

There was no signal. Of course there wasn't; there never was here. The house was too close to the cliff, overshadowed by it. But still she gripped the phone tightly, staring at the screen, willing the little bars at the top to fill up, trying to think.

The kitchen was a mess, and she was sitting on the floor, backed up against the cupboard under the sink, her legs splayed out – not very elegant, not very ladylike – and she could smell blood.

No. That was just her stupid imagination.

Get a grip, she thought, her fingers aching as she clutched the phone in both hands. *Get a grip, get up and* – she paused, lifted her head, listened.

It was faint, too faint to be sure, but wasn't that . . . ? She strained to hear. Couldn't she hear someone upstairs, moving slowly, deliberately along the first-floor landing?

Now, she thought, her heart hammering. *Get up now*.

She'd put it back, hadn't she? She found herself wishing that alone would be enough. She could still feel it, her talisman, her little piece of luck, warm in the palm of her hand, soft and yielding. The way it seemed to – fit. That had been the hardest part, giving it up, even after everything went wrong. Even though she knew it was the right thing to do, the only thing to do; even when she'd wanted to keep it close.

She grabbed the edge of the sink, slowly pulling herself to

her feet, then straightened up, trying to ignore the dull ache deep in her belly. She'd given up so much already.

Don't lose your nerve.

She shifted the phone from one hand to the other, flexed her fingers, listened. She could definitely hear footsteps. They were not so much moving across the landing as resonating deep inside the fabric of the building, inside her. The sound was comforting, in its way.

At least she wasn't alone.

The front door scraped open and – there was no mistaking it this time – someone stood hesitating on the threshold. Upstairs the footsteps stopped.

'Hello?'

It was him.

She'd made it clear he needed to keep this to himself, their arrangement. And later when they asked, she would say that she had come back to the house to retrieve her phone.

Her heart pounding, she moved silently to the corner of the room, to the fuse box.

Maybe he'll go away.

She could hear the door rattling softly on its hinges as he pushed it further back. It was dark in the hall, she knew, gloomy.

There was a shuffling as he tried to make up his mind. It wouldn't be long, a few seconds at most before he stepped inside.

She would say she had come back to the house to retrieve her phone and – and . . .

She had found him there, and no, she'd had no idea – there was no reason for him to be in the house, no reason at all.

And there had been nothing she could do.

An accident, she thought as she reached up, opening the cupboard door.

She had been too late.

‘Hello?’ His voice soft, uncertain.

The floorboards shifting as he stepped inside. The noise upstairs started again, bolder now, insistent.

She placed her hand on the switch, closed her eyes, and pushed.

1

Nell looked up at the gate; its slender fleurs-de-lys curves at odds with the worn sandstone buildings either side of it. It was new, wrought iron, unpainted, unfinished, the pale pewter grey standing in stark contrast with the rest of the long cobbled street and its mismatched Georgian shop fronts, the low doors and the sagging bow windows.

‘Unbelievable.’ She shook her head.

‘What now?’ said Chris.

‘These yards aren’t private. They’ve no right to block it.’

‘Well, it’s not blocked, is it?’ said Maude. She reached past Nell and pushed; the bolt was hanging loose, and the gate opened easily enough, clattering against the enamelled sign that had been set into the wall, BISHOPS YARD. ‘See?’

‘It’s out of place,’ said Nell. ‘And it’s ugly.’

‘Yes, well, grab a bag, would you?’ Chris opened the car boot. ‘Best not hang around.’

The journey had taken longer than they’d expected, a combination of motorway delays and too many stops to accommodate Maude’s alleged travel sickness. Then they’d been late collecting the keys from the letting agency up on the West Cliff.

‘I’ll go over with you,’ the woman had said, ‘get you settled in,’ but there’d been no mistaking the relief in her eyes when Chris had declined her offer. The shop was empty, the sign

flipped to CLOSED and Nell had the impression that the rest of the staff had left for the day.

‘We’ll manage,’ Chris said. ‘My wife’s a local girl.’

‘Really?’

‘We’ve kept you waiting long enough, and I’m sure you need to get home.’

