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Black Rabbit Hall

Written by Eve Chase

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Black Rabbit Hall

EVE CHASE



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For Oscar, Jago and Alice

I held him wise, and when he talked to me
Of snakes and birds, and which God loved the best,
I thought his knowledge marked the boundary
Where men grew blind, though angels knew the rest.

If he said Hush! I tried to hold my breath;
Wherever he said Come! I stepped in faith.

Brother and Sister, George Eliot

Prologue

Amber, last day of the summer holidays, 1969, Cornwall

I feel safe on the cliff ledge, safer than in the house anyway. A few feet from the coast path, it's a twenty-minute scramble from the edge of the estate, far enough from Black Rabbit Hall's watching windows, a secret place. I hover on the cliff above it for a moment or two, wind snapping my dress against my legs, soles of my feet tingling, then lower myself carefully, gripping the clumps of grass, sea roaring in my ears. (Best not to look down.) One small heart-stop drop and I'm perching right on the edge of sky.

Jump too wide, it's all over. I wouldn't do it. But it occurs to me that I like the fact I could. That I have some control over my destiny today.

Pressed against the cliff wall, I finally catch my breath. So much frantic searching: woods, rooms, endless stairs. Heels rubbed raw in too-small plimsolls. And I still haven't found them. Where *are* they? Shading my eyes from the sky dazzle with my hand, I scan the bottle-green cliff tops on the other side of the cove. Deserted. Only cattle in the fields.

I inch down then, spine against the rock, and hitch up my dress, brazenly, so that air tunnels through my bare bent legs.

Still at last, I can't outrun the events of the day any

longer. Even the sound of the waves on the rocks makes my slapped cheek sting afresh. I blink and there is the house, silhouetted on the inside of my eyelids. So I try to keep my eyes open and let my mind loose in the vast pink sky, where the sun and moon hang like a question and an answer. I forget that I am meant to be searching. That minutes move faster than clouds at dusk. I think only of my own escape.

I don't know how long I sit there, my thoughts pierced by a huge black bird diving over the cliff, so close its talons might catch in my hair. I instinctively duck in its wing draught, nose meeting the cool skin of my knees. And when I look up my gaze is no longer on the sky but flotsam bobbing on the high tide swell below.

No, not flotsam. Something more alive. A dolphin? Or those jellyfish that have been washing up in our cove all week, like a lost cargo of grey glass bowls? Maybe. I lean forward, dipping my face over the edge to get a better view, hair blowing wildly, heart beating a little faster, starting to sense something terrible shifting just below the shimmering blue surface, not quite seeing it. Not yet.

One

Lorna, over three decades later

It is one of those journeys. The closer they get to their destination, the harder it is to imagine that they'll ever actually arrive. There is always another bend in the road, a judder to the dead end of a farm track. And it is getting late, too late. Warm summer rain is drumming on the roof of the car.

'I say we cut our losses and head back to the B-and-B.' Jon cranes over the steering-wheel to get a better view of the road liquefying behind the windscreen. 'Grab a pint and plan a wedding somewhere within the M25. What do you reckon?'

Lorna draws a house with her fingertip in the condensation on the window. Roof. Chimney. Squiggle of smoke. 'Don't think so, darling.'

'Somewhere with a sunny micro-climate, perhaps?'

'Ha. Funny.' Despite the disappointments of the day so far – none of the wedding venues has lived up to expectation, too much overpriced chintz – Lorna is quite happy. There is something exhilarating about driving through this wild weather with the man she is to marry, just the two of them cocooned in their wheezing little red Fiat. When they're old and grey they'll remember this journey, she thinks. Being young and in love and in a car in the rain.

‘Great.’ Jon frowns at a looming dark shape in the mirror. ‘All I need now is a massive bloody tractor up my backside.’ He stops at a crossroads where various signs, bent by the wind, point in directions that bear little relation to the angle of the corresponding roads. ‘Now where?’

‘Are we lost?’ she teases, enjoying the idea.

‘The satnav is lost. We seem to have gone off grid. Only in your beloved Cornwall.’

