

# Thea and Denise

**‘Oh, you’re not crazy, Denise. I think this is  
probably the sanest you’ve ever been...’**

**Two women. An open road. The trip of a lifetime.**

Thea is confident, sorted, determined to have fun, but  
there are sorrows beneath the surface of her life.

Denise is struggling under the weight of her many  
commitments and in desperate need of  
some excitement.

When these polar opposites meet, and unexpectedly  
become friends, they realise they’re both looking  
to escape.

So begins a road trip that leads them far from home  
and yet closer to their true selves.

But they can’t outrun their pasts forever and when  
things start to become complicated, both women  
have an important decision to make. Do they give up  
or keep going? Turn around or drive on?

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caroline bond



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<PLACEHOLDER>



# Prologue

THE SKY was filled with purple-tinted clouds.

The sun was coming up.

The roof was down.

The roads were clear.

Thea drove fast, following the smooth contours of the coast road with ease. Denise tilted her head back and felt the warmth of the new day hit her face.

They were mistresses of their universe.

As the sun rose higher the road started to narrow and climb. After a few miles Thea turned off. A plume of dust rose in their wake as they rolled and bumped along the unmarked track. Denise had no idea where they were. They drove on, away from or towards something – she no longer cared.

After another ten minutes or so Thea swung the car around a bend and brought it to a stop.

They'd reached the end of the road.

In front of them was a stretch of scrubby grass, the sky and the cliff edge. Away to the left, on the headland, sat

a lighthouse, a curiously squat affair topped with a black-capped dome. Beyond it the coast unfurled in a seemingly never-ending series of rocky inlets. Denise heard the sea heaving and crashing somewhere far below. Above them the gulls wheeled and screamed.

‘Where the hell are we?’

‘St Abb’s Head.’ The wind whipped Thea’s hair across her face. ‘Isn’t it beautiful?’

‘It is.’

They sat, side-by-side, taking in the view. The grandeur of it silenced them both. They’d been travelling together for barely a week, but in that moment Denise felt closer to Thea than she had to anyone else in her entire life. She wanted Thea to know that. ‘You’re a good friend.’

Thea smiled. ‘You, too.’

Denise breathed in the fresh, sharp air. She caught sight of her reflection in Thea’s sunglasses: her hair a mess, not a scrap of make-up on her face, her nose and cheeks tinged red with sunburn. She looked good. Even more importantly, she felt good – the best she’d felt in a very long time. So much had changed since they’d left home, not least Denise herself. She was a different person, happier, freer, braver, and that was due, in large part, to the woman sitting next to her.

They fell silent again, reflecting on what they’d learnt about themselves, and each other, over the past few hectic, revelatory days.

Indifferent to the presence of such wise women in their midst, the gulls rose and fell at the cliff edge. Their screaming and flapping reminded Denise of the problems mounting



and massing at their backs. Real life was going to catch up with them eventually. They couldn't keep running for ever.

Although up on that wild, isolated promontory, with the sun shining down on them and the wind blowing in off the sea, it felt like perhaps they could.

'So,' Denise finally asked, 'what do you want to do now?'

Thea looked at the limitless sky stretching out beyond the cliff edge and said, 'Keep going.'



# PART ONE



# Chapter 1

SHE WOKE up on fire.

Desperate to get some air onto her molten skin, she began kicking at the bedcovers. Her nightie clung to her like a sick child. It fought back as she attempted to drag it off, entangling itself with her arms and sticking to her face. She panicked. Her heart thudded and her breath caught in her throat. For a split second she wondered if this was what waterboarding felt like, but immediately discounted the thought as hysterical. Free at last, she threw her nightie on the floor. She reached for the glass of water on her bedside table and glugged down as much as she could manage, trying to put out the flames. The sensation of the cold water trickling down the insides of her stomach was unpleasant. Stripped and doused, she leant back, closed her eyes and waited for the inferno to die down.