The woman picked up a folder and two sets of keys, glancing at Nell, most likely trying, and failing, to place her. ‘Well, if you’re sure.’

‘We’ll be fine,’ Chris said. ‘Thanks.’

But Nell had forgotten about the one-way system, or maybe it was new, and once they’d left the agency, they’d had to follow the road up onto the cliff, and down onto the seafront, before driving up the harbour to cross the little swing bridge into the east side of town. Over the river, they’d turned onto the cobbled street, slowing the car as they checked the names of the yards. Chris had parked as close as he could, up on the pavement, more or less.

‘It’s a gate, it doesn’t have to be pretty,’ said Maude, picking up her rucksack and leading the way.

‘Well, thank you for your insight, sweetheart,’ said Chris, ‘I’ll be sure to—’

Nell nudged him and shook her head.

Maude counted off the numbers on the houses as they walked up the yard. There was a narrow gutter running the length of it, not quite central, not quite straight, carving its way through the worn cobbles. ‘One, two, three,’ to their right, ‘five, six, four,’ to the left. She came to a halt at the bottom of a flight of stone steps, steeply pitched, shallow and uneven. ‘That doesn’t make sense.’ She looked up at Nell, frowning. ‘Why is it like that?’

‘Oh, I don’t know.’ Nell considered the question; most of

the houses were low sandstone cottages with neat pantile roofs; one or two had well-tended planters by their doors. Numbers five and six were no less orderly, but were built of red brick, and were set further back. All the houses were silent, their windows blank and grey, and it was impossible to tell if they were occupied or not. Nell wondered if the three of them might be the only inhabitants of the whole yard.

‘I think,’ she said, ‘it depends how you look at it.’

Maude followed her gaze, ‘Yeah?’ she said.

‘Do we have to do this now?’ asked Chris, squeezing past, ‘Can’t the history lesson wait?’

Maude chose not to take her father’s side, for a change. ‘Those look new,’ she said, ‘so, the houses are numbered in the order they were built?’

‘Not our place and maybe not the cottages, but yes – anything that came after them.’

Maude absorbed this. ‘Right,’ she said, then she pointed to the next house, which was about halfway up the steps. ‘Is that us, then?’

‘No.’ SPINNAKER COTTAGE was engraved on a brass plate fixed to the bright blue door. ‘We’re right up at the top.’ Nell couldn’t be sure, but there seemed to be movement at one of the windows, someone watching them perhaps as they gawped at the yard like a bunch of tourists. They had shown Maude the pictures, of course, when they’d booked it, but she’d barely acknowledged them, dismissing her father’s enthusiasm for the house, the town, the whole trip with a single word: *whatever*. Twelve going on twenty-one, as Chris had taken to saying.

It wasn’t so easy to dismiss in real life. Elder House stood at the top of the steps, stiff, formal, imposing, looking down on the rest of the yard. It was rigidly symmetrical, solid, with stone mullioned windows and diamond shaped lead lights. The

roof was slate, and there was a grey-greenish tinge to the dressed stone; it was old – but unlike its neighbours – there was something untouched about it.

Dark, Nell thought, the way the house backed up against the cliff like that, she doubted it ever got much direct sunlight, even at midday. And it didn't look like a holiday let, there was nothing quirky or inviting about it. She turned and looked down the yard. The way it veered ever so slightly to one side meant it was impossible to see the street from here; the effect was oddly isolating.

Chris paused and called down to them, 'Are you two coming, then?'

Maude rolled her eyes, 'Yes. Right. Fine.' Nell took her time following her.

The steps led up to the left side of the house, and to the narrow flagged path that ran around it. There was a sheer drop of ten or twelve feet between it and their nearest neighbour, Spinnaker Cottage, and Nell had to resist the urge to warn Maude to stay away from the edge. She was a sensible kid, as a rule.

Chris was waiting for them by the front door. He found the right key, inserted it into the lock, struggling with it as it seemed to stick, shudder, then give. The door opened into a hall, a gleaming parquet floor dominated by a wide, wooden staircase. It was silent and the air was still; the house smelt faintly of beeswax polish and lavender, and underneath that, something else, something . . . Nell couldn't place it. They stood there for a moment, the three of them, waiting.

