears I’ve ever encountered. Weirdly, it immediately makes me feel better.

“This is Betty,” the man says, leaning down and scooping her up into his arms. She nestles into him and licks his face, and I see that her tiny body is trembling.

“Bless her,” I say, giving her another stroke. “She’s terrified.”

“So am I,” Charlie replies, moving in to scratch those amazing ears. “What the fuck happened out there?”

I don’t have it in me to reprimand him for his language. He is an adult, and he is also correct—in some situations, only the word *fuck* will suffice.

As if to back that up, an especially loud shriek of wind gives us all another gentle nudge.

“Don’t worry, we’re fine,” says the man, seeing my expression. “I moved it around to the side of the barn as soon as the wind got bad. I’m Luke, by the way.”

As he talks, he opens an overhead cupboard and pulls out a stack of towels. We all take one, and the act of rubbing my own hair makes me realize exactly how wet I am. In fact, we’re creating puddles on his floor.

We are in what seems to be the living area, and it is surprisingly spacious. There is a table that looks as though it folds back up, a banquette-style sofa that probably doubles as a bed, and a compact cooking area with a stove and microwave. Beyond the contents, though, it feels really nice and lived in—there are gorgeous

framed photos on display, showing beautiful sunsets in beautiful places, and a small shelf lined with fossils and seashells and pressed flowers in glass. A battered acoustic guitar is propped up by the window.

I see a scattering of well-worn paperbacks, a newspaper folded open to the crossword, a pair of binoculars and a clearly much-used *Guide to British Birds*. This feels like a proper home, not like a holiday home. Despite the fact that there are three wet people and a dog in here, it doesn't feel too cramped, and it even smells nice—probably due to the small tribe of scented candles in glass jars and tins that are grouped together on the table. My eyes run over the labels: bergamot, lavender, mint, rosemary, and sea salt.

I can imagine, under better circumstances, how nice this would be—a cozy night in, reading a book by candlelight, everything close by and tucked away. Safe and cocooned. Everything I once associated with my own home, which is now halfway down a cliff that didn't even exist this morning.

I thud down onto the banquette, suddenly running on empty. Suddenly and totally exhausted, numb, incapable of staying upright for a moment longer. There was so much damage out there—even the stuff that hadn't fallen was wrecked, coated in debris, buried beneath the bricks that once protected us, the roof that should be over our heads.

Everything is gone. Our clothes, our furniture, our books and games and precious photos. Our passports and paperwork and phone chargers and the laptop and the Xbox. Our bedding and towels and curtains and food and pots and pans and the slow cooker I never even use. Our flowers and our vegetable patch and our little patio set and my own scented candles. Our shoes and coats and Charlie's collection of random baseball caps and my few items of jewelry. The cookie jar shaped like an owl; the trophy he

won for the Good Citizen Award in year six that I've embarrassed him with ever since; his school certificates; all our fridge magnets.

So many things, all gone. A new one seems to crowd into my mind every second, and I feel the panic starting to rise. The panic, and the grief—because these aren't just things, are they? They are memories. They are moments. They are the physical manifestation of a life lived together. And now they are lost.

It's the thought of the baby scan picture that finally pushes me over the edge. I always meant to put it in a frame, along with the pictures of Charlie as a newborn, but somehow I never did. I just kept it, in an envelope, tucked inside one of the albums. I know it was just a fuzzy black and white outline, I know I have the real thing in front of me right now, and I know it is silly to react like this—but that is the loss that makes me cry. I feel big, fat tears rolling down the sides of my face and don't even have the energy to wipe them away.

Charlie kneels down in front of me and pats my hands. He looks distraught, and about twelve years old, and I see that he is trying to comfort me even though he is still an overgrown version of the baby in that scan photo. I squeeze his hands in return.

"I'm all right, love," I say as calmly as I can. "I'm just in shock. And sad. It'll all be okay, I promise. I just needed to have a little cry, it seems . . ."

"You never cry, Mum," he replies, still looking uncertain.

