

## HOW TO KILL YOUR BEST FRIEND

### Method 1: Accident

Yes, but what kind of accident? It's so easy in the movies: a pleasant walk along a cliff top, then—bam!—a sudden shove . . . In real life, there's no handily accessible cliff, and if there was, nobody in their right mind would walk so close to the edge of it. And supposing, just supposing, those two obstacles were somehow resolved, there's always the chance that somebody would see you. A dog walker, probably. There's always a bloody dog walker around.

It's just like they say: it's not the murder that's the problem; it's getting away with it.

No, wait. The murder is a problem, too.

# ONE

## GEORGIE

The hotel is beautiful—of course it is; it topped the Condé Nast list of the best small hotels worldwide—but that barely registers with me because I'm late. Hideously, terribly late. It's not my fault: the plane was delayed, and it took forever for the luggage to be unloaded; but that hardly matters. All through the teeth-clenchingly slow two-hour journey from the airport, I've been fervently hoping that something might have delayed the start, but now that I'm here, spilling out of the cool taxi into the hot, humid reception area—open on all sides to allow any breath of wind to waft through—I'm abruptly aware of how slim a hope that is. There's a smiling woman, local in appearance, waiting for me by the enormous bamboo sofa; there's a tray laid on the table in front of it with a moist towel and some kind of tropical drink complete with a cocktail umbrella. I cut off her welcome. "Has it started?"

"Oh." She's visibly startled. "You're here for the, um, you mean—Lissa?" I nod tersely. "But yes, it started already."

"Where? Where do I go?"

"Down to the beach," she says, pointing, her own gaze following

her finger. Then she looks back at me, and her brow furrows in consternation. “But ma’am—”

I’m already rushing past her. “I’ll check in after. Hold on to my bags, please,” I call over my shoulder.

“But ma’am—” she calls after me. I don’t stop, though, because I’m late. I’m late, I’m late, I’m terribly late.

The reception area is set up on a hill. I hurry down the (charming, but steep) stone steps, pushing my sunglasses back up my nose repeatedly and bemoaning my precarious wedge sandals, with barely a glance at the azure blue of the sea, shimmering in the late-afternoon sun. The path twists and turns as it picks its way through the tropical foliage. I can’t see the beach that it’s surely about to spit me out onto—but then I turn a corner, and the horseshoe-shaped cove is laid out before me. The cliffs near the mouth drop straight into the sea, but in the main belly of the cove, there’s a beach, some thirty meters wide at this tide, and perhaps one hundred meters long. Set out in the middle of it are rows of chairs, with an aisle down the middle. Next to what I can only imagine is the priest, I see the unmistakable figure of Jem facing the sixty or so attendees, his sunglasses hooked on by one arm at the open neck of the white linen shirt he’s wearing.

And then a breath of wind takes the skirt of the lightweight halter neck summer dress I’m wearing—black, but scattered with scarlet flowers—and streams it out sideways, as if a flag. Jem’s head turns toward me, and after the merest of beats, he lifts his hand. It’s a small gesture, but nevertheless, the priest tails off and most of the crowd turns reflexively, and I realize with dawning horror that every one of them is wearing white. White. All of them.

*Jesus. It looks like a fucking wedding, not a funeral, I think. Jem could be a groom waiting for his bride.* A wave of nausea swells inside me. I stamp it down ruthlessly; this is not the time to fall apart. I force my shoulders back against the weight of all these pairs of eyes and walk deliberately down the last few steps, ignoring the mutters I can al-

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ready hear, my scandalous black and scarlet cutting a path straight down the aisle, which is thankfully paved by wooden slats. White linen shirts, white sundresses, white wide-legged beach trousers . . . How did I miss that detail? There are one or two pairs of pale beige tailored shorts, but other than that, everything is resolutely snowy. Behind my sunglasses I'm searching for Bronwyn, or Duncan, who will surely be near the front. I spot Duncan's height first, in the second row, with Bron's wayward chestnut curls next to him, barely reaching his shoulder. As I get closer, I see that Jem means to step forward to greet me before I can duck into the row, and I can't think of a single thing to say that is worth saying.

"You made it," he says, reaching out with both hands to clasp mine. I haven't seen him for months—actually, over a year; not since the last time all the gang got together for one of our regular swimming holidays. Except no, that wasn't the last time for everyone else: the last time was when Lissa drowned, but I wasn't there. For once he looks every second of his forty-plus years. His mouth is smiling, but there's no energy in it, and his pale green eyes look worn. It's as if he's pulled on the suit of his skin and found that he doesn't quite fill it anymore.

"The plane was delayed. I'm so sorry," I murmur inadequately.

"No matter, you're here. She would have wanted you here."

*Hardly. Nobody wants their funeral at thirty-five; she wouldn't have wanted this at all. She would have wanted me to be there that night, to stop her from going for a swim alone in the dark. But I wasn't.* I squeeze his hands mutely, then let Duncan pull me into the row, my wedges sinking awkwardly in the sand. "Quite an entrance, as usual," he mutters as I squeeze past him to a chair next to Bron. Her eyes are puffy, but then, all of her seems puffy; I can feel the give in her waist as I slip an arm round her and pull her against me. There's been gradually more and more of Bron over the half of my lifetime I've known her, and less and less of Lissa. And now there's nothing left of Lissa at all.

Bron catches my eye as the priest starts up again. "Making a statement?" she murmurs quietly, gesturing at my dress.

*What on earth would that statement be?* "I didn't get the memo."

Her eyebrows lift briefly; I'm not sure she believes me. To her, I'll always be the girl she first met, or a mere step away from that. Careless, reckless—with myself and others; a bullet ricocheting. Maybe she's right; maybe I'm the one fooling myself. Perhaps one step is all it would take to fall back into that. Today, that step is perilously tempting.

