

# Lightning Never Strikes Twice

My first husband had always loved the Isles of Scilly, ever since he was a boy. At one time his father owned a cottage on the edge of Carn Morval Down, so Oliver was as familiar with St Mary's as he was with his own face. We honeymooned here, two love-struck young newlyweds filled with hope for our future together.

For someone brought up in the industrial griminess of Wolverhampton he had an intense passion for the sea. Perhaps it was an ancestral spirit reminding him his past was rooted deep in some far-off Scandinavian land.

When God knitted my DNA in its unique double helix he dropped that particular stitch. I was never taken by the sea, certainly not the grey and angry sea dashing against the rock-strewn St Mary's coastline. That ineluctable sea, with its power to destroy, terrifies me. One day, I stumbled across a book, *Ships, Shipwrecks and Maritime Incidents around the Isles of Scilly*, and bought it for Oliver, thinking it was a fiction full of romantic maritime tales. Only when I came to write a dedication in it did I realise it was a catalogue of poor souls who had lost their lives in these boiling waters. Oliver laughed at my pusillanimity, saying Neptune would only turn his attention to you if you took him for granted. I would not be convinced, so he never pressured me if an opportunity arose to jump aboard a boat and cross the water to the nearby islands of Treco and St Martin's. Instead, we contented ourselves with exploring the coastline and looping round Old Town, Higher Moors, Maypole and Porthloo. He never complained, but if his nostrils caught a salty tang he would look out to sea as if a Siren's enchanting song had wafted in on the breeze.

Now here I am again, gazing at my reflection in the window of my B&B room, turning back the years in my mind.

Remember this place, Oliver? Of course you do. This is where we made love, laughed, and learned about each other. This is where you laid out your plans for our future in words that painted such a brilliant picture on the blank canvas of my adoring mind.

This is the place I never wanted to see again.

You were always good with words, even your last ones. You could make arsenic sound as appetizing as strawberries and cream.

*Don't worry, Eleanor. Yacht racing offshore is no more dangerous than skiing. In fact, it's not as dangerous as skiing.*

That was a lie and we both knew it. You might have broken your leg on the slopes but you would never have . . . never have . . .

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*Take care of Lucy while I'm away.*

You had to go. Danger was your drug of choice at a time when that expression had yet to be coined. I knew that, although I could not accept it. You had a family, Oliver: a family you left rudderless.

*Wish me luck.*

Luck? You had it in spades - a thriving business, a beautiful house, a doting wife, a delightful young daughter, and enough money never to have to worry about it.

*I love you.*

And I love you so much it still hurts. Thirty-one years, Oliver. Thirty-one years since that horrendous day. I have tried and failed to put your death behind me, to reconstruct my shattered life. Yes, I have found another man. You know I could never have lived my life like a nun. He's kind, generous and thoughtful and thinks the world of Lucy and Hughie. My fondness for him grew slowly, year by year, like the rings of a tree trunk.

But Oliver, dear Oliver, he doesn't come within a country mile of you. Not a single day passes without my heart somersaulting when I think of you: my daring, devil-may-care, beautiful man. I keep my memories private; hide them away in my grief-filled locker. Secrete them even from Lucy, now more than halfway through her fourth decade of life.

I don't want to be here, Oliver. I want to be a million miles away from these islands that stole you away from me. Islands they say appeal to the human spirit, yet leave mine cold. Perhaps it is because life here is governed by the sea and tides and mine is governed by an eternal emptiness that I cannot reconcile myself to forgive them.

Or forgive you.

'Are you all right, Eleanor? You look a little peaky.'

Immersed in my own thoughts, I forget Robbie is with me in the room.

'Sorry, darling, it's the helicopter. That whup-whup-whopping noise has given me a headache.'

Culpability does not sit on the helicopter's shoulders. Ever since Lucy booked this trip for us my nerves have been as taut as piano wires, my poor nails chewed almost to the quick. That was three months ago. Three months, during which I should have stood my ground and told her no, I am not yet ready to face my demons, will never be ready.

'Perhaps you should lie down for a while.' Robbie's face creases in that concerned way he has when treating me as if I were a child. I shouldn't complain. He is the one who does my

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shopping and maintains my house and garden ever since I had the cancer scare two years ago, days short of my sixty-first birthday. Fortunately, that was all it was, a scare, but it shook me badly.

