





# Prologue

*Midsummer's Eve, 1930*

Alexa got out of the back seat of the car and stood perfectly still on the gravel drive, clutching her fur stole over her shoulders.



Ferris House, high up on the Enys Point headland, had always been foreboding. The wind-buffed granite was hard and severe against the often blissful-blue Cornish sky and, Alexa admitted, always scared her a little. But this evening, the house was transformed and softened by music, by laughter, by light. The towering front door, propped open by bay trees in copper pots, welcomed her, enticed her to walk to the top of the sweeping stone steps and enter its embrace. As a fleet of cars and taxis continued to pull up the drive behind her, dropping even more guests for the ball, Alexa heard, and felt, the tinkling conversations of the crowd inside, and her stomach bubbled with nerves.



‘Are you all right, Alexa? Look lively,’ teased her father, William, tucking his wallet inside his jet-black dinner jacket having paid the driver. ‘You can’t be late for your own party.’

Her stepmother, Eleanor, stopped fiddling with her gloves to link her arm with Alexa’s.



‘We’ll see you safely through the door, Alexa,’ she said. ‘After that, we won’t spoil your fun by hanging around you, will we, William? We’ll leave you bright young things alone. Oh, my dear, you are shaking.’

‘I’m desperately trying not to.’

Alexa took a fortifying breath, lifted the hem of her gown, and set off across the gravel with her father and stepmother either side of her, fighting her rising panic and the strong urge to turn and run.

‘You know, it is quicker to walk here from home, than motor over,’ commented William unnecessarily as they tackled the steps, treating them to another of his musings. ‘Down the cliff footpath from Porthdeen, across the quay, back up again. It’s simple. And such a fine evening for it. Don’t know why I didn’t suggest it.’

Alexa glanced at her father and saw his tongue pressed firmly in his cheek. But Eleanor let out an exasperated little snort.

‘In these shoes, William? It would be like setting out on one of your hikes over the headland. And, frankly, last time you made me do that, it nearly killed me. You can walk home, if you like. Alexa and I will certainly be getting a taxi.’

‘He’s teasing us, Eleanor,’ Alexa said, as the sound of swaying music reached her and her knees wobbled as if she’d just stepped off Harvey’s boat onto dry land. ‘Dad, please don’t. Now is not the time.’

He gave her a crooked, apologetic smile.

Alexa forgave him, took a deep breath and walked under the grand entrance into the wide hall and the chattering crowd.





The scent of flowers and cologne hit the back of her throat, sweet and overwhelming, like a toffee she had once choked on.

‘Oh, but how utterly gorgeous,’ she sighed.

Even though the sun lingered in the midsummer sky and the evening promised to unfold fair and long, candles burned in every room. They burned at windows, on the candelabra and in fireplaces, competing with the last of the sunlight. Champagne bubbles in crystal glasses sparkled and the diamonds and opals at ladies’ throats winked at her. Freesias and pinks, roses and lilies – Harvey knew her favourites – spilled over the edges of urns and trailed around pillars. And there were people, so many people.

Alexa guessed at a hundred heads: hair oiled or marcelled, here and there, a twinkling tiara. The beautiful, not so beautiful, the good and the great of the parish, and indeed the county, were assembled as a joyous *mêlée* and were, one by one, turning to look at her.

At the bottom of the flight of stairs where the great bannister curved back around itself, Harvey was waiting. She saw him scanning his guests, keeping watch for the door. He spotted her and his face transformed with innocent pleasure as he began to squeeze his eager way towards her.

How the pristine black of evening wear became him. He was dressed identically to every other male guest at the party, but he remained the most attractive man she had ever seen. His wavy tawny hair was slicked back and he looked, Alexa decided, quite divine. Her legs stopped working and she came





to a halt, drawing even more attention. Guests parted and began to clap.

Alexa took a step back, flummoxed, only to be caught playfully by Eleanor.

‘You can’t escape, Alexa,’ she whispered in her ear.