Ha, I think. As if. I cry all the time. I just do it when I'm alone, because nobody wants their child seeing that, do they? We mums are supposed to be invincible, unbeatable, unsinkable. We stay strong for the sake of our kids, even if that means we have our meltdowns in private.

Luke has remained silent so far, watching this minidrama unfold before him. It has taken perhaps five minutes.

“Tea?” he asks now, raising his eyebrows in question. I nod, and wonder if he has any brandy. I don’t think my much-anticipated bottle of wine will have survived today’s events somehow. Another loss to mourn—alas, poor Chardonnay, I knew him well.

Charlie sinks down next to me and we sit together, wet and shaking, holding hands. Betty jumps up to join us, and she is such a sweet little thing, I even consider a smile.

I glance at Luke as he goes about his business, filling a kettle, getting mugs. The kitchen is tiny but perfectly formed, everything in its place, little storage cupboards built in all over. He is a big man, I realize, and he takes up a lot of the space.

I have seen him before, of course, and part of my brain had registered that he was a good-looking human—but his standoffishness completely obliterated that aspect. Now things are different, and I find myself seeing him in a much more appreciative light.

He is as wet as we are, a black T-shirt with the logo of a rock band on the front plastered to his body, a pair of faded Levis dark with rain and mud. He has dark hair, so closely cropped it is almost shaved. He has the tanned skin of the outdoors type, the kind of nose you see on statues in museums, and a wide mouth. I stare at him as he concentrates on what he is doing, and wonder how old he is—there are creases on that face, laughter lines around the green eyes, a certain lived-in quality that speaks of challenge and experience.

He meets my gaze, and I am suddenly embarrassed. I know nothing about him, and he is not a stranger on a bus. I am silly to be trying to make up a backstory for him. He is clearly a seasoned traveling man, without a care in the world—I am simply filling in the blanks, pondering his life to stop myself from thinking about my own.

As though I have manifested it, he produces a bottle of brandy

and holds it up. I nod, and he glugs a generous splash into my mug. He glances at Charlie, and I fight off the urge to say no. He is eighteen, and he has had a Very Bad Day as well.

Luke sits opposite on a small footstool, and we are silent for a few moments. The mug is warm against my palms, the brandy is warm against my throat, and it is helping.

“I called 999,” he says, once we have all savored our first mouthfuls. “Emergency services told me they’d get people out here as soon as they could—there’s been a pileup on the Norwich road, and all kinds of accidents because of the storm. They’re sending people out to cordon it all off, and to close the beach, in case . . .”

“In case my house falls on a dog walker’s head?”

“Yeah. That. It started getting bad about an hour ago, stuff flying around from your garden—but this . . . this happened pretty fast. It was like the sea just swallowed the cliff, it all collapsed, and then the cottage started to shake, and bit by bit . . . it fell. I’m so sorry. But at least you weren’t there—I saw your car was gone, but there was still a moment where I wondered, and that’s why I came down to check.”

“Thank you,” I murmur, really meaning it. “That was both kind and brave, running toward the disaster instead of away from it. I’m not sure I’d have done the same. And I know it’s lucky, really, that we weren’t in—we might have been, but my car broke down in town and we had to get the bus. I was pretty annoyed about that at the time, but . . . well, maybe it saved our lives, now I come to think of it . . .”

For a moment my mind drifts to a dark place; a place where Charlie and I were at home, getting ready for a quiet night in. Where Charlie was gone, along with his Xbox. It’s been an absolute shit of a day, but it definitely could have been worse.

“Do you have a phone charger?” I ask, suddenly aware of the

fact that I need to start thinking about some practicalities.

Luke nods and retrieves one from a drawer. I root my phone out of my bag and find, naturally enough, that it doesn't fit. Charlie's, however, does. Success.

"What will you do?" Luke asks, frowning. "I mean, in the short term?"

"I was thinking maybe a brief period of anxiety followed by a full-blown panic attack . . . but after that, well, I don't know. I have to speak to the landlord—he lives in London. I have to speak to my work colleagues and tell them I won't be in tomorrow. I have to . . . find somewhere for us to live?" The last few words trail out limply, as though they ran out of energy halfway to being spoken. It's all too much. It's too big, and too weird, and too insane.