It frightened the pants off Robbie.

This year, Lucy took it upon herself to suggest where Robbie and I should spend our late summer holiday.

*How about St Mary's, Mother? It holds happy memories for you, doesn't it? You would both love it there.*

Oh, Lucy: so cunning yet so transparent. How conveniently you forget my one memory that taints them all.

And why suggest it now after all this time?

I cannot bring myself to ask her, not outright just like that. There has always been a pressured edge to our relationship, like two tectonic plates riding against each other until a dramatic displacement takes place and all hell breaks loose. Sometimes I wonder if she blames me for the loss of her father, as if I have been clumsy or careless. I doubt she remembers Oliver. It could be she has constructed flesh and bones from the many public images there are of him, although the photographs I possess are locked away, deliberately out of mind in a tea chest stowed in the darkest recesses of my attic.

I do recall she spent one entire week – she would have been fifteen or sixteen – in Southampton Central Library, gluing herself to the microfiche reader and hunting through rows of old newspapers.

*What are you doing in there, Lucy?*

*I'm looking for Daddy.*

*Why?*

*Do you have to ask?*

My mouth flapped up and down like a ventriloquist's dummy, but the ventriloquist wasn't there to throw the words. Her eyes held mine, challenging, and I knew then Oliver would always be with her; an unseen presence, as real to her as if she were holding his hand.

A mother should never say this about her child, but I was relieved – actually relieved – when she went away to university. I had begun to spend more time with Robbie who was stoking up the courage to ask his estranged wife for a divorce. Lucy treated me as if I were Jezebel, as if I had betrayed Oliver, made a cuckold of him. Conversation had to be dragged

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out of her, the words backed up, clogging her throat. She overheard Robbie say he wished he had a wife like me. She flew into a fury and raked her nails across his face, leaving bloody trails. Robbie and I didn't see each other for some time after that, not until after she left university.

After graduating, the bright lights of London beckoned her and she slipped effortlessly into the glittering world of advertising, marrying her boss and bearing his child along the way. For years I never saw her, receiving only a monthly telephone call that she must have felt duty bound to make.

Then her life spiralled out of control. The business failed, her husband committed suicide, and she was left, penniless and homeless, with a ten-year-old child to care for.

Guilt climbed all over me. I had been blind to my child when she needed me most. How selfish to have put my own interests before hers. So when she dug her heels in and insisted we make this journey, I gave up resisting and thought it better to say, yes, it is about time, before I am too old.

Now it is too late. Now Robbie and I are here and tomorrow we will be *there*.

On the one hand, my natural curiosity begs to be satisfied. *There* is where Oliver met such a tragic end. On the other, it scares me half to death wondering what I will encounter when we are *there*.

While Robbie unpacks my case, I continue to stare out of the rain-splattered sash window, the wind whistling eerily through its ill-fitting frame. A small flotilla of boats bobs wildly on the choppy waters of St Mary's Pool and in the near distance Samson rises up, barely visible in the squall. The few people on the street are bent forward from the waist, leaning into the wind, hands holding hoods, multicoloured anoraks glistening wet. Maybe my memory is selective, choosing only to pick out days of uninterrupted sunshine, but I swear that when Oliver and I used to come here we never experienced such a downpour as this.

Should I kneel down here and now and thank God for such foul weather? Pray it continues so I have a perfect excuse for keeping my feet on terra firma? If only I could, but I cannot. God has abandoned me and Robbie is watching me like a hawk.

'Lucy asked me to give you this,' he says, taking a folded sheet of paper out of his inside jacket pocket.

'What is it?'

'It's a newspaper cutting.'

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‘A newspaper cutting?’

‘Yes. She found it years ago in the library. She says you should read it.’ He unfolds the sheet and holds it out. I can see it is an old photocopy.

‘Would you mind reading it? My eyes feel like they’re being pierced with hot needles.’

He opens his spectacles case, takes out his reading glasses and hooks them over his ears.

‘It’s from *The Times*, dated 15<sup>th</sup> August 1979.’

Blood turns to ice in my veins. Why Lucy? Why are you doing this to me?

He begins to read. “The Fastnet race has been held every year since 1925, except during the war. It is a classic amongst offshore races. Starting at Cowes on the south coast, it goes around the Fastnet Rock off the coast of Ireland and finishes at Plymouth, a distance of 605 miles.