And suddenly, reassuringly, Harvey was right there, blocking out the others, taking hold of her hand – how wonderful that felt – and making her welcome and warm and wanted. Her plans for her future, her escape to a new life, withered a little.

‘Happy birthday, Alexa. How beautiful you are,’ he said. ‘I’m so glad you are here.’

‘Hello, Harvey,’ she said, smiling at her best friend.

He took two champagne coupes from a tray and, with a nod of greeting to William and Eleanor, led Alexa away across the ballroom and out through the French windows on to the terrace where, at last, she could breathe.

They walked through sea-fresh air, down the steps and across the pristine lawn, towards the pines that whispered in the evening breeze, exhaling their sweet, oily aroma. Ranks of rhododendrons created black-green dense hollows. Through gaps in the shrubbery, Alexa saw the yellow of the prickly gorse and, beyond the cliff’s edge, the pure blue horizon, still bright on this, the longest day. Below her, waves roared against the black rocks of Enys Point.

Alexa turned her back on the view.

‘The house looks so wonderful, Harvey,’ she said. ‘Everything is so light, so sparkling. How have you managed it? This is what my mother would have remembered. She once told me what





a spectacle the Ferris Midsummer ball was. She would have loved this.'

'I'm sure she would have done, Alexa,' Harvey said. 'But this is for you, remember. I can't think of a better way to celebrate your eighteenth birthday.'

Harvey's concentrated stare pinned her like a butterfly and she shifted her gaze to the coy statues peeking around ancient yews, the gravel pathways into secret bowers behind box hedges, the sky large, empty and soft over the sea.

'The only thing you haven't thought of, Harvey,' she said, 'is peacocks for your lawn.'

He looked momentarily disappointed, as if caught out.

'Certainly, next time,' he said. 'I will . . . When I . . .'

Harvey's parents hailed them from the terrace and began to walk across the lawn towards them, his father stooping a little, peering upwards with a wide grin, while his mother held court with broad-shouldered confidence. Arthur's medals were pinned resplendently on his jacket, and Betty's pearls glowed, suggesting ancient treasure.

She greeted Alexa with a powdery kiss on her cheek.

'My dear girl, you look absolutely divine. You put us all in the shade,' Betty said, self-deprecating even though her precise Scottish accent always made her sound imperious.

Arthur placed an affectionate hand on his son's shoulder, as if to congratulate him, his watery eyes surveying Alexa.

'Good god, when I saw you, Alexandra, across the lawn, I thought that it was Carlotta standing there. I truly did.'

Betty elbowed him.





‘Goodness, Alexa, do excuse my husband. He doesn’t set out to upset you. He means it as an absolute tribute. Your mother was very special to us all.’

Alexa saw the tell-tale signs of compassion and pity, for her mother had died exactly six years ago, the day before her twelfth birthday.

‘I remember visiting you here with her so many times,’ Alexa smiled at Harvey’s parents, helping them as they stumbled over their kindness. ‘And I remember us being served the softest buns for tea. The house seemed enormous to me then, as a little girl. And now,’ Alexa glanced at the dazzling windows, feeling the spike of her loss as if it had been yesterday, ‘it is just as huge and wonderful.’

‘We haven’t done this circus for years,’ said Arthur, ‘but Harvey wanted it this way for you.’

‘Come on, enough of this,’ cried Betty, grasping her husband’s arm, pulling him away, ‘we must circulate, attend to our guests.’ She threw back over her shoulder. ‘Don’t hog her, Harvey.’

‘I will try not to, Ma,’ he called. ‘At least,’ he said quietly to Alexa, ‘I will, if you want me to.’

Alexa laughed brightly. He was teasing her, surely. But his face was serious.

She heard the spicy syncopation of a jazz number starting up, felt the vibrations distract her. ‘I want to dance.’

‘I wouldn’t expect anything else.’