'Are we going in, then?' Maude pushed past her father and dropped her things at the foot of the stairs.

Nell followed her, flicking on the hall light, hoping to dispel the gloom. A sharp prickle of static electricity took her

unawares, and she caught her breath; Maude turned away, not quite masking a smirk.

There was a door to the left, and Nell opened it, revealing a long room that ran right through the house – the kitchen-diner. At the far end, on the counter, next to the Aga, there was a welcome pack, a cellophane-wrapped hamper filled with someone's idea of essential groceries and finished off with a shiny blue bow.

They had done a decent job of knocking through a wall; the shift from polished floorboards to worn flagstones was all that indicated there had once been two rooms where now there was one. The leaded windowpanes lent the room a slightly greenish cast.

Without thinking, Nell crossed the kitchen, squatted and lay her hand against the stone floor. It felt cool beneath her palm, and – this must have been imagination – slightly damp.

She stood up. There was a smell here too, although this was easier to place; it put her in mind of wet soil and rotting vegetables. It might have been the rag rug in front of the Aga, but it seemed new enough, the regular, clipped tongues of fabric springing up from the sacking base. Maybe they were the first visitors of the summer season, that would explain the damp, unused air of it all.

She didn't like it.

More than that: she didn't want to stay. The thought took her by surprise, and she tried to ignore it. It wasn't as if she had a choice.

It took a couple of trips to get everything out of the car, and by the time they were done, Chris's mood was beginning to sour. 'Next time,' he said, 'we choose somewhere with parking.'

'You were the one who wanted to stay in a yard,' said Nell.

‘You’re the one with the big old family party to go to.’

It wasn’t really her fault, of course, the house, the trip. Nell had glanced at the invitation when it had come, more than a month ago, then put it to one side, intending to send a polite refusal, but never quite getting around to it.

Chris had picked it up from her desk one day, when they’d been discussing Maude, and the long summer that was suddenly stretching out in front of them. ‘There’s always this,’ he said, opening the card before handing it to her.

There was an email address and a phone number printed inside, with the time and the date underneath the announcement: *David and Jennifer Galilee, Silver Wedding Anniversary*. There was a handwritten message too, although the writing was unfamiliar.

It would be great to see you, if you could find the time.

Love, Jenny and Dave x

‘We won’t know anyone.’

Chris raised a sceptical eyebrow.

‘You know what I mean,’ Nell said. ‘You won’t know anyone. And I’ll – it’ll be awkward.’ She couldn’t remember the last time she’d spoken to her cousin, her dad’s funeral, probably.

‘It’s up to you,’ Chris said, ‘but you never know, it could be fun. It might be nice to get away for a bit. Get Maude away from – everything.’

‘It’s a long way to go, just for one party.’

‘Then we make it worth the effort. Stay on for a bit, show her the sights.’

‘There are no sights.’ She stood the card on her desk. The photo on the front showed a yacht sailing out of the harbour on a clear summer’s day. ‘Do you think she’d like it?’

‘I don’t see why not. It’s the seaside, isn’t it? Everyone likes the seaside.’

They hadn’t been back since Maude was small, six or seven years ago, when an ice cream had been a treat, paddling in the sea an adventure. Before the arguments and the sulking, before everything had become so complicated and Maude’s easy affection had been replaced by something more guarded, more unpredictable. The rush of nostalgia took Nell by surprise. ‘Go on then,’ she said, before she could change her mind, ‘but don’t blame me if she gets bored.’

She had pretty much left everything up to him after that. ‘I don’t mind where we stay,’ she’d said, ‘as long as we’re together.’

She hadn’t imagined he’d settle on somewhere so big, so uncompromising.

‘Can I choose my room?’ Maude was already halfway up the stairs.

‘Sure,’ said Chris. ‘Go and have a look around. Don’t mind me. I’ll be having my heart attack in the kitchen, out of the way.’

Maude didn’t look back.

Nell leant back against the banister. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘here we are.’

‘Hmm.’ Chris pulled her into a gentle hug, resting his chin on her head as he looked around the hall, taking it all in.

