



CHAPTER 1

It was Friday the thirteenth of August, and the first day of Orla Perry's summer holiday. Tall for her twelve years with straggly red hair and green eyes that sometimes looked blue, Orla was pretty excited about what was to be her first real holiday since she was nine. Her brothers, Richard and Tom – fifteen and ten respectively – not so much. The bickering had started before they'd left London – caught up in rush-hour traffic because, all but one of them agreed, Richard had spent too long doing his hair.

Now the five of them – Mum and Richard in the front, Orla and Tom in the back, and Dave the dog wedged in with the luggage – were sat in a steamed-up hatchback in a fifteen-mile tailback somewhere west of Exeter on the A38. Richard's surfboard was strapped to the roof, Lady Gaga was on the radio and the windscreen wipers were waving like festival fans. Outside, the sky was the same colour as the road and a fine drizzle filled the air like static.

"Are we nearly there yet?" whined Tom. He'd been

asking the same question every five minutes for four and three-quarter hours and clearly still thought it was funny.

“Shut up,” growled Mum. “Ask me that one more time and I’ll drive us straight back to London.”

“Are we nearly there yet?” chorused Tom and Richard in unison.

“Ungrateful swines,” muttered Mum.

“What I don’t get is why we’ve left a perfectly good house in a modern city to drive all the way to Cornwall to stay in a shack in the woods,” said Tom. He had a practical approach to life.

“It’s not a shack in the woods,” said Mum.

“Yes, it is,” retorted Richard. “I looked it up. There’s some woods, and a shack.”

“It’s a traditional Cornish cottage in a peaceful location near the charming village of Poldevel, and only five minutes’ walk from a secluded beach,” recited Mum.

“It’s a shack in the woods miles from anywhere,” insisted Richard.

“It’s a *free* shack in the woods,” corrected Mum. “And it was very kind of Mrs Spark to lend it to us.”

“Who exactly is this Mrs Spark?” asked Richard.

“She’s an old friend of Mrs Cottrall’s,” said Mum.

“Mrs Cottrall is weird,” muttered Tom. “I bet her friend’s traditional Cornish shack is weird too.”

“Mrs Cottrall is not weird,” said Mum. “She’s a church warden.”

“Do we even know if there’s electricity in this shack?” asked Richard a little later.

Mum sighed as the traffic came to a halt again. “She said there’s an Internet router, so there must be.”

“Only Wi-Fi is going to make this week bearable,” Richard warned.

Orla smiled and gazed out of the window. The sheep looked like crash-landed clouds, and she liked the weird hills, with their Mohican haircuts of trees. Most of all, she loved the sensation of travel – the fizzing excitement of heading into the unknown. She opened her backpack and ran her hands over her kit: the penknife her dad had given her, her pencil case, a silent whistle for Dave the dog that he resolutely ignored, a torch, a notebook, a first aid kit and some plastic gloves she’d grabbed at a petrol station because it was better to have things and not need them than need things and not have them.

And Malasana.

She felt a twinge of embarrassment, followed by a rush of guilt, as she squeezed the old rag doll. Her dad had given her Malasana on the day she was born, and even though she knew she was too old to be cuddling a doll, Malasana, with her crazy black hair and her gypsy dress, was an old

friend, and Orla was certain that she brought her good luck.

In the back, perched atop a shifting stack of suitcases and groceries, Dave was planning his move. Eight years old, with short legs and an even shorter temper, his job was head of household security, specializing in close protection and threat detection. No one else in the car had ever appreciated that. To them, the grizzled black and white Jack Russell terrier was a grumpy pet who gave postmen a hard time. And wouldn't stay put in the back of cars.

Dave crept forward, keeping his head down. Incursions into the passenger cabin of the car were always tricky operations, hampered by angry protests from hostile civilians. One option was to jump. The other was to creep, on the off chance he wouldn't be noticed. He went with option two.

"Muuuummm," cried Tom. "Dave's making a move."

"Dave," barked Mum. "Get in the back."

"Get back, Dave," shouted Richard.

Orla smiled. She knew how this would end.

Dave ignored everybody. He clambered over Tom's shoulders, dropped onto the seat, then climbed over Orla's lap to reach the window.

"He's farted," wailed Tom.

Orla scratched him behind the ear. "I think he's just excited to be going on holiday," she said.

* * *

Predictably, they got lost. Orla woke up – with Dave still on her lap – to hear Mum and Richard arguing over directions and thunder that exploded like bombs. Outside, blue bolts of lightning pierced the wet, black night and hard rain fell like nuts and bolts on the roof of the car.

"We have absolutely no idea where we're going," confessed Mum. She sounded tired.