*Focus*, I tell myself. *This is not the time to fall apart. I have to hold up Bron.* She is crying now, as silently as she can, one of my hands gripped tightly in hers. There's barely a breath of wind on this beach, and we are entirely exposed to the tropical sunshine. There's something extraordinarily *wrong* about this weather for a service like this. It should be cold, bone-piercingly so, but instead I can feel a dampness where Bron's forearm touches mine, and it's possible those behind me can see a sheen of sweat on my exposed back. I'm also starting to need the bathroom. How strange that Lissa can be dead but our bodies don't seem to know; they just continue on with their own petty concerns.

It was cold for Maddy's funeral. And for Graeme's.

*Focus.*

I force myself to concentrate on the priest, but suddenly I can't hear what he's saying because I've caught sight of a large photograph of Lissa, displayed on an easel as if a painting. It's not one I've seen before, and it must be a professional shot: it's black-and-white and artfully lit so that her eyes stand out, but the rest of her features are almost bleached away. She looks unfinished.

*Lissa is dead. She's dead, she's dead, she's dead. How can she be dead?* It's been a constant tattoo in my brain over these past three months, since Bron called to tell me, though she couldn't get the words out. Duncan had to take the phone off her.

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*There's been an accident, he said. His voice was raw but steady. She went for a swim the other night by herself, at Kanu Cove, and—*

*Wait—She? Who? Who went?*

*Lissa.*

*Lissa? But . . .*

*She's missing, Georgie. Lissa is missing; she didn't come back. They're still searching, but by now there's really no hope, he said. And the water at Kanu—you haven't seen it, but . . . Christ, I don't know what she could have been thinking. The police will record it as missing, presumed—*

*No. I wouldn't let him say it. I don't believe it. I didn't believe it then, and I don't know how to believe it now.*

Duncan is nudging me; I belatedly realize everyone else has risen. I lurch to my feet, and my wedge sandals sink unevenly into the sand, tipping me awkwardly against Bron, who is still fixed to my side. I think of all the photos I have of the three of us: sixteen years of posing for the camera. Pictures from university—swimming galas, black-tie events and celebrations, pre-mobile-phone era—yielding to shots taken at weddings or christenings or on our numerous swimming holidays. In almost every one, I'm in the middle. There isn't a middle anymore.

I sense we're nearing the end, but I still can't make sense of the priest's words, not with the photo right there. It could be a painting that the artist has stepped away from for a moment, perhaps to give the model a cigarette break; he hasn't had time to paint in what she was thinking. I think of Duncan's words—*I don't know what she could have been thinking*—and the puzzlement in his voice. I don't know what she was thinking, either. None of this makes sense. Lissa is dead, and it doesn't make sense.

It seems to be over; Duncan is turning to me. I don't know what he sees in my face, half hidden as it is by my sunglasses, but he says, almost helplessly, "Oh, Georgie."

I shake my head abruptly, take a deep breath and pull Bron against my side. “No Ruby?” I say, to head him off.

He looks at me searchingly, as if he has something to say, but then he sighs and shakes his head. “She wanted to, but with the twins . . .” Duncan’s twins can’t be much more than seven months old. He looks like he’s carrying all of those months in the lines on his face and in the slight paunch I can see beneath his loose shirt. “Maybe if it had been somewhere easier to get to . . .” It’s true that many more family and friends would have been able to attend had the service been held in London. I glance back at the departing crowd. At a guess, the last few rows, perhaps even half of the congregation, were occupied by locals, many of whom are wearing staff uniforms. “It’s not like you can build a holiday around a funeral.”

“Memorial,” I say. Duncan looks at me. “No body. Memorial.” No body, but also no doubt. A teenager in some kind of light fishing craft hauled up a blond-haired corpse in a red swimsuit with his net a little over a month later. He was so shocked, he didn’t actually get it on board, and it slipped back into the depths. It was the swimsuit that erased all doubt; he saw the logo. TYR. A swimmer’s swimsuit, not the type of thing the average woman would be wearing on vacation.

TYR. Lissa’s favorite brand. That *Baywatch*-red suit was familiar to us all. I wonder where she is now; I wonder what that red swimsuit looks like after months in the salt water. I don’t want to think what Lissa might look like.

“Well, trust Lissa to demand a *memorial* on an exotic island in Southeast Asia,” says Bron, in a valiant attempt to sound like her normal self.

“Demand?” I ask.

“It was in her will,” Bron explains. “Jem said so. They got them done when they bought this place, and she put it in then.”

“Jesus,” I say. “That seems . . .” Prescient? Macabre, to be that specific at her age?

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But Bron, ever practical, is thinking along different lines. “No, it was very sensible. You really ought to have a will, especially if you own property.” She looks at me keenly. “Do you have one?”

“I rent.” My words are heavily soaked in vinegar.

Duncan looks at me sharply. “Come on,” he says quickly, either to forestall Bron from pressing me or to stop her quizzing him on the status of his own will and testament. “There’s a thing now. Up at the main reception.”

I glance back at the photo. One of the staff is preparing to lift it from the easel. It’s not Lissa, or not my Lissa. I turn back to Duncan and Bron. There is nothing to be done but forge on with this awful day. “Yep. Let’s go.”

We are among the last to traipse back up the hill to the main reception, retracing the steps of my earlier mad dash. The sun is sinking hastily, without the fanfare of any dramatic colors; it will be dark in mere minutes. Lights hidden within the foliage that flanks the path are flickering into life. As we approach, I can see that the thing seems to involve a meal. There’s a buffet laid out beneath the shade of the traditional wall-less pavilion, with staff behind multiple stations for different types of food that is being cooked on demand on the spot. I’m not in the least bit hungry.

“Georgie,” says a voice behind me, in a soft Northern accent. *Adam*, I think; then, even as I’m turning, *Surely not*. But here he is.

“You came,” I say, unable to hide the surprise.

“You thought I wouldn’t?”

Yes. But I don’t say it. He must have been here for a few days, as he has the start of what I know will become a mahogany tan, accentuated by his crisp white shirt. He looks like he always does, lean and efficient—there’s never any excess to Adam—and moves to greet me with kisses on both cheeks. I feel absurdly self-conscious during the ritual.

He gestures at the buffet line. “Can I get you anything?”