It did so quickly, the heat radiating off her in waves. The slick of sweat that had coated her body only minutes earlier evaporated, leaving behind a deep chill and a tightness that felt like black pepper under her skin. She reached for the

duvet and pulled it up around her. As the shaking subsided and her body slowly unclenched, something close to normal bodily function finally returned.

Released from the grip of her night sweat, Denise regrouped and began her second battle of the night – hand-to-hand combat with her brain.

Tonight the battalion of worries was fronted by a number of seemingly intractable work issues, but soon other concerns joined the assault, chief amongst them her sons. There was Aaron's stormy relationship with his girlfriend, Millie – they seemed to do nothing but fight, make up, then start all over again, often over the course of a single day. There was Lewis's future – if his A-level results were as bad as she was expecting, God knew what he was going to do. He couldn't play golf for the rest of his life. Next her mind pivoted to her youngest, Joe, and his persistent acne, and the impact it was having on his confidence. The weight of worry never seemed to get any lighter. Indeed, as her sons headed into adulthood, she found herself increasingly at a loss as to how to help, what to do or say to make it better. A hug and a kiss no longer cut it. Then there was Eric, her ageing father-in-law, who consumed so much of her time and offered so little in return, other than bad temper and military statistics. And down there, right at the bottom of a list that she should surely be near the top of, was her eighty-three-year-old mother, Lilian, hundreds of miles away in the North-East, alone in her little cottage by the sea. How long was it since Denise had spoken to her mum properly, without having her eye on her emails or her attention directed elsewhere? How long since she'd been to see her? Months!

Having exhausted her stock of family anxieties, Denise's brain fought wearily on, skirmishing with a myriad of smaller guilts and concerns. Before she knew it, she was worrying about the cracked drawer in the freezer, and whether she'd texted the joiner with the right measurements for the shelves they were having fitted in the dining room.

Enough! She knew worry was wasted energy.

She scrunched up her toes and released them ten times. She focused on each vertebra in her spine, imagining them aligned in a smooth curve. She tried to breathe from her diaphragm, resting her hand on her belly to check she was doing it correctly. She visualised being by the sea, imagined the soothing sound of the waves, the fresh air, the sense of peace she always felt when she was close to water. She rolled over onto her front and tried to channel her inner child. She rolled onto her side and counted her blessings.

Nothing worked.

She threw in the towel at 1.16 a.m. She simply couldn't face lying there any longer, staring into the darkness, listening to her husband, Simon, sleep, peacefully unaware of her nocturnal battles.

*Trying to get to sleep* was such a contradiction. Sleep was not responsive to effort. Once you started trying, you were doomed, as she knew from bitter experience. She slid out of bed, mindful of not disturbing Simon. He had a meeting down in Southampton in the morning. The alarm was set for 5.45 a.m. Four and a half hours. Not long if you had an early start; an eternity if you were awake and fretting. She shrugged on her old towelling dressing gown, crossed the landing quietly and crept downstairs.

A darkened house, with everyone else dead to the world, was one of the loneliest places on the planet. Denise chided herself for the thought. Of course that wasn't true. A teenager sleeping rough on the streets, a prisoner in a locked cell, a security guard patrolling an empty office block, an arthritic old lady sitting up in her chair, alone with her fading memories – the list of lonelier places and circumstances was endless, and deeply depressing. She really needed to limit her news intake before bed.

She switched on the under-cupboard lights in the kitchen, feeling reassured by their warm glow. As she waited for the kettle to boil, she moved the plate and knife from someone's evening snack to the sink, swept the crumbs off the worktop into her hand, threw them away and returned the loaf to the bread bin, twisting the bag shut as she did so. Then, despite having made a pact with herself that she wouldn't, she looked at her phone. There was, as always, a tranche of new emails. The downside of dealing internationally was that someone, somewhere, was always awake, working and awaiting a response. She skim-read through her messages, mentally prioritising them. That done, she composed a polite, but firm email to the supplier in San Francisco, reiterating her take on the latest supply issues and stressing the importance of it all being sorted before the next shipment.