Harvey took her hand and lead her back inside where they merged with a dozen other couples; some older guests marching sedately, the younger ones jigging and dipping, chatting over





the music; a warm weight of people. She felt his closeness, his chest so very near her own, with his chin tilted just so and his raised hand delicately balancing her fingers. As he held her, he seemed very grown-up compared to the boy she had known all her life. He guided her, supported her, dipped her joyfully at the appropriate moment. She felt her shoulders drop as she relaxed into the steps; she took in the room, the faces, the smiles and laughter, the last embers of sunlight slanting through the large windows.

Suddenly, the idea of her suitcase packed and ready, hidden beneath her bed back home at Porthdeen, seemed terribly wrong. But she had made the decision. Her train ticket was bought; Lady Meredith's Cadogan Square address branded into her memory for the moment next week when she stepped off the train at Paddington and into her new life. She was leaving home for London to work for a stranger, she just hadn't found the moment to tell her father and stepmother, or Harvey, for that matter.

Tomorrow, she told herself, as Harvey guided her on another circuit of the dancefloor. She'd tell them all tomorrow, during the slow morning of recovery. In any case, she thought, her eyes flicking to Harvey's wonderfully familiar face, his clear eyes watching her, he knew that she longed to leave Porthdeen. He just didn't know how badly.

As the tune came to a halt, she noticed Sarah Carmichael with her punch cup aloft like a barrier, sinking back against the wall, camouflaging herself behind a flower arrangement. Her dress was delicate china blue, simple but flattering, and her fair hair dressed like a confection on her head. She concentrated on





the pieces of fruit in her cup, occasionally dipping the tip of her finger, licking it and glancing shyly up at the room.

‘Dance with Sarah,’ Alexa said.

Harvey grinned. ‘Of course I will. Ma said that I was not to hog you. And one must do what Ma says.’

Alexa gave him a ‘thank you’ smile and drifted over to the small gathering around the punch bowl where she found her father topping up Eleanor’s cup.

‘Enjoying it so far?’ Alexa’s stepmother asked, leaving lipstick on the rim. Her hair shimmered blonde in the light of the candles.

‘Of course, it really is so very wonderful . . .’

‘I think we’d better dance,’ said her father.

‘I’ll hold that for you, if you like,’ said Alexa, reaching for Eleanor’s cup.

‘No,’ said William, ‘I meant with you.’

As he led her onto the floor, he confided, ‘Eleanor has been making me practise, but alas, I fear it has been to no avail.’

Alexa laughed with affection, remembering her mother once complaining what a bad dancer her father was and how bruised her toes – in her thin silk dancing shoes – became.

‘Here goes,’ said William, guiding Alexa backwards into a rather frenzied jazz tune. ‘Ferris has really done you proud tonight. He has hired two bands, you know. One specialising in slow, old-time music for us grown-ups, and one for the young folk like you. Must say, I know which one I prefer –’

They bumped straight into Harvey and Sarah dancing in the other direction.







‘Please excuse us,’ said William. ‘My dancing lessons have not paid off.’

But Harvey and Sarah barely noticed. They were talking intently, Sarah blushing and laughing. Alexa saw a veil of ecstasy over her pretty face.

‘Are you happy, Alexa?’ William asked her.

She tilted her head to look at her father, realising that, just as with Harvey, this was the first time she had ever danced with him.

‘I am, Dad. I really am.’

‘You’re just like your mother,’ he blurted. ‘And it’s almost . . .’

She wondered what he was struggling to say. *Uncanny? Unbearable?*

Everyone said how much they looked alike, and, in turn, how Carlotta was the mirror image of her own mother Beatrice. They shared each other’s Venetian heritage: dark hair and trusting blue eyes, such a surprise against the soft-olive tone of their skin.

‘That’s what Pa Ferris just said.’ She saw her father inhale his emotion.

Dad would understand, Alexa ruminated as their dance continued, that it was time for her to leave home. She wanted to step outside of her small, safe world; and she wanted to find her grandmother. She would never be able to do that stuck here at Porthdeen, perched on the furthest point you could get to before toppling into the sea. She had to tell Beatrice to her face how sorry she was. And that six years of silence had been agony.