"No thanks." I glance at my watch. 6:30 p.m., but it doesn't feel like it to me. "It's nowhere near dinnertime for me. How long have you been here?"

"Two days. I flew with Duncan and Bron."

It's stupid to feel a stab of jealousy at that—after all, I live in New York, and they all live in London, or thereabouts; of course I couldn't fly out with them—but nonetheless, I feel it prick at me. We are hovering at the edge of the covered pavilion, watching people lining up for food and settling at the white-clothed tables scattered through the space. Duncan is helping Bron at the salad buffet. Jem is deep in conversation with someone in a uniform. "Whose idea was it to set this thing up like a fucking wedding?" I mutter. Adam glances at me, and I feel myself blush defensively.

"Jem wanted it to be a celebration of—her. Though I don't expect the staff have much experience of planning memorials, hence . . ." He gestures with the fingers of one hand, the smallest of movements that somehow seems to sweep in the tableau in front of us and the staff behind it all. I don't see Lissa in any of it. "It's quite different to Graeme's funeral, isn't it?"

Graeme. Kind, funny Graeme. Lissa's first love and first husband; Adam's best friend. But the last thing I want to do is talk about Graeme. "Who is that?" I nod toward Jem and the uniformed man. Behind them, I can see Lissa's parents, sitting at a table with several other people, their plates loaded with food. Lissa's father is tucking in, but her mother hasn't even picked up her cutlery. I wonder if she's even aware of the plate in front of her. I look away quickly.

"The chief of police. I can't for the life of me remember his name, but he's decent; he did all the right things after she went missing." I look at him, nonplussed, and he explains. "You know, search parties with all the local fishermen—the ones that weren't too scared to go out, that is—and interviews with all of us, that sort of thing. There

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was a vested interest from the locals to find her; they're all terrified that Jem will close the hotel now."

"Will he?"

He shrugs. We lapse into silence for a moment, and then his words tweak at me. "Too scared to go out. What did you mean by that?"

"There's a local legend about Kanu Cove. Some kind of sea serpent is supposed to frequent there: a snake or a dragon or something like that. Some of the traditionalists think she was taken as tribute. Or punishment—"

"Punishment?" I swing round to him. "For what?"

"It's a centuries-old myth, Georgie; it's not exactly big on detail. This snake-thingy likes them young and female, I'm told, but beyond that, the story varies. Anyway, one or two of the fishermen didn't want anyone to go searching for her at all. Apparently they thought it might be unwise to look like you're asking for your tribute back." I realize my mouth is open and close it sharply. Adam's lips twist wryly at my expression. "Yeah, I know, but don't worry, the search was really thorough. Two more fishing boats wouldn't have made any difference."

A waitress pauses by us with a tray of mixed cocktails; Adam waves her on. "Hey," I exclaim, even though I wasn't planning to take a drink at all. "What if I wanted one?"

"You're not stupid enough to drink today of all days."

I grimace. "I hope you can still say that at the end of the night."

He shrugs. "I'll be here." To stop me, or regardless of what happens? I can't tell what he means. He rubs at his jawline, and I suddenly remember how it felt when his stubble scraped over my bare shoulder. Was that the last occasion when I had a drink? No, that would have been when I last saw Lissa, of course. I stare resolutely out over the milling crowd. After a moment, I gesture at Lissa's father, Philip. He's by a drinks station now, grinning at a very pretty

young waitress, who is looking up at him rather coyly. Philip is an actor of some repute. Right now I would guess he's playing charmingly debonair Englishman with just a hint of lovable rogue. It's not a new role for him. "Christ, is he at it today of all days?"

Adam glances over. "Mmm. Can't teach an old dog new tricks."

"Yes, but you can neuter them," I say viciously.

"I don't think his wife is the neutering kind." I glance across at Diane again. She's as beautifully put together as ever, in white of course, sitting perfectly upright at the table; I'm not sure she's moved since I last glanced at her, though her table companions have melted away. I thought perhaps she was in shock, but no—there's something about her posture, about the set of her mouth. She seems too tightly reined in for shock.

Adam observes quietly, "You know, you didn't call me back."

I glance at him sharply, then just as quickly I look away. "No." Oh dear God. Where's a rug to brush things under when you need one? I hadn't expected him to bring that up—I hadn't expected to see him here at all. He was never the biggest fan of Lissa. He wasn't at university with us; he was really just part of the swimming gang as Duncan's friend—and also Graeme's, originally. I'd anticipated a period of British awkwardness when we next met, while we resolutely ignored what happened between us the last time we were together; I'd expected a certain discomfort that would have to be endured until we found our way past it. But he's waiting for more, and I find myself actually offering it, acutely aware of the color rushing to my face. "There wasn't anything to say."

"No?"

I hadn't expected him to push the point, either. "You live in England. I don't."

"We could have talked." I'm looking out across the sea of people, but I sense he's almost amused by me.

I think about that for a moment. "I'm not good at that."

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“No kidding.” This time I do look at him, and I find myself laughing—as much at his wry expression as his words. Then the waitress passes again. She has glasses of champagne mixed in with the cocktails. Cold beads of water have formed on the outside of the glasses. “Come on,” Adam says, pulling my attention away. “Let’s go speak to all the people we need to and then we can slip away for the swim.”

I draw back in horror. “We’re swimming? Surely not where—”

“No, not there. Of course not there; we’ll be swimming where the ceremony was.” He reads my face. “You didn’t know? Duncan and Bron thought it would be a fitting send-off, and Jem was all for it.” *Duncan and Bron and Jem and Adam. All here, all making plans together. And I didn’t even know about the white dress code.* “Look, it’s not compulsory. If you’re not up to it—”

“No, it’s fine.” I swallow. He tips his head quizzically. “Really. It’s a good idea. You’re right, though. I’d better go speak to her folks before I get my swim stuff.” I recognize I’ve been putting it off. Spending time with Lissa’s parents has always felt awkward, and I can’t imagine the present circumstances will improve that.

“Philip actually said he might swim, too,” Adam says. “I should tell him it’s almost time.”