"That's long term," says Luke, looking at me with concern. "For now, let's take it one step at a time. Get warm. Drink your tea. Make your phone calls. You can always stay here for the night if you need to. Betty won't mind."

A small smile makes its way to my lips, and I see Charlie has scooted Betty onto his lap. She's like a canine comfort blanket.

"Again, thank you. I'm Jenny, by the way, and this is Charlie. Nice to meet you, and sorry it took my house falling off a cliff for me to introduce myself. I should have done it ages ago. Brought you some home-baked cookies or something . . ."

Charlie snorts in disbelief next to me, and I have to grin. He is right. The best I would have managed would have been a plate full of artfully unpacked Oreos.

"That's okay," replies Luke seriously. "I'm not exactly Mr. Sociable, to be honest. Plus, I don't eat cookies. I only eat what I can forage in the wild. I live off nature's bounty."

"Really?" I ask, finding it hard to imagine. My idea of foraging is the bargain fridge at the supermarket.

“No,” he says, grinning. “Though I am honing my mushroom-gathering skills.”

He has a great grin, warm and infectious, which comes as something of a surprise. Both Charlie and I laugh much more than the joke called for.

For just a moment, I forget my new reality. I forget the wreckage, my lost belongings, my impending layoff, my financial strife. We are both safe and well, here in a cozy place, sipping brandy and petting a small dog. It could definitely be worse, and I need to focus on that instead of letting my mind race ahead too far.

Betty suddenly jumps off Charlie’s lap and starts barking at the door. It is a much bigger bark than you’d expect from a dog of her proportions. Her whole body is shaking as she wags her little tail.

“She’s a killer,” I say as Luke gets up and opens the door.

Outside, there is a man in a fluorescent vest, his fist raised as though he was about to knock on the door. His hard hat is blown to one side, and his eyes are screwed up against the wind. Luke gestures for him to come inside and quickly tugs the door shut behind him.

It now does feel a bit cramped in here, and Luke clears the items from the table and folds it back up against the wall, hooking it securely to create more space.

“Hi!” says our visitor. “Shocking out there, isn’t it?”

“Um . . . yes?” I reply. I’d say that having your house fall down definitely qualifies as shocking.

“I’m Bob. From the council.”

He is wearing a hard hat. And his name is Bob. So, automatically, I start humming the *Bob the Builder* theme tune, and hope that he can fix it. He doesn’t react—maybe he’s heard it before.

“Are you the property owner?” he asks, looking around. I’m guessing that Luke fits more into the mental image of a man who

lives in a van than I do. And once upon a time, just a few hours ago, I was wearing office clothes and looking more respectable. Now I only have one shoe and I'm covered in mud.

"We rent it," I reply. "Or we did. Not much left now. Do you think there's anything that can be done to salvage it?"

"Oh no, I wouldn't have thought so," he says blithely. "Certainly not today. There are people on the way to make the scene safe, cut off the gas and electric, that kind of thing. We don't want an explosion on top of everything else, do we?"

"No. We really don't," I say, my eyes widening. Bob is clearly not someone who is good at reading the room.

"The main thing now," he continues, "is to make sure nobody gets hurt. I've done a quick survey and it looks as though the worst is over, and there won't be any more land loss. The storm is peaking, and tomorrow the forecast is much better. Then we can do a proper assessment and take things from there."

"Will we be able to go back?" asks Charlie. "And, you know, see if we can find any of our things?"

"I can't say at this stage. We have dealt with this kind of thing before on this coastline, but it's usually a lot more gradual. It usually happens over days or even weeks, which means we can do a planned evacuation, give people time to pack. This . . . well, this wasn't that, was it? I've not seen this happen before." He sounds genuinely intrigued, like this has all presented him with an amazing puzzle to solve.

"Wow. We just got lucky, I suppose," I say, feeling a stirring of annoyance. I control it, because none of this is Bob's fault.