William slouched with relief as the number ended.





‘My, you two looked a picture, cutting up the dance floor,’ Eleanor greeted them, handing out punch cups. ‘Harvey and Sarah look quite marvellous, too. She was telling me earlier what an honour it was to be invited. Wouldn’t have happened in the old days, having the whole village here. But that’s Harvey’s influence, I suspect. It’s almost as if she’s a charity case –’

Eleanor looked sharply over Alexa’s shoulder.

‘Ah, Sarah, did you enjoy your dance?’

Alexa, used to her stepmother’s catty edge, turned to see Sarah next to her, flushed and breathing heavily, not sure what to do with her hands.

‘I most certainly did,’ she said, tucking a damp tendril of hair behind her ear. ‘Although I must have trodden on Harvey’s toes a dozen times.’

‘What’s that you have there?’ asked Alexa.

‘Harvey’s handkerchief,’ said Sarah. ‘He apologised for the speed of the dance, for making me hot and bothered. He thought I’d better have this.’

She hid her beam of pleasure by dabbing her mouth and her cheeks with it.

Eleanor caught Alexa’s eye and excused herself with, ‘I wonder where your father has gone?’ pulling Alexa behind her.

‘Sarah better not be getting any ideas,’ said Eleanor.

Alexa wanted to ask her stepmother what on earth she meant, but Harvey caught her by the arm and spun her around.

‘I’ve done my duty,’ he said, his hand firmly on her spine, ‘now it’s time to dance with the birthday girl again.’

‘Goodness,’ said Alexa, ‘now I’m hogging you!’





He gazed down at her, appraisingly, and, in complete seriousness, said, 'Happy birthday, my dear Alexa.'

She forced a laugh. Harvey's devotion, his interest, had baffled her shy young self at first: he was always the bigger boy who came across the headland from Enys Point to Porthdeen to ask her to come out to play. But William and Carlotta had liked him, encouraged her. And she fell easily into step with Harvey in their domain of cliffs and coves and rocks and waves, just as she matched his steps now across the floor.

Dancing with him, she tried to parry his attention, but lost the battle. The intensity in his eyes silenced her. How could she have ignored it? How could she have ignored her oldest, dearest friend? All of this – the music, the light and the laughter – was for her. Always, for her.

The room and its dancing joyous people revolved around her. Harvey's arms supporting her were no longer a comfort and rather his presence shot warning signals up her body. This was not the first time he'd ever touched her, but it felt like it was. Her neck ached with trying to hold herself away from his embrace. He noticed, and stopped her suddenly. He signalled to the band.

The musicians went silent for the briefest spell and then struck up merrily with 'Happy Birthday'.

And as the assembly sang to her, as Harvey sang to her, she forced herself to smile. She made herself think of her plans, of the unknown Lady Meredith, of London, her search for her grandmother, while her heart beat savagely and perspiration flashed over her skin.

The song finished, at last.





‘Look at you, just look at you.’ Harvey smiled, as if seeing her for the first time. ‘Alexa, you really don’t know what it is you do . . .’

He lowered himself and knelt on the floor. The room gasped in collective amazement.

‘Alexa,’ he said, peacefully, confidently looking up at her. ‘I’ve known you since you were a little girl. All your life, in fact.’

He was speaking as if there was no one else in the room. The air thickened. Dozens of eyes beamed at her. She raised her hands in surrender.

‘Please, Harvey, not like this,’ she whispered.

But he could not have heard her, for he was speaking, quickly, expectantly.

‘Will you, my dearest Alexa, do me the honour of becoming my wife?’

The women surrounding her put their fingertips to their faces, eyes widening; men settled their shoulders in satisfaction. As if frozen mid-tune, the band were poised with their instruments. William looked excited; Eleanor was listening hard. Sarah Carmichael stared in horror, her eyes moving in a slow frenzy.