Lorna smiles. Jon’s is a boyish, uncomplicated grumpiness, one that will evaporate with the first sign of the house, or a cold beer. He doesn’t internalize things, like she does, or make obstacles symbolic of other stuff.

‘Right.’ He nods at the map on Lorna’s lap, which is scattered with biscuit crumbs and folded haphazardly. ‘How are your map-reading skills coming along, sweetheart?’

‘Well . . .’ She scrabbles the map open, bouncing the crumbs off to join the empty water bottles rolling on the sandy car floor. ‘According to my rough cartological calculations, we’re currently driving through the Atlantic.’

Jon huffs back in his seat, stretches out his legs, too long for the small car. ‘Brilliant.’

Lorna leans over, strokes his thigh where muscle fades the denim. She knows he’s tired of driving down unfamiliar roads in the rain, touring wedding venues, this one, furthest away, hardest to find, saved for last. They would be on the Amalfi coast, if she hadn’t insisted that they come to Cornwall instead. If Jon’s patience is wearing thin, she can hardly blame him.

Jon proposed back at Christmas, months ago, pine needles crunching beneath his bended knee. For a long

time, that was enough. She loved being engaged, that state of blissful suspension: they belonged to each other but they still woke up every morning and chose to be together. She worried about jinxing that easy happiness. Anyway, there was no mad rush. They had all the time in the world.

Then they didn't. When Lorna's mother died unexpectedly in May, grief punched her back to earth and the wedding suddenly felt inescapably, brutally urgent. Her mother's death was a reminder not to wait. Not to put things on hold or forget that a black date is circled on everyone's calendar, flipping ever closer. Disorienting but also oddly life-affirming, it made her want to grab life in her fists, totter through the litter of Bethnal Green Road on a drizzly Sunday morning in her lucky red heels. This morning she wiggled herself into a sunshine-yellow vintage sixties sundress. If she can't wear it now, when?

Jon changes gears, yawns. 'What's the place called again, Lorna?'

'Pencraw,' she says brightly, trying to keep his spirits up, mindful that if it were up to Jon they'd simply stuff his large, sprawling family into a marquee in his parents' Essex garden and be done with it. Then they'd move down the road, near his adoring sisters – swapping their tiny city flat for a suburban house with a lawn sprinkler – so his mother, Lorraine, could help with all the babies that would swiftly follow. Thankfully, it is not up to Jon. 'Pencraw Hall.'

He runs a hand through his corn-coloured hair, sun-bleached almost white at the tips. 'One more shot?'

She beams back. She loves this man.

'To hell with it, let's go this way. We've got a one in four

chance of getting it right. Hopefully we'll shake the tractor.' He presses his foot hard on the gas.

They don't shake it.

The rain continues to fall. The windscreen is mashed with cow-parsley petals, pushed into snowy drifts by the squeaking wipers. Lorna's heart beats a little faster beneath the crisp cotton of her dress.

Even though she can't see much beyond the rivulets of rain running down the window, she knows that the wooded valleys, river creeks and deserted little coves of the Roseland Peninsula lie beyond the glass, and she can sense them already, hulking out there in the mist. She remembers being on these roads as a kid – they visited Cornwall most summers – and how the sea air would rush through the wound-down window, blowing away the last trapped bits of grimy Greater London, and the stitch of tension on her mother's face.

An anxious woman, her mother suffered from insomnia all her life: the seaside seemed to be the only place she could sleep. When Lorna was little, she wondered if the Cornish air swirled with strange sleepy fumes, like the poppy field in *The Wizard of Oz*. Now a small voice in her head cannot help wondering if it swirls with family secrets. But she decides to keep this thought to herself.

'Are you sure this old pile actually exists, Lorna?' Jon's arms are straight and stiff at the wheel, eyes reddening with strain.

'It exists.' She pulls up her long, dark hair, twisting it into a topknot. A few strands escape, fringing her pale neck. She feels the heat of his glance: he loves her neck, the soft baby skin just below her ear.

‘Remind me again.’ His eyes return to the road. ‘Some old manor house you visited with your mum while on holiday down here?’