We can’t immediately see Philip, so Adam heads off to find him, but Lissa’s mother, Diane, is exactly where she was before, still alone at the table as I approach hesitantly and slide into the chair next to her. She turns her head slowly to look at me. It always surprises me how little she looks like Lissa: dark haired and athletic in a posh, horsey sort of way, whereas Lissa is blond and china boned. *Was.* “Georgie,” she says. Her voice is entirely flat.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Yes.” We look out at the crowd. After a few moments she says, “No white for you, I see.”

“I—”

"Quite right, too. It's not a bloody party. But Philip said I shouldn't make a fuss." Her mouth twists bitterly. I should say something, but I can't think of anything that would fit. "Do you believe in fate?"

"What?"

She waves an impatient hand. "Fate. Destiny. Was this preordained?" I look at her blankly; I can't seem to find solid ground in this conversation. She's still staring out at the milling crowd. "All that time invested, all that—love. Sleepless nights and schools and ballet lessons, swimming lessons . . . Was this the end point all along? Or was it something I did? Or didn't do? Or Philip?" She looks straight at me, suddenly fierce, and I finally see Lissa in her, in the hazel eyes they share. In the accusations they hold. "Or you?"

I can't find a breath. "I don't—"

But she's already looking away, her sudden energy entirely dissipated. "I think I'll go back to the villa."

"Should I . . . should I find Philip for you?"

She barks an entirely mirthless laugh and pushes her seat back abruptly. "No, thank you."

I watch her walk away from the pavilion, her back militarily straight, and I wonder if Diane is the only person alive who might be capable of understanding what I'm feeling.

Twenty minutes later, after collecting my swim gear, I'm back in the horseshoe bay, which I have since learned is rather boringly named just that: Horseshoe Bay. Jem, Adam, Duncan and a handful of people I don't know are looking rather businesslike in Speedos at the shoreline. Someone has put thought into this endeavor: there are Chinese lanterns strung up on the piers that jut out on either side at the widest point of the bay, and lights on a series of buoys that span the water between them. There's enough light, from the unobtrusive lamps that light the path skirting the beach and from the moon, for

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us to see what we're doing, but the sea itself is a dark mass, darker even than the sky above it, only occasionally lightened at the shoreline by flashes of white from a breaking wave.

"What's the plan?" I ask Bronwyn. She's already shrugging out of her white dress to reveal a dark-colored Speedo swimsuit underneath.

"No fixed plan, I shouldn't think. It's about five hundred meters across, pier to pier. We usually swim straight out to the buoys then do laps along the buoys between the piers."

*We. We usually.* We, but not me; I am not part of that collective, though surely they can't possibly have done this swim more than half a dozen times. I peel off my own dress, throwing it carelessly onto a sun lounger, and adjust the shoulder straps of the swimsuit I'd put on underneath. "No sea serpent myths for this particular bay?"

"None that I'm aware of."

"Where is Kanu Cove anyway?"

Bron's hand falters as she tucks her hair into her swim cap. "Farther round, past the headland. Maybe seven minutes' walk."

"Then why didn't she swim here?"

Bron exhales. "I don't know, Georgie. Maybe she wanted somewhere peaceful. Some time alone."

"Lissa? At night? Really? On our Malta trip we could barely get her to put a toe in the water after dark."

"People change." There's an edge to her tone that surprises me. "She was living here; I guess she got more comfortable with it."

"That's just it: she was living here. So she must have known Kanu Cove was danger—"

"Stop it, Georgie." She whirls away from me, then just as suddenly turns back. The moonlight isn't strong enough for me to see her face, but I can hear the tears in her voice. "She went swimming and she drowned. It was stupid, it was senseless—and she died. And you're not the only one trying to come to terms with it."

She turns away again. I put a tentative hand on her shoulder. "Bron. Bron, I'm sorry."

She turns into me and hugs me fiercely. "I know," she says into my shoulder. I can feel her tears on my skin. "It's just . . . you weren't here. It was awful. We were all asking those same questions at the time, and the police were asking things; it was nonstop. And none of it mattered because in the end she was still gone. It was . . . Well. You weren't here."

"I . . . I couldn't be," I say, but that's not entirely true. I didn't dare come. I was too scared of what I might see in Lissa, in Jem. Even now, my mind skitters away from it. I was buying myself time by not coming, and Lissa died. "I'm sorry."

We stand together, Bron's head at my shoulder, my hand stroking her hair. It always surprises me how much taller I am than her. Is it that which shapes the balance between us; is it merely height that casts me into the role of protector? Even though, in many ways, Bron is far more robust than I? Then Duncan calls, "Are you two coming, or what?" and Bron releases me.

"Coming." She runs ahead of me to the water's edge where Duncan, Jem and Adam are waiting for us. I scoop up my swim cap and hold my goggle straps in my teeth, tucking my hair into the cap as I follow her. A group has already set off and is starting to string out; in the dark, I can't see the swimmers properly, but I glimpse intermittent flashes of pale arms or the white froth from a kick. We will catch them quickly enough; they don't possess the swimming pedigree of our little group. I know the water ought to feel beautifully warm, but without the heat of the sun, it still chills me, and I suck in my breath when it reaches my stomach. Bron throws herself into a dolphin dive, and I force myself to do the same, feeling adrenaline flood through my body as my head submerges; then I break into an easy front crawl, popping my head up occasionally to check for Bron and the others without breaking stroke. Within ten strokes or so, my heart rate has

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settled as my body starts to adjust to the water temperature. Now I'm following the pale bubbles of somebody's kick trail—probably Duncan's—so I don't need to lift my head to sight. Within a minute or two we've passed a swimmer with an awkward stroke, then two more, then the whole pack of the first group. Bron has settled in on my right, only a meter or so from me; I can see the windmill of her pale arms every time I breathe to that side. Jem and Adam will be on our feet, following our kick trail. This is how we normally swim together, like a pod of dolphins: Duncan up ahead, Jem and Adam at the rear, Bron on my right and Lissa on my left. Only every time I breathe to the left, Lissa isn't there.