"It's the weather," he says thoughtfully. "Climate change is real. What happens in a big storm like this, the cliffs get eroded. We saw it with the Beast from the East in 2018. This time, though, it's on top of weeks and weeks of rain, which has softened every-

thing up. That process has probably been going on for a while. We get quite a few landslides when the precipitation is heavy and constant. So you've got the rain, the erodibility of the cliffs here, and the erosivity of the waves being whipped up. Between those things, plus the geology, the local currents, the groundwater levels . . . well, I suppose it was the perfect storm."

I meet Luke's eyes, and he shakes his head. It's not just me imagining it—Bob has said those last words with a total lack of irony.

"Totally," I reply. "Pretty much the best storm I've ever seen."

He nods eagerly, glad that I agree.

"For now, I need you to stay away from the building. I've classed it officially as being structurally unsafe."

I blink, assaulted with images of cracked walls and the crumbling plasterwork and the roof flapping in the wind like one hand clapping. The toilet, perched on my bed.

"I have to say, I think you're right," I answer. It is better than what I wanted to say, which was a heavily sarcastic, "No shit, Sherlock."

It is only just sinking in, now, how close I'd come to being structurally unsafe myself—running around out there near the new cliff edge, trying to save photos. I wasn't listening to Charlie, and in that moment, I hadn't been at all concerned with what might have happened if I'd slipped in the wrong spot and followed my lupins into the sea below. I shudder at the thought.

"Right," continues Bob, all business. "Well. My team is on its way, as are the emergency services, so for now we need to get you somewhere safe for the night. Do you have family you can go to?"

It is a simple question, of course, but it has a complicated answer. Yes, I have family—but they live hundreds of miles away and I haven't seen them for almost two decades. We're not what you'd

call close.

Bob doesn't need to know any of that, so I just shake my head. I see a moment of sadness flitter across Charlie's face, and bite my lip. He has always wanted a bigger family, has always envied the chaos of his friends' lives, the tangle of siblings and grandparents and cousins and aunts and uncles. Whereas I've been content with our solitude—I chose it, after all—he has often said he always wished he had more relatives around him. He doesn't understand that the upsides come with steep downsides, or how the people you love most in the world can also be the ones who hurt you the worst.

I feel a wash of melancholy, probably a combination of everything that has happened today and the brandy—yet another perfect storm.

"We can get you to a hotel," Bob continues, oblivious to the swirl of emotions he has unleashed. "Find you some clothes, the basics. Maybe you could make me a list of what you urgently need, and I'll see what I can do?"

"Um . . . how much will it cost? The hotel?"

I hate the fact that I have to ask. I hate the fact that I am worried about my card getting declined, about embarrassing Charlie, about the money that I don't have.

"Nothing. We have a fund for things like this—don't worry. It won't be the Ritz, and you shouldn't hit the minibar, but your accommodations and food will be covered."

"No minibar?" I repeat. "Not even those stubby tubes of Pringles or a Toblerone that costs a tenner?"

"Um . . . well, under the circumstances, maybe the Pringles? Anyway. I'll leave you to it and come back in a bit for that list. Are you okay here for the time being?" He glances between me and Luke, obviously uncertain of the dynamic here, of how we relate

to each other's lives.

"They'll be fine here," says Luke, my Good Samaritan in a Motörhead top.

Bob nods and leaves with a jaunty wave. The wind almost blows him off his feet as he steps outside, and Betty barks at it, just to be safe.

"Am I imagining it," I ask, "or did we just make Bob's day?"

"I think you did," Luke replies, smiling. Weird how he's been distant and grumpy until now, and in the midst of disaster there's a whole new side to him. "He'll probably be talking to people in the pub about this for years."

"Yeah. I wonder if he's married? Maybe he'll go home and start saying "heightened levels of erosivity" to his wife . . ."

"The dirty bastard."

We all laugh, but it is strained. Luke has done his best for us—he has physically removed me from a stupidly dangerous situation, rescued me from my own recklessness, and he has kept us safe and warm and given us strong liquor. But these are not pleasant circumstances, and this is not a pleasant social occasion. It is a disaster zone.

I feel brittle, taut, like a string that could snap at any moment.