“The race has an excellent safety record, only one crewman being lost overboard in 1931. On 11th August a record 303 entries got underway in fine weather. The following day, weather conditions in the Atlantic became increasingly unsettled with wind speeds reaching 30 knots. The bad weather moved towards the race area. The BBC shipping forecast did not report the approaching gale until it was too late. By the time the official gale warnings were broadcast the wind speed was nearly 50 knots and many yachts were out of control and in great danger. Last night the situation worsened rapidly, the coastguard receiving numerous May Day reports —’

‘Robbie, please, no more!’

He peers over the top of his glasses and I see collusion in his eyes. Lucy and he, once adversaries, have become allies.

I press my fingers to my temples and suck in a lungful of air. An original cutting from the same newspaper gathers dust in my writing bureau, out of sight, but not out of mind.

He draws himself up to his full height, towering over me. Arms crossed over his chest, mouth stretched in a tight line, I recognise the signs of an impending row.

‘You two were in on this together weren’t you?’ I say.

‘I happen to agree with Lucy, Eleanor. It’s about time you laid Oliver’s ghost to rest.’

‘I . . . I will, one day. I promise.’

‘When? Tomorrow? Next week? Next year?’

‘Please, Robbie, my head —’

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‘You’re a coward, Eleanor. All we’re asking you to do is take a boat trip to see where he lost his life. Is that so much to ask?’

‘Darling, I can’t . . . I can’t . . .’

‘You can. That’s why we’re here. You promised her, remember?’

Did I? Did I really? I suppose I must have done. Lucy is not given to fabrication.

I reach into my handbag, pull out a tissue and ball it up in my fist. ‘Must I do this, Robbie? Can’t we just turn around and go home?’

‘No, we can’t. You’re not the only one who carries this particular monkey on your back, you know.’

‘But I don’t see how Oliver’s —’ the word doesn’t want to come out, ‘— death affected her quite so much. She was only five at the time.’

‘Hughie found the photocopy on her bedside table. He couldn’t understand why you hadn’t been to see where Oliver died. She really didn’t know what to tell him.’

‘Ah.’

Hughie is my grandson; sixteen, strapping, and sailing mad. He hopes to represent Great Britain in the men’s one person dinghy in the 2012 Olympics. Very proud of his grandfather Lucy says, although he has never mentioned Oliver to me. I suppose she has told him to tiptoe carefully around his grandmother’s emotions.

‘Hughie’s more mature than his years, Eleanor. He’s very good at looking at things from more than just one viewpoint. He says the sea can be forgiving as well as cruel.’

Forgiving? The only image I can conjure up is an angry maelstrom dashing itself against razor-sharp rocks; jagged, black and smelling of sulphur, Oliver’s yacht pitching and rolling, its fragile backbone snapping in two.

Thoughtless words rush out before I can stop them. ‘Does he? And he would know would he? I wouldn’t be surprised if he ends up like Oliver!’

Robbie’s cheeks flush crimson. With embarrassment or anger? His emotional barometer has never been easy for me to read. I take a step toward him needing to apologise, wanting him to enfold me in his arms.

He raises his hands, palms outwards as if to push me away. ‘I’ll put that outburst down to your headache. I’m going out for a cigarette and then a stroll to the Star Castle to book a table for dinner. We can discuss this again later.’

‘The Last Supper?’ I say, only half-joking.

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‘Oh, for pity’s sake!’

He stuffs the photocopy in his pocket and marches through the open door.

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Last night’s dinner with Robbie at the Star Castle should have been a joyous occasion, reliving the one time Oliver and I had dined there. Then, we had been overawed by the opulence of the place and the ostentatious displays of our fellow diners. We were half their age, underdressed, and much too frivolous. We laughed about it for days afterwards, Oliver mimicking the stuffy old colonel (or so he imagined) on the neighbouring table.