Duncan, who is the quickest out of all of us, is setting a leisurely pace by his standards, whether out of thoughtfulness to Jem, who is the weakest, or because he's not in his usual shape, I can't tell. Whatever the reason, I'm grateful for it: I'm feeling the effects of both the jet lag and the emotional exhaustion of the day; I don't feel as if I have another gear to slip into if Duncan were to pick up his pace. My eyes are adjusting to the dim light: I watch the trail of silvery bubbles from Duncan's feet; I watch my arms cut rhythmically through the darkness beneath me. I feel the cool water slipping past my limbs, the swell of it beneath me when a bigger set rolls in. Three strokes and look for Bron. Three more strokes, don't look for Lissa. Bron, no Lissa. Bron, no Lissa. Slowly I am being cracked open. You can't hide from yourself in the water; it doesn't allow it. It seeps into even the finest of hairline fissures and soaks off the shell.

Duncan's feet drop down, and I realize he's called a halt by one of the lit buoys, presumably to let Jem, who is lagging now, catch up. Adam, by contrast, hasn't lost any ground. He was never really a competitive swimmer—he played water polo instead—so he must have been putting in some training of late. We tread water by the buoy, which gently rocks as the water beneath it swells and ebbs, its circle of light wandering to and fro, painting faces then receding, as the



faint rhythmic slap of Jem's arms against the water grows nearer. There's a solemnity to the silence that grows with every additional second that it remains unbroken. Jem has reached us now, breathing a little hard. I tip my head up toward the stars above. I will remember this forever, and I don't want to have to. It's so extraordinarily hateful to be here without her.

"Lissa." I don't realize I've said it out loud until Jem's voice joins mine. "Lissa," he says hoarsely. "To Lissa."

And then we are all saying it, our murmured words rolling out across the black velvet sea. "To Lissa." "Lissa." "To Lissa."

After we all swim back, Adam comes to settle on a sun lounger beside me, still in his trunks with a towel in his hand.

"You didn't find Philip?" I ask him, awkwardly pulling my dress over my towel. It takes a feat of coordination to remove the towel without exposing myself, but I'm practiced at it.

"I did." There's something in his voice that pulls my attention to him. "He was . . . ah . . . otherwise engaged." I shake my head, not understanding. "Quite deeply engaged, in fact."

Realization dawns. "Oh my God. With the waitress?"

"The very same."

"Jesus." It's beyond revolting, but somehow I can't help giggling. "That's appalling." Then a thought sobers me. "Poor Diane."

"She's not blind to it. At some point she must have made a decision to stay regardless." Lissa wasn't blind to it, either. But children don't get the same choice. He stands, wrapping his own towel round his waist, and then shucks off his trunks underneath it. I look out across the bay. Someone has extinguished the lights on the piers. "Though, on today of all days . . ."

"Maybe it's a reaction to it. An affirmation of life. Or something."

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“Maybe.” He sits back down beside me and starts to pull on dry shorts. “I heard you with Bron. Asking about Kanu Cove.”

“Bar?” Jem calls across to us.

“In a minute,” I call back. I turn back to Adam, my hands busy bundling my wet hair into a bun. “I didn’t mean to upset her; it just doesn’t make sense.” I sound defensive. I have no reason to sound defensive. “But then, I wasn’t here when it happened.” *As Bron made clear.*

“I know, but you’re right. It doesn’t make sense.” He pauses. “Tell the truth: when you got the call, did you expect it to be Jem that was missing?”

Yes. I stop, my hands still full of my twisted hair at the nape of my neck, my mouth full of words I can’t say, that I don’t dare voice. *Yes, I thought it would be Jem. Not then, exactly; not quite so soon, but at some point. At some point I would get the call, and it would be about Jem.* My eyes are fixed on the darkness of his face. I deliberately slide them away, looking at my lap as I finish securing the bun. The silence that sits between us has a weight to it.

He nods once, twice, as if to himself, then reaches out a hand to lay it carefully on my shoulder, his thumb rubbing gently along my collarbone. “You know,” he says thoughtfully, as if we haven’t just been discussing—well, whatever we’ve been not discussing. “I could kind of get behind the life-affirmation thing.”

“Adam.” It’s barely a whisper, and I don’t know what it means. His thumb travels along my collarbone and back once again. *Is this a good idea?* I want to ask, but just as suddenly, I really don’t, because I know I’m going to take this careless, reckless step anyway. He’s waiting for me to move. I lean into him and it’s done.

# TWO

## BRONWYN

Breakfast. Breakfast on my own, on a terrace overlooking a bay with colors so brightly saturated that it's as if someone has applied an Instagram filter to the whole vista. Breakfast that has been cooked—cooked, not poured from a cereal box!—by somebody else and delivered by a young man with a smile and skin so perfect it's ludicrous that he isn't starring in a face cream commercial. I would give anything for this normally, so why can't I enjoy it?

"Morning." It's Georgie, looking exactly right for the setting in a pale sleeveless shirtdress and flip-flops, with enormous sunglasses hiding half her face and damp hair pulled into a messy bun. Time marches on everywhere, except around Georgie.

I pull out a chair for her. "Where did you get to last night?" I ask, though I already know. It wasn't hard to put two and two together when neither Adam nor Georgie appeared in the bar after the swim; though it made for a tamer evening than I'd anticipated. Or perhaps Lissa's absence would have done that anyway. She was always the match to Georgie's touch paper. But Georgie makes a noncommittal

gesture with her hand. “Adam?” I press, then immediately feel gauche.

“Yes,” says Georgie, but then she’s turning to order muesli and a black coffee from our wondrous-skinned waiter. I wonder where Adam is. What does it say about their tumble if they aren’t even eating breakfast together afterward? I’ve never known how to handle Georgie and Lissa’s casual approach to men—as if they are toys to pick up and put down, as if those men have no feelings of their own; I could never quite work out if I was appalled or impressed by it. Though Lissa at least evolved enough to marry. Twice, in fact.