‘This is all very – showy,’ Nell said. ‘Very posh.’

‘But . . .’

‘There’s a weird’ – she hesitated – ‘smell. Don’t you think?’

‘A smell?’ He held her at arm’s length. ‘Seriously?’

‘Well, yes. Haven’t you noticed it?’

‘No.’

‘It’s not so bad here, but in the kitchen it . . .’ She didn’t much like the way he was looking at her, as if he found her

amusing, and ever so slightly foolish. 'Forget it,' she said. 'It's just . . . it's not very us, is it?'

'Isn't it?'

Chris had shown her the posting on the website, and she remembered flicking through images of a fitted kitchen with an electric Aga, cosy sofas and a log burning stove in the living room, exposed beams and leaded windows. She hadn't really taken it in. Her mind had been on other things.

She tried again. 'It feels . . .'

'What?' That same expression. Amused. Superior.

Wrong. It felt wrong.

'I like it,' said Chris. 'It's solid. Classy. There's a bit on the website about its history, former occupants and all that. You should—'

'Dad! Da-ad!' Maude's voice echoed down the stairs.

'What?'

'Come and see.'

'No.'

'You said I could choose.'

'But not this, obviously.'

'Why not?'

It was pretty impressive, Nell had to admit. The master bedroom: oak panelled, with an open fireplace, and dominated by a big brass bedstead. The ceiling was a little low perhaps, and its exposed beams seemed to dip slightly, but the room had an air of understated, if impersonal, comfort. There was a pitcher and ewer perched on a table underneath one set of windows, and a chest of drawers beneath the other. There was no wardrobe, but there were cupboards built into the wall either side of the tiled chimney breast, their tiny brass latches fitting flush against the painted wood.

Maude didn't mean it, of course – Nell could see that, she had no more intention of claiming this room than she did of letting either of them forget she was here on sufferance; the brief truce her interest in the yard had signalled was clearly over.

She fixed Nell with an accusing stare. 'He said.'

'You know perfectly well what your father meant.' Nell walked to one of the windows. Below them, to the left, the door to Spinnaker Cottage opened and a woman came out. She was blonde, wearing jeans and a waterproof jacket. As she walked down the yard, her scarf, a monochrome geometric design, fluttered in the breeze.

'Any other room,' Chris said, 'but not this one.'

'It's not fair.'

'We need the double bed,' said Chris, certain, surely, of the reaction this would provoke.

'God,' said Maude, after a horrified pause. 'You two are gross.' She turned and strode out of the room.

'What?' asked Chris, meeting Nell's gaze. 'What have I done now?'

'Nothing,' said Nell, turning her attention back to the window, 'but you can tell she's just spoiling for a fight, can't you?'

'Well, what am I supposed to do when she's being such a – brat?'

Just take a breath, Nell thought, just listen to her. 'Oh,' she said, the blonde woman had reappeared and was walking up the steps, a determined expression on her face as she headed straight for Elder House. 'I think we have a visitor.'

She could hear them, talking by the door downstairs. She'd sent Chris to deal with the woman, and now she sat on the

bed, listening to the rise and fall of their voices, running her hand over the soft blue and white quilt. Her limbs were heavy, she was tempted to kick off her shoes and lie down, curl up and close her eyes, to leave the house to Chris and Maude as she slept.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, once they settled in.

The woman's voice was rapid and determined, Chris's responses, deeper, more considered, and gradually his voice came to dominate the exchange. After a while they said their goodbyes and Nell heard the door close.

She stood up and went to the window again, just in time to catch a final glimpse of the woman walking down the yard, upright, brisk.

'Nell!' Chris called up the stairs. 'I just need to move the car.'

'OK.'

She heard him go into the kitchen, then emerge again. As he left the house, he slammed the front door behind him.

The floorboards on the landing shifted and sighed.

'Maude?'

But there was no answer, evidently she was yet to be forgiven. She thought again about the online posting for the house. There had been no reviews, she remembered. No user comments. The owners must be new to the holiday-let business. Maybe that was why the place felt so . . .

Expectant.