"It'll be okay," says Luke firmly. "It might not feel like it now, but it will. You'll feel better after a shower, and some sleep, and maybe some more brandy. I'll be here for the next week, and I'll help in any way I can. Plus you have Betty on your side now, and in my experience there are very few situations that she can't improve."

Right on cue, Betty licks my hand. I hope he's right.

Chapter 4



BOB THE NOT BUILDER IS a man of his word, and he arranges a taxi to take me and Charlie to the glamorous location of a service station with its own version of a Travelodge. It has a dodgy neon sign outside it that is on the blink, announcing to the world that it has free Wi.

“At least it has free Wi,” I said to Charlie as we walked to the lobby.

“Yeah. But the kicker is it’s a hundred pounds an hour for the Fi,” he replied.

Before we left, Luke insisted on handing me some cash, “just in case you need the Toblerone.” I was hesitant to accept it—Luke lives in a motorhome; he doesn’t exactly seem dripping in wealth. I felt that he had done enough, that the kindness of strangers can be taken too far—but one look at Charlie’s face told me he was right. He was pale, exhausted, a faint tremor on his lips.

The boy was going to need a Toblerone for sure, or maybe a bag of fish and chips. Luke’s money also meant that I had enough to stop into a supermarket and pick up a phone charger, which is most definitely one of life’s essentials these days. The hotel was

expecting us and greeted us like refugees—which I suppose we were. The staff on reception had already got together a package for us: basic toiletries, toothbrushes, a box of spare clothes that had been left behind in rooms and never reclaimed, and, in an especially kind touch, a bottle of red wine. I felt like kissing both the bottle and the receptionist.

We were escorted to a decent-sized twin room on the first floor and told to make ourselves at home. Goodness, I thought, please don't let that be true—it was a pleasant enough hotel, but it was far from being home. We both showered, and I hand-washed our undies in the sink using shower gel and, before we both collapsed, went in search of food.

The restaurant was still open, and we were told it was all being paid for by the council. Now we are sitting here, among people with normal lives, people who presumably still have homes and possessions. It all feels so strange. The storm has indeed calmed, but the sky is still gray, already dark and gloomy by 9:00 p.m., perfectly suiting our mood as we sit at a small table by the window with plates full of pizza and garlic bread.

Charlie, always hungry at the best of times, is wolfing his down like a man who has been starved for a week. I see the immediate effect—he seems stronger the moment the first bite of pepperoni hits his tongue. I, on the other hand, am finding it impossible to stomach more than a mouthful. I am just too tired, too stressed, too on edge. A million thoughts are swirling around in my mind, none of them good. You don't realize how much stuff you have—how much stuff you need—until you lose it.

I am chatting to Charlie, trying to keep his spirits up, but at the same time I am mentally cataloging everything we need to replace and how much it will cost. Multitasking at its finest. I am trying to avoid cataloging the things we can't ever replace—

the pictures, the knickknacks, the items that have no financial value but are the ones I will miss the most. I wish I was sitting at my own kitchen table, with its gingham cloth and the little jam jar I'd filled with wildflowers. I wish I was eating beans on toast rather than this feast, looking forward to nothing more exciting than finding something to watch on TV.

As we'd traveled home on the bus earlier today—*could it possibly still be the same day?* I wonder—my problems had seemed overwhelming. The threat of losing my job. The few days left until payday. A minor spat with Charlie. Now, looking back, I'd give anything to go back in time and have only those problems to deal with. I suppose that's always the way in life, isn't it? A lesson to live in the present, even if it seems less than ideal. In fact, I'd better enjoy this pizza, before Godzilla and King Kong decide to fight their last and greatest battle in rural Norfolk and we become collateral damage. You never know—it could happen.

"Mum?" says Charlie, interrupting my thoughts. I can tell from his tone that it's not the first time he's said the word. "Are you okay? You look a bit . . . wrecked?"

"Ah, thank you, son," I reply, forcing a smile onto my face. "Always nice to know I'm creating a good impression. I'm all right, yeah, just, you know, thinking about stuff."

"You always tell me it's a bad idea to think too much."