Having corralled some of her 'work monkeys' into order ready for the morning, she felt a little better. She slipped her phone back into the pocket of her dressing gown and made herself a mug of tea. Proper tea, not camomile for Denise – it was bad enough being awake in the middle of the night, without drinking hot bath water. These small acts of



distraction helped. The relentless, flickering spool of things to be done or sorted that played almost constantly inside her head slowed, their projection dimmed.

Denise knew she was lucky.

She had a close family: a faithful husband, three strapping sons and a mother who, although old, was fit and independent. She lived in a nice home and had a good job that, although busy and demanding, fitted around her family responsibilities. She had safety, security and more than enough money to keep the wolf from the door. Indeed, she – or, rather, they as a family – had the financial resources to track any wolf that might be found lurking in the manicured gardens of St Albans, humanely capture it and ship it off to Alaska, to be released back into the wild with its brethren. She was essentially a well-off, moderately healthy middle-aged woman. She had absolutely nothing to complain about. Nothing substantial going on in her life to explain her current sense of frustration, dissatisfaction and all-round off-kilterness.

Cradling her drink, Denise wandered through to the lounge. It was cast in silvery-grey moonlight, which made it look like an old black-and-white film set, although she was hardly rocking a Joan Crawford housecoat and chignon. She was wide awake now. She walked over to the window. Glanced out. The garden looked tempting. She imagined the cool grass under the soles of her feet, her dressing-gown hem soaking up the damp, the breeze on her skin. Perhaps she'd have a chance encounter with some nocturnal creature: a cat, a fox perhaps, maybe even one of those pesky wolves of her overactive imagination. Isn't that what always

happened when characters in films went on solitary strolls in the moonlight? An image of a beautiful tousled-haired, footsore Reese Witherspoon and her equally beautiful red fox encountering each other in the snowy expanses in *Wild* popped into Denise's head.

No! She couldn't start wandering around the lawn in her dressing gown. That really would be tantamount to accepting that she was going slightly insane.

Denise raised her gaze from the empty lawn. The houses over the road were in total darkness. There was no face at an upper window, no crime of passion taking place for her to observe and become embroiled in. She was a witness to nothing. It was still and quiet and exactly what you'd expect of a good area, with nice neighbours, who – beyond the occasional polite 'hello' – kept themselves, and their business, very much to themselves.

Denise pulled herself away from the lack of drama, accepting that she was destined to while away the next couple of hours awake and unaccompanied by man or beast, or at least not by any real ones.

## Chapter 2

Thea was late back. Very late. She clattered up the stairwell to her front door and let herself into the apartment. Once inside, she unstrapped her pretty, but excruciatingly uncomfortable sandals and kicked them off. They made a satisfying noise as they bounced along the floor, before coming to rest against the base of the huge brushed-steel plant pot that was artfully positioned in front of the middle window. Bullseye! Able to walk once again without wincing, Thea roved around the apartment switching on lamps, flooding her high-ceilinged, tastefully furnished home in light. There was no one else around to disturb, despite the late hour. Ella was with her father, again. It was, apparently, *more convenient for hockey practice*. She seemed to be staying with him more and more often these days. Thea crushed that vein of thought before it could start pulsing and pushing the old familiar jealousy around her well-dressed body. Tonight was not about her being a mother and the co-parent of a teenage daughter.

Music! That's what was needed. Some tunes to prolong the mood.

She chose Beyoncé, 'Best Thing I Never Had'. Not a bad anthem, at any time of day or night. Thea whacked up the volume, letting her spiritual sister sing out loud and proud. There were upsides to living in the middle of town. The primary one being that she had no real neighbours to speak of or consider. Her apartment sat on top of a row of offices that were empty outside of working hours. Admittedly there was no outdoor space, but there was what felt like acres of space inside.