No one dared say a word, for they were all waiting for Alexa’s answer.

Harvey loved her. And she did not realise until that moment, as the look on his face told her over and over again.

A shake of her head brought Harvey back to his feet. Fear darted across his face.

‘Don’t make me a fool, Alexa,’ he whispered, his voice light and coaxing, not understanding.



Behind his shoulder, Alexa glimpsed Betty Ferris, her face fixed with belief, her hands clenched before her. Beside her, Arthur was nodding gently. Neither of them had noticed the shake of her head, or heard what their son had whispered.

This is what they wanted; this is what they all expected. But this was not her.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she blurted, and turned away.

Bodies parted as she pressed through the slack-jawed crowd towards the French windows, open to the pale evening like the mouth of a dark cave from which she must escape. As she plunged out into the cooler air, it was like stepping into a cold shower of rain. Exclaims of shock and gasps of displeasure followed her. Dipping down, she hauled off her shoes, lifted her skirt and ran.



# Book One







# Chapter 1

*The beginning of summer, 1924*

‘I’m not allowed to paddle,’ Alexa called out, her voice carrying across the cove against the rushing of the waves, ‘not today. Mamma said it is far too rough.’

‘But *I’m* here,’ insisted Harvey, who had already made a dash towards the sea. ‘Should anything happen, I’ll pull you out. I’ll rescue you. Come on, Alexa.’

‘But look at the swell, it is rather choppy.’

‘I’m going in.’

Harvey perched on a rock and hauled his shoes and socks off in one go, dropping them to the sand. He whipped his cap off, rolled up his trouser legs and gave her a bright, encouraging grin.

‘Mamma will be very cross,’ said Alexa.

‘Come to the edge then.’

Alexa followed him down to the spot where the foaming waves could just reach the tips of her shoes. She darted backward and forward, teased by the water as, in a mild state of envy, she watched Harvey paddle. Just turned sixteen, and a good four years older than her, she could tell he knew he should be sensible



and grown-up, but desperately wanted to play. She gave him an amused little wave.

‘It is rather fresh,’ he laughed as an unexpectedly large breaker soaked his trousers. The pearly-blue sea was moving quickly. White crests forming far out suggested a hidden force: a danger that could easily, as Mamma would say, catch you while you weren’t looking.

‘Why won’t she let you go paddling?’ hollered Harvey, now up to his knees, his legs pale against the rocking surf.

‘You know why. She’s afraid of the water,’ said Alexa. ‘Ever since she was expecting me and she heard my voice inside her telling her not to get on the big ship. So she didn’t. And it sunk.’

‘It’s all so dramatic,’ he said. ‘It has never made any sense to me.’

‘Do you think it does to me?’ she called back, laughing, even though here on the sand, watching Harvey splashing through the swell, with the salty wind whipping her hair, and the song of the waves in her ear, her mother’s tale of unborn Alexa’s warning forced a hard thrill of terror to burrow through her stomach.

‘I wanted to take you sailing for your birthday. *Indigo Moon* is resealed and ready. She even has a new sail,’ Harvey said, making his slow way back towards her, his disappointment physical. ‘And now you tell me you are going away. Tomorrow!’

‘Are you mad, Mamma *certainly* wouldn’t want me to go sailing, unless Dad came with us. Anyway, we are visiting my grandmother,’ she said. ‘She’s Italian, so I’m to call her Nonna.’

‘What’s she like?’



‘I’ve never met her. Not even seen a photograph.’

‘But I won’t see much of you when you get back,’ he said, ‘because you are going straight off to boarding school.’

‘So are you, Harvey. And you only have a year left to go. I’m only just starting. And I don’t want to. I want to stay here.’

Harvey stood on the sand, shivering, hopping from one bare foot to the other.

‘Our parents are mean, aren’t they?’ he said, ‘Making us do things, or making us not do them. Speaking of which . . .’ Harvey looked past Alexa’s shoulder and began to wave.