Maude passed along the landing again; her footfalls muted by the carpet but still managing somehow to signal her discontent. Maybe she should have a word.

She had assumed that Maude would take the back bedroom, but when she opened the door, it was empty. 'Maude? Hello?'

She waited for an answer, as if Maude might be hiding somewhere. It was only when she went back onto the landing that she noticed the steps, the wooden ladder that seemed to be fixed permanently in place, leading up to a hatch-door and the attic.

‘I thought I’d lost you,’ Nell said, climbing the last few rungs.

‘I’m exploring,’ Maude said, ‘I mean, if that’s all right.’ She’d retrieved her bags from the hall and was bent over her rucksack, fiddling with the straps. Nell wasn’t sure, but she thought she might have been crying.

‘Of course it’s all right.’ Nell straightened up cautiously and looked around. Sleeps ten, the online ad had said, which had struck her as optimistic, even given the size of the place, but she had forgotten the attic. The beds here were no more than bunks, really, thin mattresses on wooden frames, two set at each side of the room, underneath the sharply pitched eaves, and separated by a narrow red rug. On the far wall, an old brick chimney snaked up to the ceiling, clinging to the white-wash. ‘Do you like it?’ she asked, keeping her tone carefully neutral. ‘Up here, I mean?’

Maude abandoned the bag on the rug and turned to look at Nell, stepping back a little, out of reach. ‘It’s OK.’ She looked hot and grubby, her hair coming loose from its ponytail; a little rounder in the face these days, a little taller too.

‘There’s a bedroom downstairs, next to the living room, you know.’

‘That’s for kids.’

‘Or the one next to the bathroom. That’s practically en-suite, if you think about it.’

‘I like it up here.’

‘It isn’t too – gloomy?’ The air was stale, still. She would be much better off downstairs, surely, closer to Nell and her father.

Maude didn't bother to answer, she went to one of the dormer windows, and after struggling with the catch for a moment, opened it as far as she could. 'I can see the roof,' she said, stretching up on tip-toe.

'Can you?' Nell stood behind her. Here, on this side, the back of the house, there was no view to speak of, just the dull grey slates and the looming cliff. Nell lay her hand on Maude's shoulder and squeezed reassuringly. 'Well. You don't have to decide right now, if you don't want to.'

Maude didn't answer. She turned and wriggled free, working her way around the room, opening the rest of the windows one by one, before facing Nell once again. 'It's OK,' she said, 'This will do.'

There was another pause. 'Are you—?' Nell began, but downstairs, the front door opened and closed, and distantly she could hear Chris calling out. Maude picked up her suitcase and set it on one of the beds, unzipping it. 'Go on,' she said, without looking up.

'Right,' said Nell, 'don't forget to ring your mum, once you're sorted.'

Maude pulled a book from the suitcase and set it carefully to one side. 'I won't,' she said.

Behind her, one of the windows shuddered, rattling in its frame as a breeze caught it; the room seemed to shift, to expand and settle again.

2

Maude took her time unpacking; not that she'd brought that much with her. One bag only, her dad had said, and it had taken her best efforts to bump that up to one suitcase and a rucksack, nagging him into slipping a couple of extra books into his stuff too.

He hadn't changed his mind about her laptop, though. They were all going to share his, that was the plan. No unsupervised internet for Maudie. Fine, she'd find a way around that as well; maybe if she asked him when he was on his own. It was always a lot easier to get her own way if Nell wasn't around.

She lay on the bed nearest the cliff – the bankside, that's what Nell called it – and a seagull shrieked somewhere up on the roof, sounding a little bit too close. She felt as though she was tucked up in a nest, a crow's nest, as if they were at sea.

She considered the view, the sloping, whitewashed ceiling and the bare beams that held everything in place. Oak, she supposed, but she wasn't really sure how a person could tell. It was interesting, the way the beams slotted together, the way the structure of the roof, the house, was revealed, like a skeleton. Especially up here, where it was all so bare.

Elder House was very old, her dad had made a point of telling her that when he'd booked it, because she liked History at school and generally got good grades in it, and apparently that was what they were concentrating on now: the positives.