"And it probably is—but there is a lot of stuff to think about right now, and I'm trying to do it before I fall asleep for a thousand years."

He nods and puts down his fork. He stares at the table, at the remnants of our meal, and says: "It's nice here, isn't it? Great food."

I glance around and see a few business travelers, some tourists probably on their way to somewhere else, men who look like

they're on a stopover on their truck driving routes. It is nice, in a generic refillable coffee machine kind of way.

"Yep," I reply. "I'd give it two Michelin Tires."

He frowns, not getting the reference, but not wanting to show it.

"Michelin is a restaurant guide," I explain. "And a company that makes tires. That's what makes it a hilarious joke. You can look it up on your phone, and then it will become real to you."

"Oh. I see. Is this going to be one of those 'the younger generation never get off their phones' conversations? The one where you tell me that in your day, you used to play on rope swings for twelve hours and drink water straight from the sewers and play rounders in the park even though you had a broken ankle and it never did you any harm?"

My mouth twitches in amusement; we have had versions of this conversation many times. It is a game we regularly play. "Yeah. You young people and your phones, it's a disgrace. I bet you don't know how to do anything without your phone."

"No, we don't. I have to google 'wiping your own arse' every time I go to the loo."

"Wouldn't surprise me. I bet, before long, everything will be replaced with phones."

"Like what?"

I screw up my eyes and try to think of a silly example—we both need the distraction; we both need a few moments of levity.

"Like rubbish bins. I bet you don't have bins in the future."

"No, we'll just use our phones."

"And chairs."

"You're right, we'll just sit on our phones. They're really comfy."

"And Pot Noodles."

"Mum! Don't be ridiculous—some things are sacred, and we

will always have Pot Noodles . . .” He reaches out and squeezes my hand, grinning. “We’ll be all right, Mum. We can still make each other laugh, so all is well in the world.”

He is being so brave, so grown-up, so mature—he is comforting me, consoling me, trying to get me to see the bright side. This is a whole new dynamic to our relationship and I’m not totally sure how I feel about it. He is my baby, my child, my responsibility—I am the one who should be looking after him, not the other way around. I know none of this is my fault—I didn’t create the storm or the cliffs or the sea—but I still feel terrible, as though I have let him down.

“But your stuff, Charlie. I’m so sorry . . .”

“S’okay. Eventually, I’ll get new stuff. And it is only stuff.”

“Even your Xbox?”

“Well, that’s part of my soul, like Voldemort and his Horcruxes, but less creepy. I carry my Xbox within me, wherever I go . . . but one day, maybe I’ll upgrade. You can help me pick a new username; it’ll be like a whole new world.”

“I vote for DickBagBallFace.”

“I’m not sure that’ll fit. Could abbreviate it to Dick? What do you think?”

“I think,” I say, leaning across the table to give him a big and undoubtedly embarrassing kiss on the forehead, “that you are the best human in the whole world. I love you, and I’m proud of you, and right now I even like you.”

“Wow. The L word. Thanks. So . . . what happens next?”

“In life?”

“More like tonight.”

What I would like to happen next is for me to curl up in a ball in my nice clean bed and sleep. Lord knows I need it. But I also know that with my mind in its current hyperaware state, there

is no way that I will manage it. I will just lie awake, tossing and turning and thinking and crying, and that will not be good for me or for Charlie.

“I think you should go back up to the room and chill for a bit,” I say, watching with astonishment as he demolishes a whole slice of garlic bread that was left on the plate.

He holds up a hand to gesture for me to wait while he finishes chewing. Charming.

“And what will you do?” he asks. “Hit the bar, go clubbing?”

“Probably, yeah. I’ll be twerking on the tables within the hour. But before that, I have some boring stuff to do—phone calls to make, things to sort, that kind of thing. I’ll follow you up in a bit, okay?”

He yawns, hiding his mouth with his hand, and replies: “I was going to argue, but you’re right. I’m knackered. See you in a bit.”

He stands up, and once again I marvel at his ridiculous height. He is wearing a pair of tracksuit trousers from the hotel box of abandoned garments, and they are about three inches too short. He gives me a hug, and I pass him the keys.