She turned to see the silhouette of her mother at the top of the Porthdeen cliff, calling, beckoning her home.

‘Time to go,’ said Alexa. ‘Mamma wants me to have an early night. Big day tomorrow. It must be two hundred miles to London.’

‘Probably even more,’ said Harvey, struggling to squeeze his wet feet into his socks.

‘All I know is we have to catch the milk train from Penzance at dawn.’

‘You’ll be up before the seagulls,’ said Harvey, settling his cap on his head.

They picked their way back up the beach and began to climb the cliff path. Halfway up, where the track split into two, one way up to Porthdeen, the other along and down to the village, Alexa stopped.

‘Goodness me,’ she said, ‘look at this. I very nearly trod on it.’

By her shoe lay half a gull’s eggshell, speckled olive green and dappled with brown, the colours of rock and sand. Gingerly



picking it up, she peered inside. A tiny feather was stuck to something runny.

‘It’s been ambushed,’ she said, dismayed. ‘Something’s stolen this egg, split it and eaten the chick.’

‘Oh no, but here’s the other half.’ Harvey bent down to pluck it from the cushiony grass at the side of the path. ‘The chick has pecked his way out. A successful hatching, I’d say. And now he is in a nest somewhere, mouth gaping, being constantly fed by his mother, who is probably by now run ragged.’

He gave it to Alexa and she cradled the two halves of the shell delicately in her palms.

‘Is this my birthday present?’ she asked, laughing.

‘I’ve not bought you anything else, so I expect it is.’

‘Alexa!’ Her mother’s call reached them again.

‘I really must be going,’ said Alexa, but instead of making her way up to where Mamma was waiting, she sat down on a tussock of grass.

‘Alexa, you will make her cross,’ said Harvey, ‘and I’m going to go before we both get into trouble.’

Alexa watched as Harvey made his way, following the flank of the cliff all the way down to the village. If Alexa leaned forward, she could just see the slate roofs and the smoking chimneys of Little Porthdeen below and the diminutive quay where two or three fishing luggers jostled for space. Her mother called again, but, tucking her hands up inside her sleeves, Alexa decided to wait and watch Harvey walking along the quay. She spotted him as he emerged from behind the Sea Captain’s cottage. Head down, cap pulled low, his tiny figure took the steep stone steps





in great bounds and quickly reached the path that fed its way up and over the rising headland of Enys Point where the fresh wind combed the grasses, switching them back and forth.

Harvey stopped suddenly, hands deep in pockets. He turned to look behind him. She saw the pale shape of his face as he stared from his clifftop, across the water, to where she was sitting. She had no idea if he had picked her out or not, and wondered if she should stand up, wave and call, give him a proper farewell.

But, clutching her knees close to her chest, blending with the furze behind her, Alexa stayed completely still. Harvey turned, put his face to the wind and strode on his way.

A hand rested on her shoulder and her mother was suddenly beside her, sitting on the grass. The breeze had teased her dark hair from under her hat. Her face, usually so expressive, was still.

Alexa glanced at her, terrified that she was angry.

‘I’m sorry, Mamma, I don’t know why but I just had to watch him go.’

Her mother reached out to tuck Alexa’s wayward hair firmly behind her ears.

‘You should really wear a hat, darling, on a blowy day like today. Don’t let Juliet catch you without one.’

‘You’re not cross with me?’

Mamma shook her head, her eyes clear with understanding. ‘I know you’ll miss him, Alexa. But we’ll only be away a little more than a month. He will miss you too.’

A gust of wind battered Alexa, bringing with it a sudden and magnifying delight.



But she ignored it. 'You don't know that for sure, Mamma.'  
Her mother stood up and reached down for her.  
'Come on home. Juliet is making you supper. And Ovaltine if  
you ask her nicely.'  
Alexa handed Mamma one half of the precious eggshell to  
carry and, together, they began the long climb back up the cliff.