It has all changed now. Paintings by local artists hang on pastel walls. The dining room is more akin to a French café; scrubbed wooden tables, each decorated with a slim glass vase containing a single red rose, its efflorescing fragrance mingling with the aroma of garlic and onions drifting in from the kitchen. It is a setting where Robbie and I could have talked amicably about things of little consequence: next door’s cherry tree’s thick roots disfiguring our lawn; Betty Kennedy’s torrid affair with the butcher; plans for the village hall restoration. Instead, hardly a word passed between us, Robbie still angry with me, methodically and determinedly working his way through the courses, drinking far too much Pinot Noir. He did link my arm on our way back to our lodgings, though whether it was in forgiveness or out of a desire to maintain his equilibrium is debatable.

Poor Robbie, I don't know why he hasn't left me before now. It can't be easy trying to fill another man's shoes. His was the first shoulder I cried on after Oliver's accident; burying my face in the warmth of the Arran pullovers he is so fond of wearing. After that, well, he was always there to comfort me, to wrap me in his arms and stroke my hair with his long artist's fingers. Before long, he became my constant companion, accompanying me on my many visits to Lucy as she attempted to repair the broken pieces of her life. I don't know what I would have done without him. I had never learned to drive when Oliver was alive, had never needed to.

Selfless, faithful Robbie. Always there for me.

Try as I could, I found sleep elusive, fighting a nightmare determined to impose itself; a swirling wraith, impossibly tall, limbless, with a grinning mouth full of huge, gleaming white teeth. It towered over the hazy figure of Oliver who was shouting *Don't worry, Eleanor. Yacht racing offshore is no more dangerous than fighting this devil* before the wraith drew a glinting knife and sliced it viciously across mouth. Blood spurted everywhere in a fine

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crimson mist, but Oliver's mouth went on shouting, louder and louder and louder until everything began to spin, faster and faster and faster until I jerked awake, sweat pouring out of every pore in my body.

In the end I gave up, resorting to my old ally Mister Zolpidem, his chemical charms coaxing me into the welcome blackness of sleep.

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I awake to find sunlight lancing through the gap in the curtains. Bright red figures on the bedside clock declare the time is 8:52. The smell of bacon frying hangs in the air. At first, I am a little disorientated and cannot recall why the window is on the left side of the bed and why there should be the sound of laughter outside it. Then it dawns on me where I am.

I hear a light tapping on the door.

'Are you awake, Eleanor?'

Robbie. Can he hear me breathing? I jam my fist in my mouth, squeeze my eyes tight shut.

Go away.

His knuckles attack the door like an angry woodpecker. 'Eleanor! Are you there?'

'Is something the matter?' another voice, more distant, concerned, unsure.

'No, it's nothing. My friend is . . . a little hard of hearing, that's all.'

'Well, if you wouldn't mind hurrying her along. We finish serving breakfast at nine-thirty.'

'Yes, sorry.'

The whisper floats through the keyhole like poison gas. 'Don't be so childish, Eleanor. The boat's at eleven and there's no way you won't be on it.'

When I enter the cramped dining room, Robbie is sitting at a table in conversation with a woman who is the spitting image of Anne Widdecombe. He scowls and points at the chair next to his. Now I feel like an errant child as I edge around the tables, forcing a smile for the seated guests.

'Thish is your other half, I gather,' says the Widdecombe lookalike, giving me a smile that reveals a perfect set of dentures, much too large for her mouth. As I take my place, she holds out her hand and clacks, 'Ruby Shpredbury. Pleashed to meet you.'

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I nod, but leave her hand suspended. ‘Eleanor. Eleanor Magnusson. I’m not his other half, I’m his . . . we’re just good friends.’

Sharing a table with a stranger is not my idea of fun. Any minute now this woman will tell me what an unusual name I have; she is sure she has heard it before; it seems to ring a bell.

‘Magnusson? What an unushual name. I’m sure —’

‘Full English?’ A teenage girl slouches at the edge of the table, weight on one leg, face blank with boredom. A black skirt barely covers her backside and there is an egg stain on the front of her white blouse.

I could not digest food even if my stomach reached out of my mouth and dragged it in.

‘No, thank you. I’m not hungry.’

‘Tea? Coffee? Juice?’

‘A glass of water would be fine.’

The girl looks at me as if I might be ET, and yes, I am tempted to ask if I can phone home, because at this precise moment that is exactly where I want to be.

‘Beautiful day.’ Ruby’s face beams at me. ‘Robbie tellsh me you’re taking a little trip out to the Weshtern Isles.’

A tic triggers in my right eyelid.