“He was nice, wasn’t he? That guy from the motorhome? Luke? You’d made a few snarky comments about him being rude before . . .”

“Yeah. Well, he kind of was, to be honest—but maybe that was just the surface, and underneath he’s really nice. We’ll have to pop in and thank him. Maybe take him a little ‘thanks for dragging us out of the storm’ present.”

“Didn’t look like he needed much, did he? One of those people who seems totally sorted. Maybe something for Betty instead.”

He’s right, now I come to think about it. Luke might live in a motorhome, but it is a spacious and pleasant motorhome, per-

fectly equipped for a presumably adventurous life on the open road. Luke might not forage for his food, but he does give off a self-sufficient vibe—possibly a ‘don’t bother me’ vibe, which is how I’d first thought of him. Betty will definitely be an easier buy—bag of dog treats, squeaky toy, boom.

“That’s a great idea, love. Now scoot!”

Charlie nods firmly and leaves, giving me a little wave over his shoulder. I notice a teenage girl who is eating with her parents follow him with her gaze as he heads to the stairs, and it makes me smile. My son—the accidental heartbreaker.

Once he has gone, I relocate to the small bar area with a glass of wine, taking my now wonderfully charged-up phone with me. I spend an hour or so making calls: first to Barb, who is aghast at this strange turn of events and promises to help in any way she can. I can’t help thinking that this kind of thing simply wouldn’t happen to a woman like Barb. Her house wouldn’t dare fall off a cliff.

I leave a message for the landlord, and am not especially looking forward to that conversation. I register my claim with our insurers, not at all convinced that they will pay out, but refusing to imagine what will happen if they don’t. I check my emails, stalk a few people on Facebook, and read the online news report about “a severe cliff-fall on the local coast.” It’s weird, reading the words and seeing the picture that seems to have been taken with a drone—and knowing that it is my home they are talking about. That their breaking news is my breaking life.

The photo isn’t too clear—probably not ideal weather for drone photography—but I can vividly see the wreckage of my once-lovely home. The roof has finally given up and come off completely, the red kitchen door is still somehow standing, the cliffside is strewn with my furniture. I can make out yellow tape

cordoning it all off, and vans parked nearby.

I scroll away quickly—it is too upsetting. I fear it will overwhelm me, so I move on. I browse the internet for a while, doing that mindless tumble from one link to the next that we've all become familiar with. The online shuffle. I read a few articles, check out a few websites, and then finish my wine.

I still don't feel like I'm going to be able to sleep, but I can't stay here forever. I gather my belongings, say good night to the staff, and head up to the room.

I try to creep in quietly, but Charlie sits up as I close the door behind me. His curls are all over the place, and it's so adorable, he'd be mortified if he could see it.

"You all right?" he asks groggily. "Not going dancing?"

"Nah. Hadn't got my dancing shoes."

I point to my feet, and the bright pink Crocs that I found in the box. Beggars, choosers, et cetera.

I head into the bathroom and use a strange toothbrush, and a strange towel, and look into the mirror to see a strange woman. I am dressed in clothes I don't recognize, and my eyes are dark and tired. I look dreadful. That is, I decide, understandable. This has not been the kind of day that lends itself to an immaculate beauty routine.

I take off the clothes I don't recognize and climb under sheets that are not mine, in a bed that is unfamiliar. I can hear the sound of cars outside as people top up on gas and buy late-night snacks and go on with their journeys. For everyone else, this is a stopping-off point—for me, it is the beginning of a whole new and frankly terrifying stage of my life.

"Hey, Charlie?" I say as I pull the duvet up to my chin and try to create a snuggly feeling to comfort myself.

"Yeah?"

“I’m really pleased for Eric. You’re right, it is brave.” There is a pause before he replies, and perhaps he is thinking the same as me—that that conversation now feels like it took place in another lifetime.

He grunts, but I can see the glimmer of a smile from the light creeping through the curtains.

“Go to sleep, Mum!” he answers, amusement in his voice.

And, amazingly, I do exactly that.