“Adam was asking the other day about how we met,” I say. Georgie doesn’t answer, but I’m fairly sure she’s paying close attention. “Sometimes I forget he wasn’t at uni with the rest of us.” *Us*, meaning Georgie, Duncan, myself and Lissa—and Graeme, once upon a time. Five, then four; now three. “Anyway, what was it: sixteen, seventeen years ago that we met?”

“Something like that. I’ve known you as long as I haven’t.” A short laugh bursts out of me unexpectedly, and she arches her neck slightly and smiles, enjoying my reaction. How typically Georgie. The sly twist she puts on things, that halts you in your tracks. She never quite says what everyone else would, but she *almost* does. If you weren’t paying attention, you’d miss the difference.

“Ah,” I say wryly, “but I’m wysiwyg, remember?” Wysiwyg: what you see is what you get. That’s what Lissa used to describe me as. It was affectionately meant, and I took it as such, even if I sometimes wished to be just a little mysterious. Though only a little; mystery must be so exhausting. “You don’t need long to get to know me.”

“I don’t know. You still manage to surprise me from time to time.” She’s still smiling, still pulling me into the bright circle of Georgie. She could be the exact same girl, not a cell different, from the one I met seventeen or so years ago.

“Working?” I gesture at the laptop she’s placed on the chair beside her.

“Yep. We’re having IT issues, though, so I’m not sure how successful I’ll be at logging in remotely.” Her hand moves as if to chop off that conversation—*too dull*—and then she tips her sunglasses up on her forehead and focuses on me with her green eyes. “Anyway. It’s so good to see you, despite . . .”

“I know. You too. We still miss you in London, you know.” I try to cajole her back every time I see her, but it never works.

Her smile is rueful. “I miss you guys, too. New York is great, but you can never make friends as close as the ones from uni. Nobody has the time after that.” The rueful smile makes a brief reappearance.

“Tell me about it. All these new friends I supposedly have—all the mums at the school gate—they’re lovely, and they’re almost all of them really friendly; they’ll happily grab your child for you if you’re running late, but it just feels superficial when the only thing you have in common is kids the same age.” We smile at each other, a smile that somehow echoes through all the years: all the training sessions, the competitions, the nights out and the parties; those years when we saw each other absolutely every day. Then after uni, when Georgie was still in London, all the catch-up lunches and coffees and dinners and phone calls, when the frequency was still at least twice weekly. All that time invested in a relationship such that it can now survive a distance of three and a half thousand miles on a diet of only emails and calls and a visit or two a year.

“Tell me everything,” Georgie says. “What’s going on with you?”

“All good, really. Well, apart from—well, this, of course. The move to the dreaded burbs has actually worked out really well. I knew it was the right thing for the future, for the kids’ schools, but I thought I would miss London, and actually I don’t at all. It helps that the house is lovely, I suppose.” Her head is inclined to me, and she nods as she listens, but I still wonder if I sound boring—harping on about

schools and the suburbs, while Georgie dons designer clothes for work, drinks cocktails in Manhattan bars and goes home with whoever she feels like. Or maybe she's envious of family life: grass is always greener and all that. Rob would tell me I'm being silly, but even he turns up his smile a notch when Georgie and Lissa are around. Sometimes I think that's what the attraction was with Graeme: that he had Lissa but he wanted *me*, even if only in that moment.

But there's no point in thinking about Graeme. I slide my knife decisively into my croissant. "You must come stay next time you are over. See your goddaughter; Kitty would love that." Kitty adores Georgie, and Georgie is brilliant with her. The expression of unmitigated outrage on Kitty's little face when she realized I would be seeing Georgie without her was priceless. I feel a pang. Kitty and Jack will have climbed into our bed this morning for a cuddle, like they always do. I can almost feel the warmth of their little bodies against me, still heavy with the remnants of sleep, before the energy that fizzles through them for the rest of the day has had a chance to take hold.

"That would be lovely. It's been too long since I've had a trip back." She doesn't say *home*. We all know Georgie never goes *home*, and we all know she won't talk about it. Even I, with my famous lack of tact, know better than to tackle that subject. "So you and Rob are better now?" she asks.

"Yes." She tips her head sideways, a mild telegraphing of her disbelief. "No, really; we are. I think that—episode—was a good thing, actually. It made me appreciate him more, appreciate what we had." It's terrifying now to think of everything I jeopardized. My marriage and my family, even my friendships. If Lissa had ever found out . . . And all for what? I didn't get whatever I thought I would from it, if I was thinking at all. "I mean, he's still rubbish at—well, all the things he's rubbish at, but it doesn't drive me quite so mad now."

She thanks the waiter, who has brought her order, then turns back to me. "Your wysiwyg-ness didn't extend to telling him, did it?"

“God, no. What on earth would that have achieved?” I stare at her, confused. Did she expect that I would have? Surely the only people who confess are those who are looking to walk out the door but need a push?

One shoulder shrugs in the smallest of movements. “And you don’t think Graeme told Lissa?”

“Are you kidding? Do you think Lissa would have ever spoken to me again if he had? Do you think I would even have been allowed to live?”

She winces, and I wish I could drag back the words, but it’s too late now. “God. Sorry.” An odd thought strikes me: is she asking because she herself told someone? “You didn’t tell her, did you? Or anyone else?”

“Of course not. I promised you I wouldn’t.” It’s so simply put: she promised she wouldn’t, and therefore she didn’t. End of discussion. And it really is: if I have to trust someone with my secrets, there’s no one better than Georgie. Though not *all* my secrets. Not that.

“I know. Yes. Anyway.” I find I’m rubbing my temple where a headache is forming. It’s the brightness of the sun, maybe, or the wine from last night. Or maybe it’s just this conversation. I want to drag it somewhere less fraught with obstacles, for either one of us, but I can’t suddenly start talking about the weather, or Brexit, or Trump. Lissa died. It’s why we’re here; there’s no escaping it. “When did you last see Lissa in person, then?”