"It's left," said Orla, wondering how she could be so certain.

Richard spun to glare at her. "Don't confuse matters."

"It's left," she insisted. "Then left again, right at the fork, straight down the hill and left again immediately after the bridge."

"You sound very certain about that," said Mum slowly, studying Orla in the rear-view mirror as though she'd just heard a squirrel quote Shakespeare. "How can you be so sure?"

Orla shrugged. "Dunno. But I bet I'm right."

She was too.

They knew when they saw the tiny, hand-painted sign in the hedge. Richard turned and gave Orla a *how the hell?* look. Orla smiled. The red paint spelled out Konnyck Veau, and an arrow pointed down a muddy track through a tunnel of trees that swayed back and forth like great

black sails ripped loose from a mast.

“Looks like a painting by a psychopath,” observed Tom, as lightning flashed and thunder followed. No one disagreed.

They rolled carefully down the rutted track until the car headlights picked out a white cottage in a clearing. Then they sat and stared for a few moments.

“This is it, kids,” said Mum. “A traditional Cornish cottage in a secluded location. *Not* a shack.”

“It looks like the sort of house where people are murdered,” said Richard.

“Don’t be so dramatic,” chided Mum.

Dave was coiled like a spring, ready to leap into action the moment anyone opened a door. Orla was first to oblige, and he could hear their cries of indignation as he slipped into the night, nose close to the ground. They could moan all they liked about muddy paws, but the first priority of a security professional when arriving at a new base was to check the entire area for threats. And wee up the odd tree.

It took twenty minutes to lug everything into the cottage. Orla thought it was amazing, with its dark slate floor, rough plastered walls, antique cooker and plastic wall clock that looked like it had stopped in 1972. Creaky wooden stairs led up to three bedrooms and a bathroom with a cast-iron

bathtub, a fluffy pink mat and a loose window that rattled in the gale.

As she was admiring the retro vibe, Tom dashed past.

“This room’s mine,” he yelled.

“No way,” protested Orla. “I get the single room because I’m the only girl.”

Tom threw himself onto the bed and shook his head. “Sorry, mate. Too late.” A sudden thunderclap made him jump, and the lights flickered.

Richard appeared. “I’m taking this room,” he announced, “so get off my bed, squirt.”

“He’s not on your bed,” growled Orla, blocking the doorway. “He’s on mine.”

Richard pushed past her, scouting the room for plug sockets. “You two can share,” he said. “I need privacy.” He looked up at them in mock surprise, his floppy hair falling across his face. “Still here, children? Jog on.”

“Orla!” It was Mum, calling from the bottom of the stairs. “I’m not letting that filthy dog into this house until you’ve rubbed him down.”

Orla frowned. “Why me?”

“Because you let him out of the car. Go and fetch the dog towel from the boot.”

It should have taken Orla a few seconds to find Dave’s grotty old towel and return to the cottage, but that would

have meant missing the show. Instead, she stood in the pouring rain, watching the lightning and grinning like a kid at a firework display. She'd hoped there would be barn owls or tawny owls in these woods, but no owl with an ounce of wisdom would be out tonight. That would be good news for the rabbits. The soggy rabbits. A long, low rumble of thunder rolled across the sky, fleeing a whiplash crack that seemed to knock the leaves from the trees.

That, decided Orla, deserved a round of applause, and it was only when she felt the cold water running down her spine that she remembered the task in hand. She popped the boot and grabbed the towel, and as she slammed the hatch another flash lit up the clearing. For a millisecond, Orla was certain she saw a hooded figure watching her. Then, as the thunder trundled down the valley, it was gone.

All was quiet but for the drumming of the rain and the swish of the trees. Orla frowned into the darkness for a few moments, then shook her head.

"Trick of the light," she decided, and without a backwards glance she went indoors.

By the time Dave was decontaminated, the bedroom dispute had been settled. Mum had one double room, the boys the other and Orla took the coveted single room at the front. But there was now a much bigger problem.

"The bloody Wi-Fi doesn't work," wailed Richard.

A crack of thunder rattled the windows.

"Maybe the storm knocked out the signal," said Mum wearily.

"I'm going to die," said Richard. He turned away from the blinking router, looking plaintively at Mum, Tom and Orla. "I'm serious," he said. "I can't live for a week in the woods without Wi-Fi."

Mum poured herself a glass of wine. "Don't be ridiculous," she said. "Think of this as a digital detox."

Luckily, the TV worked, in a fuzzy, three-channel, 1970s kind of way. They ate supermarket pizza and then, exhausted, went to bed. Outside, the lightning flashed, the thunder growled and the storm thrashed like a trapped shark in the trees.