‘I’ve never been there myshelf, but I do hear they are so wondrously myshterious. Mind you, you don’t want to get too closhe to that nasty Bishop Rock.’

A cold finger traces the curve of my spine.

‘The forecast is for fair weather,’ says Robbie quickly, giving me a sideways glance. ‘Probably be as calm as a millpond.’

‘Ain’t never calm, never,’ snaps the girl, banging the glass down on the table as if somehow it is to blame for her working in this place. She holds out her hand, shows an ugly red scar that runs from the base of her little finger to the fleshy mound of her thumb. ‘Got that on The Bishop. Could have been much worse. Dead lucky I was.’

‘Heavensh.’ Ruby’s face turns puce.

I experience a moment of nausea.

Robbie glances at his watch. ‘Time to go, Eleanor.’

‘Last Supper done with, now the crucifixion?’

Ruby and the girl stare at me, their eyebrows knotted like spaghetti.

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A crowd is gathered outside the Harbourside Hotel on the tarmac road running parallel to the quayside. A dozen or so feet below the roadway, a line of boats wait patiently, diesel engines putt-putting. An overweight woman with a clipboard holds her hand in the air and barks instructions. The crowd splinters as chattering people line up in orderly queues for their designated destinations: St Agnes, Bryher, Tresco, St Martin's.

Oliver once told me tourists rarely venture as far as the Western Isles and the local boatmen are careful to pick the calmest of days before setting out. Needle-sharp rocks lie in wait for those who stray from the narrow safe passages. Only the insane would insist on making such a journey if the weather shows the faintest signs of turning foul.

Foul weather has hammered the islands for the past week.

Why, oh, why is it so good today?

'There's our boat,' says Robbie. 'Let's go.'

He clamps his hand on my forearm and hauls me to where a green and cream boat nestles between much more solid neighbours. Its wheelhouse is set aft, barely big enough to hold one person. The deck is uncovered, affording no protection from the elements.

I shrug off his hand. 'You can't be serious. If you think I'm setting foot on that, you've another think coming.'

For a split second, I see uncertainty in his eyes and then it passes.

'The chap comes highly recommended. There's nothing to worry about.'

'But look at it! If a big wave hits that thing, it's bound to end up upside down!'

The familiar look rolls on to his face. 'Oh, so you know all about boat building now? Come on, mind the steps.'

As I tread gingerly on the weathered concrete steps, holding on to a filthy rope that passes through iron eyelets driven into the harbour wall, I notice how low the tide is. A fringe of dark seaweed, smelling of roasted nuts and iodine, runs in an uninterrupted horizontal line below which the wall is scabrous with barnacles.

'Careful, missus, the step's a mite slippery.' A hand grasps mine, warm, reassuring. Taking my eyes off the steps, I look into the face of the boatman, a face etched with fine tracery like a spider's web. Penetrating blue eyes peer from under brows the colour of cigarette ash. It is impossible to say how old he is; he could be anything from fifty to seventy. He is certainly dressed the part. Blood-red Dutch Fisherman's cap, faded black sweatshirt

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with white letters - *Captain's Rules*. *Rule 1: The Captain is always right. Rule 2: See Rule 1* - heavy corduroys and roped-soled shoes. As I hover above the gunwale I feel the boat rock, and for a brief moment the gap between the wall and the boat draws me like a magnet.

The boatman's free hand firmly cups my elbow. 'Steady, there. We don't want any accidents.'

I really cannot believe how small this boat is. The last time I was on water was a Nile Cruise. Three decks up, I could have been in a five star hotel, there was so little movement. It never occurred to me how the ship would behave in rough weather. Why would it? There was no possibility of breakers crashing on the Nile.

'I really don't want to do this,' I whisper to Robbie, every muscle in my body tightening. 'Please take me back.'

'Sit down, or you'll hurt yourself.'

He settles himself next to me, jaw tightening.

In less time than it takes to cook a casserole, we'll be *there*.

The boatman pushes the throttle forward and the boat jerks into life, its bow rising. From where I sit I can see the sickle sweep of Town Beach, the white-walled and grey-roofed houses of Hugh Town crowding the water's edge. Robbie takes a book out of his rucksack – *Isles of Scilly Guidebook* – flicks through it and stops at a page titled 'Getting your bearings on Scilly' that portray a stylised map. I try not to look, but I can't resist. My eyes flit westwards past St Mary's, The Gugh, St Agnes, Annet, finally coming to rest where the print almost bleeds off the page.