“When she came to New York. I was planning to come out a month after you guys came; we had it all arranged for when my work eased up. But . . . anyway, I last saw her in New York. That must have been, oh, five months ago.” She looks sideways, a little furrow forming between her eyebrows as she squints against the sun; when she turns back to me, there’s a trace of it there still: the first evidence that Georgie is not immune to time. A teeny burst of something akin to

triumph blooms inside me and is followed immediately by hot shame: I am mean and petty and not worthy of being her friend, this girl who has never been anything other than utterly supportive to me. “She seemed . . . happy. For Lissa, I mean.” She shrugs and her lips twist ruefully. “It’s all relative. But given how—broken—she was after Graeme died, she really seemed to be doing well. She was pretty absorbed in the hotel project. I know it had been Jem’s dream for—well, forever, but it really seemed to be hers, too.”

“Yes, she and Jem stayed with us for a bit when they were sorting out some of the financing in London, and it was literally all she could talk about.” It had been an odd visit. She stayed for a fortnight, and yet we hardly seemed to find a moment to properly catch up. Was she happy? I would have said so. With hindsight, though . . . But perhaps hindsight casts shadows that were never really there. I pull myself back to the present. “Well, they’ve done an amazing job with it—not that you’d expect anything else.” Both Lissa and Jem made careers out of high-end hotel management. They actually met at a professional conference. “It’s quite something, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” She looks around, as if taking in the view for the first time, then back, dismissing it entirely. “I can see how it suited them. As a couple, I mean.”

I know what she means. The glamour of this place is undeniable. “Yeah, I couldn’t see Graeme here.” Graeme again. *What’s wrong with me?*

“I know.” She has barely touched her muesli, which is unlike her. Despite being almost as lollipop thin as Lissa, Georgie likes her food. “He was better for her, I think.”

“Hardly. Graeme and Lissa were fighting like cats and dogs before he died.” I sound truculent; I try to soften my tone. “And remember, her dad never much liked him.”

Georgie huffs out a breath. “Did you ever see him approve of



anything Lissa chose to do without consulting him? As if his opinion was ever worth counting.”

I shrug. I know Georgie’s opinion of Lissa’s father, and whilst I don’t exactly think she’s wrong, it still seems somewhat . . . disrespectful. “Well, anyway, Jem adored her.”

She looks at me in that way she has, as if she’s peeling back the surface to see what’s underneath. *Nothing*, I think defiantly. *I’m wysiwyg, remember?* “I suppose. Though Duncan said Jem and Lissa were arguing that night, the night she—”

“You were talking with Duncan?”

“Yes. This morning. Adam and I ran into him at Kanu Cove.” I see the cove in my own mind’s eye, a narrow tongue of a bay, shaped more like a fjord, all dramatic cliffs and almost no beach; it’s exactly the sort of place that would have a serpent myth attached to it. She doesn’t miss the shudder that goes through me. “Exactly. The water there—there’s not a chance you’d get me in there. So it doesn’t make sense that Lissa would opt to swim there—”

“Jeez, Georgie.” My words are too strident. An elderly man in a frighteningly bright orange shirt looks up from the next table, but I can’t help myself. “Do we have to? Go over everything?”

She looks at me quizzically without saying anything for just long enough for me to feel myself start to flush. “Bron, are you okay?” she asks quietly.

“No!” I take a breath, then two, before I risk a glance at her. I’m pushing her away, I know it, but I just can’t bear the questions . . . “I mean yes. Sorry. Yes.” I dash a hand at the tears that have spilled out. “I’m just on edge today; I don’t know why.” She hands me a napkin and strokes my upper arm while I wipe away the tears, trying not to mess up my eye makeup. Though I don’t know why I’m bothering to take care, given that in this heat my mascara will have smudged into panda eyes by lunchtime anyway. I take another deep breath and let

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it out slowly. Georgie is waiting patiently for me to say something. "Maybe it's being away from home. I know it sounds lame, but I really miss the kids."

She shakes her head. "It doesn't sound lame at all."

"When I'm with them, I'd kill for a little alone time, but the minute I get it, I'm wishing they were here." I force a laugh. "They ruin you twice over." But Georgie has her head tipped to one side again. "What?"

She shrugs. "Nothing, just . . ."

"What?"

"I thought maybe it was my questions—"

"Georgie—"

"—I know I'm upsetting you with them, and Duncan, too; I'm not meaning to, I'm just trying to understand—"

"Why? What difference does it make if you understand? She's still dead, and there's nothing you could have done." My volume has risen again: the elderly man is looking at me once more, and now the occupants of a few other tables are, too. "What difference does it make?"

"It makes a difference to me. It should make a difference to all of us." I stare at her, and suddenly I feel slightly afraid. When she's set her mind on something, Georgie doesn't bend. Lissa had that about her, too. Maybe I did once, but that was a long time ago, before marriage, and kids. "Don't you think we owe it to her to try to understand? To make sure the same thing never happens again?"

"How could it ever happen again?" I'm genuinely bewildered, but Georgie has dropped her sunglasses back into place, hiding those intense green eyes of hers. All I can see is the azure of the sea and the white of the terrace wall reflected in her dark lenses. I look away, across the bay, to where the horizon blends into the sky. The blues are so bright that they make my eyes ache. I reach for my bag and push my chair back. "I'm going to call home. I'll see you later."

She purses her lips, then shrugs, reaching for her laptop. “Duncan, Adam and I are planning on swimming this afternoon, sometime after lunch.” Her tone is excessively polite. “Dunc was going to see if he could get a boat to take us out to the nature reserve island, so we can do a swim round there.”

“Oh,” I say, equally stiffly. “Well. I might join you.”

She’s opened up the laptop now and is firing it up. I feel dismissed, despite the fact that I was the one to get up from the table. I turn back when I get to the edge of the terrace, but she’s entirely focused on something on her screen. She’s not looking at me at all.