‘That’s right.’ She nods enthusiastically.

‘Your mum enjoyed a stately, I know that.’ He frowns up at the mirror. The rain is falling in undulating silver sheets now. ‘But how can you be sure it’s this one?’

‘Pencraw Hall popped up on some online wedding directory. I recognized it straight away.’ Already so many things have faded – the hyacinth notes of her mother’s favourite perfume, the exact click of her tongue as she searched for her reading glasses – but in the last few weeks other memories, long forgotten, seemingly random, have come into unexpected bright focus. And this is one of them. ‘Mum pointing up at this big old house. The look of awe in her eyes. It sort of stuck with me.’ She swivels the diamond engagement ring on her finger, remembering other things too. A pink-striped paper bag of fudge heavy in her hand. A river. ‘Yes, I’m almost certain it’s the same house.’

‘*Almost?*’ Jon shakes his head, laughs, one of his big belly laughs that rumble against his ribs. ‘God, I must love you.’

They drive in companionable silence for a moment, Jon thoughtful. ‘Last day tomorrow, sweetheart.’

‘I know.’ She sighs, not relishing the thought of returning to the hot, crowded city.

‘If you wanted to do something non-wedding-related?’ His voice is disarmingly soft.

She smiles, puzzled. ‘Sure. What sort of thing?’

‘Well, I thought if there was anywhere of . . . significance you wanted to visit?’ The words fall awkwardly.

He clears his throat, seeks her dark eyes in the driver's mirror.

Lorna won't meet his gaze. Her fingers are loosening her hair so that it swishes down, hiding the flush of her cheeks. 'Not really,' she mumbles. 'I just want to see Pencraw.'

Jon sighs, changes gear, lets the subject go. Lorna wipes the scribble of a house off the clouded window and peers through the cleared porthole, nose to the cold glass, looping in her own thoughts.

'So. The reviews?' he asks.

She hesitates. 'Well, there aren't any reviews. Not exactly.'

He raises an eyebrow.

'But I did phone and speak to a real live human being, the lady of the house's personal assistant or something. A woman called Endellion.'

'What sort of a name is that?'

'Cornish.'

'Are you going to use that as an excuse for everything?'

'Yeah, yeah.' Lorna laughs, slides her feet out of her silver flip-flops and rests them on the hard grey plastic of the glove compartment, pleased by the tan marks and that her pale pink nail varnish hasn't chipped. 'She explained that it's a private house. First year it's been hired out. So no reviews. But nothing dodgy, promise.'

He smiles. 'You can be such a sucker sometimes.'

'And you can be so bloody cynical, my darling.'

'Realistic, realistic.' He glances into his mirror, eyes hardening. 'Jesus.'

'What?'

'That tractor. Too close. Too big.'

Lorna tenses in her seat, twists a strand of hair around her finger. The tractor does look menacingly large for this narrow road, which is more like a tunnel now, sealed by steep verges of solid rock and a roof of interlocked tree canopies. She grounds her feet on the floor of the car.

‘We’re going to stop at the next field gate and see if we can manage a U-turn,’ Jon says, after a few more tight minutes.

‘Oh, come on . . .’

‘It’s dangerous, Lorna.’

‘But –’

‘If it’s any consolation, the house is sure to be like all the others, some B-and-B chancing it. A dodgy conference centre. And if it’s any good we won’t be able to afford it.’

‘No. I’ve got a *feeling* about this house.’ She tightens the coil of hair, pinking her fingertip. ‘A hunch.’

‘You and your hunches.’

‘You were a hunch.’ She puts a hand on his knee just as the sinews of his muscles contract and his foot slams down on the brake.

It all seems to happen at once: the squeal of rubber, the skid to the left, the dark form leaping across the road into the bushes. Then terrible stillness. A clatter of rain on the roof.

‘Lorna, are you okay?’ He touches her cheek with the back of his hand.

‘Yeah, yeah. I’m fine.’ She runs her tongue around the inside of her mouth, tastes the metal of blood. ‘What happened?’

‘A deer. Pretty sure just a deer.’

‘Oh, thank God. Not a person.’