I gasp. There it is; tiny, the size of a full stop. Insignificant in the white space that surrounds it.

The Bishop Rock.

'Name's Gabriel, like the angel.' The boatman doffs his cap and takes a bow.

Robbie points at me, then himself. 'Eleanor. Robbie,' he calls above the thrumming of the diesel engine.

'Welcome aboard the *Pride of Bryher*. Be with you in 'alf a mo. 'ave to run through the safety stuff, see?'

We are now heading out to open sea. To my left, high above me on the harbour wall, two small children wave at us. Without thinking, I wave back and continue to watch them as they grow smaller and smaller.

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Gabriel trims the throttle and the engine settles into a steady beat. He bends down and then steps out of the wheelhouse, clasping an orange life jacket in each hand.

‘Best if you wear these,’ he says. ‘Case you go overboard.’

Beads of sweat bubble on my forehead. ‘But the forecast is for good weather, isn’t it?’

‘So ‘tis, missus, but these waters can change mood faster than a chameleon. My advice would be to put this on. If you don’t want to, you don’t have to. It’s your choice.’

Robbie takes one lifejacket from his hand, stands up, slips his arms through the holes, loops the straps around his waist and ties them. He does it in a practised, familiar way. The way he used to do it when Oliver took him out on his boat, leaving me biting my lip as they tacked away. Then he takes the other, holds it out, waiting for me to push my arms into it.

‘Accidents can happen very quickly on the water, Eleanor. I think you should put it on.’

The jacket is bulky, uncomfortable, chafing my neck. I feel as if I have been forced into a dress that is two sizes too small.

My eyes glue themselves to the boat’s planking deck, not wanting to see the empty sea stretching ahead us. I try to blank my mind, but a lonesome seagull trails our wake, its harsh mewing setting my teeth on edge.

I almost shed my skin when Gabriel’s voice booms in my ear. ‘Ain’t nothing as beautiful as the Western Rocks on a calm day. If you look to your over there, that’s Annet we’re passing.’

Robbie takes my hand in his, pats it. ‘Won’t be long now.’

‘Seals at nine o’clock.’ Gabriel points to where the disembodied head of a Grey seal breaks through the sea’s translucent skin. As I watch, more heads pop up. There is a whole crash of them – bulls, cows and calves, eyeing us as we chug past. It strikes me they are the watchers, not us.

‘Aren’t they beautiful?’ Robbie takes his camera out of its case and trains it on the curious animals. As he does so, two oily backs silently part the water not ten yards away.

‘Porpoises,’ says Gabriel. ‘And look there – you don’t often see that – a pair of Shearwaters.’

I look to where he points. Two black and white birds glide past and settle on a finger of rock. Behind them, larger birds, green as dark seaweed, stand in a row like sentinels.

‘What are those?’ I say.

‘Cormorants, last year’s young. By next year they’ll be jet black.’

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For the first time since we arrived I feel the tension ease as the peaceful scene draws me in. Only the occasional plopping sounds of the seals emerging and submerging break the silence. The seagull gives a final cry then wheels off towards the rocks.

The boat is now seesawing gently, a whipping wind tugging at the sea, sending flecks of white foam like spit over the water. Rain begins to pitter-patter on the rippling surface, hardly noticeable at first. Then fat drops hurtle down, pock-marking the sea.

Gabriel shrugs. 'Probably just a passing storm.'

*Probably?*

Then I spot it and a fist clamps my throat. Impossibly tall and limbless: the Bishop Rock lighthouse.

Gabriel moves closer and I smell tobacco mixed with engine oil. 'Magnificent, isn't she? Unmanned now, of course.'

The sea here is agitated, waves licking at the rock. I crane my neck to see the lantern high above.

'Neptune's sleeping today,' he says. 'The old lighthouse, she'll try her best to make sure he don't wake up and take anyone unawares. Mind you, sometimes the old beggar catches her out.'

I gasp, my lung punctured by an invisible lance.

'My brother lost his life here.' Robbie's hands grip the side of the boat, knuckles white as bleached shells, as he stares fixedly at the giant finger. 'In the Fastnet.'