Only I can’t call home, because it’s not even four in the morning, as Georgie no doubt worked out because nothing much gets past Georgie—when she’s sober. Which, come to think of it, is the only way I’ve seen her this trip, in stark contrast to our university years, though she hasn’t said anything particular about it. Georgie is the direct opposite of wysiwyg—except no, Georgie isn’t as binary as that. She’s the strangest mix of wide-open rooms and locked doors. I had just started at uni when I met them both—Lissa and Georgie together, as they always were—and full of desperation to be more interesting than in my staid years at a girls’ private school, being diligently studious and enthusiastically sporty and utterly ordinary; the only thing that held me apart was my swimming. It was swimming that brought me to Lissa and Georgie, but Georgie’s was the arm that pulled me into their circle. It took me a long time to figure out that that same arm holds people away. Everyone except Lissa, that is. But I was an academic year younger; it felt natural that they would be closer.

Ordinary. It’s not the insult now that I felt it was at eighteen. I’m not even sure it’s damning with faint praise. So many well-lived

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lives are ordinary; so many enduring loves, too. It took me an even longer time—and Rob pointing it out—to realize that my very ordinariness is why Lissa and Georgie and I fit together so well. *You're their voice of reason*, he said. *They need a point of reference, a true north.* A wave of longing to hear his voice sweeps through me—but he won't much thank me for waking him at this time; I'll have to wait a few hours.

I could go and lie by the pool, I suppose, and maybe I will later, though I'd better stick to the shade. Georgie hasn't even been here a day, but already her skin has acquired a golden glow. The only things I've acquired are more freckles and an uncomfortable sunburn on the backs of my knees; I'll need factor 50 there if I'm to swim later. But for now, for want of anything better to do, I head toward my room, winding my way up the hill on the paved stone path, occasionally having to move to one side to allow one of the fleet of what looks like adapted golf buggies to pass, laden with dirty bed linens or gardening equipment or some such. It can't be more than two hundred meters, but it feels much farther in the heat. Jem has put us all up in amazing villas—I have one all to myself, with a private plunge pool, no less—at no cost to us, though it did make me wonder if maybe the hotel isn't doing so well as I thought. Surely he ought to be putting paying guests in these accommodations?

There's a local man coming down the steps from the entry to my villa as I approach; presumably one of the staff. There are more staff than guests here, it seems; I must remember to get some local currency to leave a housekeeping tip when I depart. I smile politely, and he bobs his head back, before setting off quickly down the path. The cool shade inside the air-conditioned suite is a welcome relief to my sticky skin, but I know that nothing short of the ibuprofen that's in my toiletries bag will help my headache.

The slide door to the bathroom has been closed, presumably by

housekeeping. It sticks a little; it takes both my hands to yank it into motion. Then those hands fly to my mouth. Scrawled across the mirror, which spans the width of the bathroom, in six-inch-high letters are the words:

**IT'S YOUR FAULT  
BITCH**

I whirl around, my heart thumping in my ears, as if I might find the culprit right beside me, but the bathroom is completely empty. I reach for the bathroom phone and am midway through pressing the button to dial reception when my brain catches up to me. If I report this, I will have to answer questions, more and more questions. Questions like, who could have done this, and why? Like, what exactly is it that's my fault, and why might I be a bitch? I slowly replace the receiver in its wall-mounted cradle and stare at the words, fighting the urge to run screaming back down to the main reception while I try to formulate a plan. *Safety first*: I need to check the rest of the villa. I listen for a minute, then two, straining to hear above the rasp of my own breathing. Even my heartbeat is too loud, and too rapid. But the villa sounds empty. There's a slight nasal hum from the bathroom light, and a low-frequency whirring from the air-conditioning unit, and now that I'm concentrating on it, I can hear something from the minibar, too, but nothing that indicates the presence of a person hiding somewhere. It feels empty, too.

I slip off my noisy flip-flops and move slowly into the bedroom, trying to move soundlessly as I run my eyes over the perfectly made super king bed, the chair in the corner with the nightdress I'd dumped on it now neatly folded. In here the air-conditioning unit seems extraordinarily loud; I keep glancing over my shoulder. Would I hear anyone behind me? I force myself to check under the bed—nothing. Nothing in the walk-in wardrobe, either. The safe there is

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still shut; when I type my code in, which I have to do twice as my fingers are trembling and clumsy, my jewelry and passport are safely intact.

The living area is similarly empty, and the French doors that open out onto the plunge pool area are locked. Whoever came in did it through the front door, and they could have done it at any point after I went to breakfast. Though surely after housekeeping came in, given the neatly made bed; I doubt the housekeeping staff would have missed six-inch-high letters across the mirror. I think of the man I saw leaving. Was it him? Was he dressed correctly for a staff member? He had a dark blue smock on, in some kind of light material, and matching trousers. Is that what the housekeeping staff wear? I can't think. But why on earth would a staff member write this? This is personal. This comes from someone who knows something. Or thinks they do. I find I'm shaking. *It's your fault.* Lissa's death, surely—but who would lay that at my feet?

I go back into the bathroom and approach the writing cautiously. The missing apostrophe glares at me, though I can't imagine it says anything significant about the writer's origins: native English speakers are just as likely to have made that mistake. It looks like it's been written in brownish-pink lipstick—my own lipstick, I realize, as I spot my MAC Verve tube wrapped in a tissue on the bathroom counter, the protruding lipstick mashed and misshapen. On further inspection I spot the missing cap on the floor. It seems particularly spiteful to have used my lipstick. Or opportunistic. I should probably bag up the lipstick tube. It's unlikely to have fingerprints on it, assuming the culprit used the tissue when holding it, but there's a chance—and then I stop. What's the point in bagging it up if I'm not reporting this? But what if this is the start of something more sinister? Surely I ought to bag it anyway? In the end I repurpose the plastic bag that holds the complimentary shower cap and gingerly transfer the tissue and the lipstick tube to it, taking care never to touch them directly. Then I

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store the bag in the minibar; I'm not completely sure, but I think I read once in a crime novel that cold preserves fingerprints.

Lastly I take my mobile phone and carefully photograph the words in the mirror. *It's your fault. Bitch.* I stare at the photo on my phone. My own reflection, holding the phone in front of me at shoulder height, is in the image. *Bitch* is written across my face.

I pick up one of the pristine white facecloths and set about cleaning off the lettering.