Thea had found the apartment by pure chance a few years back. She'd been walking past the estate agent on Catherine Street when she saw one of the sales staff in the window adding a new property to the display boards. An architect-designed, newly converted 'unique living space' on the High Street, at a price she could in no way afford. Thea's attention had been snagged. After months of arguing that it was imperative she and Ella stay in the family home, she found herself going inside and asking to view the property. She'd fallen in love with it the minute she stepped over the threshold, negotiated as best she could – given that it was blindingly obvious she wanted the place – and had her offer accepted that same evening, all without saying a word to daughter, or her estranged husband, Marc.

Some things were just meant to be.

Despite the ongoing stress of paying the mortgage, not once in the intervening five years had Thea ever regretted her decision. The apartment was as different from their old house as it could possibly be, but that had been the whole

point. A fresh start, of her own choosing, in surroundings with no memories and no associations, 2B The High Street, Harpenden had lived up to its promise. It had gifted Thea light and space, and the perfect mix of privacy with a simultaneous sense of being in the middle of things. Living in the apartment, she found the constant thrum of other people's lives going on outside reassuring, soothing even. Its position above the action, but not removed from it, gave her connection without direct contact. Most people were unaware that there was residential accommodation above the office fronts. Very few ever looked up and wondered who lived behind the tinted windows on the upper floors of the stylish old buildings that lined the High Street.

So what, if living on a different level from everyone else led to complications.

The day she and Ella had moved in, the removal van had caused a tailback all the way to the Common. Deliveries were a nightmare – parcels ended up left in dustbins or with one of the shop owners. And the parking at the back of the building was a very tight squeeze – hence trading in her much-loved Audi for the Mini. But none of the hassle of town-centre living really bothered Thea, because she loved her new home. It made her feel invincible.

Free of her vertiginous heels, Thea danced around her expensive, but very lovely home, feeling the buzz of alcohol and excitement zipping around her bloodstream.

She had been on a real date.

The first in a very long time.

A nice restaurant.

A nice man.

A nice evening.

Small things, perhaps. No, that wasn't true – they were big things.

Men paid Thea quite a lot of attention. She had the looks and the attitude that attracted them. In theory she had plenty of options and opportunities, but in reality the type of men who showed an interest in her wanted sex more than they wanted anything else. True, she sometimes wanted sex too, but rarely did she want it badly enough to lower the reassuring barriers that she'd built around herself since her divorce. The couple of drink-oiled encounters that she had gone through with – in hotel rooms far away from her home, her daughter and her professional life – had been okay, but who wanted a life based on okay and the cover of darkness?

Thea shimmied another circuit around the sofas, swaying her hips and shaking her ass – once more for luck. Not that she believed in random good fortune, but she didn't want to jinx this tentative feeling of excitement and hope.

Tonight she had spent time with a nice man.

A man who seemed to like her.

A man she liked in return.

A man who wasn't Marc.

For a start, the nice man was taller than Marc – that was a bonus. His height had made her feel dainty. He had the kind of physique that seemed eminently capable of encircling you and keeping you safe. It was so Mills & Boon she should be ashamed of herself, but she wasn't. He had made her feel feminine, and Thea had liked that. True, the nice man did have hair that was worryingly similar to Marc's – close-cropped, lightly greying – but that similarity was

offset by his totally different face. The nice man had a more prominent nose, slightly thinner lips and less noticeably blue eyes. That wasn't to say he wasn't good-looking. He was, just in a different way. Because, somehow, despite his physique, the nice man had seemed slightly less masculine – though not in a bad way. Perhaps that was down to his voice, which, though warm, educated and courteous, was not as deep as Marc's.

Yes, all in all, it had been a very pleasant surprise that the nice man had been as nice in person as he had seemed on his profile and in his messages, and that was something worth celebrating. Thea threw herself down on one of the sofas and stretched out.

And he had asked to see her again.