She knew what he was doing, though. It was a sort of bribe, to make her go along with their stupid holiday, and when she'd asked exactly how old the house was, he'd gone all vague. He'd tried to show her stuff online, and that had actually been interesting, but he had spent so much time hovering over her shoulder, reading paragraphs aloud, watching her click on the links, she had begun to feel stifled. It had been easier in the end to close the laptop and pretend she wasn't that bothered.

Maybe she should ask again, maybe he'd leave her alone this time.

She followed the line of the central beam, tilting her head a little, watching the very last of the evening light from the dormer windows cut across the ceiling, splintering into shadows that shifted and settled in the corner of the room. They could make her join in, she thought, but they couldn't make her happy about it.

When she noticed the marks, she wasn't sure what they were at first. A scrawled date, perhaps. Or maybe someone's initials – the man who'd raised the beams leaving his name behind.

There was a wooden trunk in front of the chimney. Maybe if she yelled for her dad, he'd help her move it and . . .

No. She was still annoyed with him, with all of them, really, Nell and her mum, too. All of them going on as if she was to blame, as if nothing had changed. The way they kept telling her she had to be grown up now, *a proper big sister* now her mum had finally given birth, and her weekend visits with her and Callum had turned into stupid family days out with baby Leo always in the way. She had her own room at their house, but she could tell they didn't really want her there, not any more.

The trunk wasn't heavy, and there were rope handles. She could move it herself; she wanted it closer to the bed anyway. She could use it as a dressing table.

She dragged it into position and climbed on top.

The marks were faint, but quite deliberate, carved into the central beam that formed the ridge of the roof. She had a powerful urge to run her fingers over them, but of course she couldn't reach. She wondered who had made them, who had seen them last.

Craning her neck, tilting her head back for so long, trying to focus on the marks had made her feel dizzy, and she had to jump down from the trunk before she lost her balance entirely. It was quite pleasant, though, the light-headed rush, the way the room seemed momentarily to dip and swoop around her.

If she took the bunk closest to the cliff, then this was what she'd see when she opened her eyes first thing in the morning, and last thing at night too, half hidden in the dark; jagged peaks, a capital *N* or *M* – like an *M* for Maude – repeated over and over, and circles too, circles overlaying circles, like a flower, or a maze. She didn't want the big room with the brass bedstead, anyway. It was modern, fake. This was better; this, Maude decided, was hers.

Nell found Chris in the living room, his bag and jacket abandoned in the hall; he was sitting on the sofa, frowning at his laptop screen. 'Are you OK, love? Chris?'

'Yes. Sorry.' He looked up. 'I was just wondering what the Wi-Fi password is.'

'No idea. It'll be in the folder, I expect.'

'Which is . . . ?'

'I don't know. Where you left it?' Nell switched on the lights, then sat next to him, sinking into the cushions. Someone, she realised, should be thinking about dinner; lunch had been a long time and at least three counties ago. 'You could at least pretend not to be desperate to check your email, you know.'

Chris closed the laptop, then reached out to squeeze her hand. 'Sorry.'

'Hmm.'

'How is she?'

Nell glanced involuntarily at the ceiling. 'Hard to say. She's decided she wants to sleep in the attic.'

'That sounds suitably Dickensian for the poor suffering child.'

'Hmm. Did you manage to do your usual thing with that woman, the unhappy blonde?'

'Usual thing?' Chris's face was a study in mock outrage. 'I'm sure I don't know what you mean.'

'I'm sure you don't too.' Nell stretched out her legs. 'But she went away happy, yeah?'

'She was a bit pissed off about the car, because did we know we were blocking access to the whole yard. But I apologised very nicely, and told her we wouldn't make a habit of it.'

'That's my boy.'

'I think her bark is worse than her bite. She seemed friendly enough, once we'd got things settled. I had the distinct feeling she was angling to be asked in.'

'Wow. Fast work, love. Even for you.'

He shrugged. 'Well, you've either got it or you haven't.'

Nell considered her husband. He looked worried, she thought, underneath the smile and the easy charm. There was something going on, and she might have asked, if she hadn't heard Maude coming down the stairs.

She poked her head around the door. 'I'm hungry.'