Gabriel's eyes spring open. 'You talkin' about the Grimaldi, mate?'

I clamp my hand over my mouth. The name haunts me. Too close to grim, grimace, Grim Reaper.

'A bad do, that. Neptune was mighty angry that day.'

I cannot help it. 'Angry?' I say.

He nods. 'I was right here in seventy-nine. When it happened.'

'Surely not? You said the lighthouse was unmanned.'

'Oh, aye, 'twas. But I weren't in the lighthouse. I were in an 'elicopter.'

'A helicopter?'

'Aye. At the time I were in the RNAS, based at Culdrose. We were mobilised as part of the rescue effort and directed to assist a yacht in trouble close by The Bishop.'

'The Grimaldi.' The name slips out before I can catch it.

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‘The very same.’

‘Did you . . . did you see what happened?’

He tugs his chin, as if the memory lies beneath its skin. ‘As much as I could, given the conditions.’

‘Tell me.’

‘We received a report from a vessel of a yacht bein’ tossed like a cork by a gigantic storm. The crew were tryin’ to outrun it, but it kept knockin’ the poor boat flat time after time, like it were swattin’ a fly, hurlin’ the sailors into the sea and to the end of their safety-line harnesses. The next we heard, a huge wave had flipped the yacht over and on to its back, dismastin’ it.’

‘And then it broke up on the Bishop Rock?’

‘Not until later, after we’d rescued as many of the crew as we could.’

‘Off the rock?’

‘Lift them off the rock? Listen, we couldn’t get nowhere near The Bishop. The crew had inflated their life raft and abandoned the boat before she capsized. That’s where we found the six of them - in their life boat.’

Robbie’s brow furrows deeply as he asks the question. ‘What happened to the captain? My brother?’

‘We asked them that after we winched them into the chopper. They said he had been swept overboard by a breaker and carried away before they saw The Bishop. The boat was crippled so it was impossible for them to try and rescue him.’

‘So he didn’t die on the rock?’ I say.

‘No, missus, he didn’t.’

My knees give way and I begin to slip to the floor. Gabriel’s hands catch me, and help me on to the seat. Robbie’s arms are now around me, hugging me, tears streaming down his face.

I don’t know if I should feel angry or relieved. How cruel that poor Oliver was the only casualty on that fateful day. Yet, truth is, it was not the Bishop Rock, the object of fear I have carried with me all these years, which took his life from him.

Gabriel’s words run around inside my head.

*The old lighthouse, she’ll try her best to make sure he don’t wake up and take anyone unawares. Mind you, sometimes the old beggar catches her out.*

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I stare at the lighthouse and see it in a different light: a white and towering splendour; protective, commanding, indefatigable.

The mariner's friend.

'It's over, Eleanor,' says Robbie, squeezing me tightly. 'Time to move on.'

Robbie and I sit on the low quay wall that skirts Porthcressa Beach. The light is leaking away and the only sound is of a pewter sea sucking gently at the sand.

We're eating fish and chips with our fingers, something I haven't done for years. Not far away a huge gull stands motionless, its beady eye staring unblinkingly at the greaseproof paper in my hand.

Robbie's gaze is fixed on the lights of a tramper, a dark silhouette gliding along the line of the horizon. 'I'm sorry for getting angry with you earlier,' he says. 'It's just that . . . well, I was hoping you would rediscover some of the happiness you found here with Oliver.' He turns his head and looks into my eyes. 'Only this time, it would be with me.'

Seven years were all I had with Oliver. Seven years of intense passion that had my heart pounding and my head spinning. The image I hold of him is frozen in time. What kind of father would he have been to Lucy had he lived? Would we still love each other? Robbie had been my constant companion for almost forty years. He had guided me through my highs and lows, never complaining, never faltering.

There can be no greater love for a person than that.

Oliver loved me, but Robbie is in love with me.

I feel his hand settle on mine and my heart flutters. I lean against his shoulder and press my cheek against the softness of his Arran pullover.

'I'm sorry you had to wait for such a long time.'

'I would have waited forever.'

'I know you would, darling. I know you would.'

They say lightning never strikes twice. They're wrong.

Oliver is gone, finally laid to rest, but Robbie remains.

Tonight I will sleep without the comforting presence of Mister Zolpidem.