He'd come straight out with it, in the middle of the meal, laying his cards face up on the table, no bluffing or faking or playing games. She'd liked that about him as well: the directness. She'd declined to give him an immediate answer, of course. Instead she'd excused herself and gone to the Ladies to... *freshen up*. A phrase she never used. *Coy* was not in her repertoire – *hard to get*, that was a different matter. In the harsh glare of the mirror she'd studied herself, trying to see what he was seeing, to work out what it was about her that was calling to him. In it she saw a woman who looked good for her age, which was forty-nine. Or perhaps good for any age. Almond-shaped, blue eyes. Good brows. It was a strong face with well-proportioned and positioned features. Features she had inherited from her mother. Thea had seen a programme once about the science of attraction and had been proud to be able to tick many of the 'required' boxes

to qualify as a conventional beauty, totally aware – even as she was congratulating herself – that her face was purely the product of genes.

What were this woman's faults? Or at least what were her visible flaws? Her internal flaws could wait – wasn't that the joy of a new relationship, the ability to keep things hidden, at least for a little while? Thea rotated her head through 180 degrees to get a better view of herself. There was her mouth. It was a touch too wide and filled with gappy teeth that 1980s orthodontics had never quite fixed. And there was her nose: it had a bump on the bridge – the legacy of an old hockey injury – that no amount of concealer could conceal. But on balance, Thea thought these imperfections added character to her appearance.

But the key ingredient that the mirror captured was confidence. The woman in the mirror met Thea's scrutiny full on and returned it, with interest. Hopefully it was that strength of character, as much as her conventional good looks, that was intriguing the nice man, who was – as she preened – sitting at their table in the crowded restaurant fiddling with the stem of his wine glass, waiting for her. Thea touched her lips with a dab of colour and adjusted her neckline – in his favour.

She'd returned to the table, slid into her seat and they'd talked on long into the night, convincing themselves of each other's potential. And as they chatted and sipped their wine, and were sublimely oblivious to the other customers finishing their meals and melting away, Thea had given the nice man, who was not Marc, a hundred small gestures of encouragement, but no actual promises.



At the end of the evening, when the last waiter left standing finally ushered them out of the restaurant and locked the door behind them, she'd declined to allow him to escort her home; indeed, she'd insisted that he didn't, thereby asserting her independence and protecting, for now, the sanctity of her address.

Beyoncé started in on 'Sorry'. Thea clicked her off. The apartment fell quiet, or as quiet as it ever got with the almost constant sound of traffic and the sporadic bursts of drunken shouting from the street below. It was time for bed. She had work in the morning. She retraced her steps, turning off the lights as she went. She didn't extinguish all of them. Thea always left the floor lamp near the front door on. A nightlight for a daughter, who no longer needed it, especially when she wasn't there.

Despite the late hour, Thea stuck to her routine. She undressed, slipped on her dressing gown, hung up her dress, threw her underwear in the laundry basket and laid her clothes out ready for the morning. She removed her make-up thoroughly, slapped some moisturiser on her face, then brushed her hair twenty times, silently saying goodnight to her mother as she did so. Night-time ritual complete, she climbed into bed and turned off the light.

Thea was reliant on her own body heat to take the edge of the coolness of her king-sized cotton sheets, just as she was reliant on herself for so many things. It took a little while. In the darkness she brought her hand to her face. She followed the bony contours of her cheeks and her nose with her fingertips, explored the smoothness of her cheeks and the fullness of her lips. She ran her fingers along her jaw

and down her neck. She lightly stroked the fragile thinness of the skin of her breastbone, before moving on to the soft weight of her breasts.

Gently, slowly, lovingly she traced herself into existence.

She stopped, broke contact with her body, arousal crowded out by more complicated emotions.

She laid her hand on her stomach, let it rest there for a few seconds, feeling her tummy rise and fall. Instinctively her fingertips found the top of the scar. She ran her fingers along the full length of it. Each dent, bump and pucker was as familiar to her as her face. The skin along the ridge was smooth and shiny now, the passage of time reducing the violence done to her to something almost, but not quite, benign.

The scar was her proof of life, but it was also a marker of how close to death she'd been.

She had fought and won.

She had been hurt, but healed.

Whether she'd fully recovered was another matter entirely.