'Did you ring Jess?' asked Nell.

Maude rolled her eyes. 'Yes. And I'm still hungry.'

'Right.' Chris shook himself free and put the laptop to one side and stood. 'Fish and chips all round, then?'

Nell nodded. It had been a long day, that was all, she thought,

a long drive with too many delays, and nothing more than that. She should have insisted they break the journey; it wasn't as if there had been any need to rush. 'Sure,' she said. 'That would be great.'

Chris said it would be quicker if he went on his own, which meant Nell was left behind, in charge of Maude and the kitchen.

They played around with the switches, working out which one matched each range of lights, the small halogen bulbs that were embedded in the ceiling and the showier adjustable spot-lights over the kitchen counters and the oven. But it didn't matter what they did, what combination they tried, they couldn't seem to make the room quite bright enough.

'Right,' she said, 'that will have to do. Plates. Cutlery. Glasses.'

There was a certain pleasure in opening the cupboards, in discovering where things were kept, in passing judgement on the owners' taste; it was as if they were trying on someone else's life for a while. Someone with expensive tastes, was Nell's verdict, even if everything did feel impersonal, cold.

'There's no salt,' she said as Maude set the table, 'and we need vinegar too.' She opened the fridge. 'There's butter, and they left us some milk, but we'll need more.'

'You should write it down,' said Maude.

'I should,' Nell said, 'or maybe you could write it for me?'

That was a request too far, though, Maude simply sighed and fussed with the knives and forks on the table.

Nell opened the welcome pack, fishing out the coffee. 'Can you find us some mugs, please?'

'I don't want coffee.'

'And you don't have to have it.'

'I want a cold drink.'

Nell took a deep breath. Maude was tired, she reminded herself; they all were. ‘Coke?’

‘Diet. Please.’

‘I’d better ring your dad, then,’ said Nell. ‘Have you seen my phone?’

‘Dunno. In your bag?’

‘Have you seen my bag?’ Nell looked around the kitchen. She must have left it in the living room.

It was almost fully dark now, but even with everything switched on, including the lamp in the window, the front room too remained on the gloomy side. She retrieved her phone, but as she swiped the screen she noticed the battery was low.

‘Shit.’

She rummaged in her bag. No charger. It was, she suspected, still in the car, the car now at the other end of the street in the residents’ car park.

Still holding her phone she went back into the kitchen. ‘Maude, can I borrow—’ Maude was standing completely still, looking up at the ceiling. ‘Maudie?’

‘The lights went out,’ said Maude. ‘Here.’ She pointed to the spotlights over the dining table.

‘Right.’

‘It wasn’t me.’

‘I switched on the lights in the other room. Maybe we’ve tripped a fuse.’

The fuse box was in a corner cupboard above the work-top. ‘See?’ One switch was down and the others were all in place. Nell flicked it back up and the lights blinked on again. ‘Sorted.’

She closed the cupboard door and the room seemed to dim again. The spotlights above the counter blinked out. Nell swore

softly, and opened the cupboard again. The next fuse in the row had tripped. 'Fine.' Nell pushed it back into place and they stood waiting, the two of them, just in case it happened again.

'OK.' Nell closed the door gently, as if that would somehow make a difference. 'Can I use your phone?'

'What for?' Maude's tone was defensive.

'To ring your dad?'

'What for?'

'To get him to pick up some more milk, and some Diet Coke, for you. Come on, Maude, please, there's no need to be so . . . Mine is pretty much dead. Please.'

After a long pause Maude pulled the phone out of her jeans pocket and handed it over. 'Here,' she said.

The phone was locked, but Nell knew the password.

Maude watched her closely as she tapped at the screen, hitting the icon to call Chris – but nothing happened. Nell frowned. 'There's not much of a signal,' she said turning to look out of the window at the bankside. 'We're too close, I suppose.' She tried the kitchen door, but it was locked. She went into the hall and opened the front door, stepping out into the chilly evening air with Maude following close behind. The call connected at last, but went through to voicemail almost immediately.

'Damn,' said Nell softly, turning away from Maude. 'Chris, can you fetch some milk back with you, and some Diet Coke for Maude and – I don't know – some salt, vinegar—'

'Chocolate,' said Maude, 'and ice cream.'

'Did you hear that? Chocolate and ice cream too, please.' Nell ended the call. She should have thought to check about the mobile signal, they used to have the same problem at her dad's house.

'Can I have it back now?' Maude was staring at her, hand extended.

Nell glanced down at the phone. There was nothing on there that shouldn't have been, no icons for email or the internet. All that had been carefully removed by Chris. Maude's phone was being used for calls and texts only; she barely even used it as a camera these days.

'Sure.' She handed it back. 'Thanks.'

One of them should check her messages, of course, but maybe she'd get Chris to do that later. They should unlock the kitchen door too, she thought, as they went back inside, another job to go on the list.

Chris returned to the house with fish and chips for three, a family-sized bottle of Diet Coke and a pocketful of Kit-Kats. No ice cream, no milk, though.

'Sorry,' he said as he helped Nell plate up the food. 'I didn't see you'd called.'

'We'll live,' said Nell, 'as long as there's something sweet for madam.'

'Well, I do know my girl.'

'Who were you talking to?' – Maude was hovering behind them – 'when Nell rang?'

'What?' Chris concentrated on transferring a piece of fish to a plate.

'She couldn't get through. So who were you talking to?'

'No one,' said Chris. 'Work. Sam. I just wanted to—' Above them the lights flickered and died.

'Not again,' said Nell.

'I told you it wasn't me,' said Maude.

'I never said it was.' Nell opened the cupboard. 'It's an old house, and underneath all the improvements, the electrics are still a bit . . .' She flipped the switch back up. 'Dodgy.'

'That's a technical term, is it?' said Chris.

‘Funny,’ said Nell.

‘Yeah. Funny,’ said Maude, picking up her plate and taking it to the table.

Maude didn’t really mind washing-up when she got to do it with her dad, although she always made a point of complaining, just so they both knew she was doing them a favour. Sometimes it was the only part of the day they got to spend together, just the two of them.

He hadn’t thought to buy washing-up liquid, but luckily there was a bottle hidden away in the cupboard under the sink. There was a supply of bin liners and a dustpan and brush, and other cleaning things too. She supposed the owners wanted their house left nice and tidy.

‘You all right then, Maggot?’ That was an old nickname, from before. He only ever used it when he wanted to make up for something.

‘Suppose so.’

‘And you’re all right up in the attic?’

‘Yup.’ She made a point of drying the plate she was holding particularly carefully. She wondered if she should ask about the internet again.

‘It’s not too lonely up there?’

‘Nope.’ She turned the plate over, dried the back of it. She could feel him looking at her, considering his next move.

‘Well, OK then.’ He tipped the washing-up bowl into the sink, and they both watched the suds circle and swirl. He might be interested in the marks in the attic, Maude thought. They could go up and take a look together, just the two of them. In the living room they heard Nell switch the TV on, the familiar theme for the news wafting through the open door. The lights over the sink wavered a bit, then settled.

Her dad dried his hands. 'Shall we go and find something fun to watch?' he said.

She was supposed to say yes, obviously.

'If you like.' She added the plate to the pile. 'I'll put these away first.'

She could hear them talking as she returned the plates to the right cupboard. Talking about her, probably, and how unreasonable she was being. She folded the tea towel and hung it carefully where she'd found it, on the handle of the oven door. She didn't really want to go and join in, she'd rather be on her own; but then again, she didn't really see why they should get to spend the night together, all cosy, as if everything was all right.

She switched off the lights by the sink and the kitchen suddenly seemed smaller, closer, and the dining table, still illuminated by overhead lights, very far away. Outside, in the street beyond the yard, someone called out to a friend. Maude couldn't quite hear what they were saying, then someone laughed and their footsteps faded away.

She stretched up and opened the cupboard that held the fuse box. The fuses were all labelled, kitchen, range, dining area, living room, hall. She was tempted for a moment to flip one just to see what would happen. That was a stupid idea. She closed the cupboard door and stood for a while, gazing out of the kitchen window, into the dark.