He whistles beneath his breath. ‘Close call. Sure you’re okay?’

A rapping on the driver’s door. The knuckles are hairy, the skin raw red. The tractor driver is a dripping mountain of orange anorak.

Jon winds down the window apprehensively. ‘Sorry for the hard braking, mate.’

‘Bloody deer.’ A man’s face, as battered as the landscape itself, veers up to the window. He peers over Jon’s shoulder and fixes his dull stare on Lorna. It is a stare that suggests he doesn’t come across many petite thirty-two-year-old brunettes wearing yellow sundresses. A stare that suggests he doesn’t come across many women at all.

Lorna tries to smile at him but her mouth feels twitchy at the corners. She might burst into tears instead. It hits her how close they’ve just come to catastrophe. It seems all the more unbelievable because they are on holiday. She’s always felt immortal on holiday, especially with Jon, who is protective, secretly rather sensible and built like a hammer.

‘They get in through gaps in the hedging. Caused a crash only last month.’ The man blows a gust of stale breath into the small confines of the car. ‘Two mangled a few yards from this spot. Damn creatures out of control.’

Jon turns to Lorna. ‘Someone’s trying to tell us something. Can we call it a day?’

She feels the tremor in his fingers, knows she can’t push him further. ‘Okay.’

‘Don’t look like that. We’ll come back another time.’

They won’t, she knows it. They live too far away. Their lives are too busy. They work too hard. When they get

back Jon's family building firm is due for a long project, some swanky new penthouses in Bow, while the first day of the September school term rears ever closer for her. No, it's all too difficult. They won't come back. And Cornwall is impractical. It's expensive. It asks too much of their guests. It asks too much of Jon. Her dad. Her sister. Everyone is only indulging her because they feel sorry for her losing Mum. She's not silly.

'You don't see much traffic on this road. Where you folks going?' asks the tractor driver, scratching his bull neck. 'You certainly picked the day for it.'

'Trying to find some old house.' Jon reaches into the glove compartment for a sugar fix to steady his hands. He finds an ancient sticky mint, half unwrapped. 'Pencraw Hall?'

'Oh.' The man's face withdraws into the cave of his hood.

Sensing recognition, Lorna sits more upright in her seat. 'You know it?'

A brisk nod. 'Black Rabbit Hall.'

'Oh, no, sorry, we're looking for a Pencraw Hall.'

'Locals call it Black Rabbit Hall.'

'Black Rabbit Hall.' Lorna rolls it around her tongue. She likes it. She likes the name. 'So it's near?'

'You're practically on its drive.'

Lorna turns to beam at Jon, near-death crash forgotten.

'One more turn off this lane – last chance to leave – that takes you into the farmland, what's left of it. Another half-mile or so before you hit the estate proper. You'll see the signpost. Well, I say you'll see it. Buried in the bushes. You'll need to keep a look-out.' He stares at Lorna again.

‘Funny place. Why do you want to go there? If you don’t mind me asking.’

‘Well . . .’ Lorna takes a breath, ready to launch into the back story.

‘We’re checking it out as a wedding venue,’ Jon says, before she has a chance. ‘Well, we were.’

‘Weddings?’ The man’s eyes bug. ‘I’ll be damned.’ He glances from Lorna to Jon and back again. ‘Look, you seem like a nice enough couple. Not from round here, are you?’

‘London,’ they mutter in unison.

The man nods as if this explains everything. He puts one hand on the rolled-down window, his fingers creating a fat glove of condensation on the glass. ‘If you ask me, Black Rabbit’s not the place for a wedding.’

‘Oh. Why not?’ asks Lorna, spirits sinking again, wishing him away.

The man frowns, looks unsure how much to tell them. ‘It’s not in any fit state for one thing. The weather gnaws away at houses around here unless you throw money at them. No one’s thrown nothing at that house for years.’ He wets his cracked lips with his tongue. ‘Word is there are hydrangeas growing through the ballroom floor, all sorts of funny things going on.’

‘Oh . . . I love that.’

Jon rolls his eyes, trying not to laugh. ‘Please don’t encourage her.’

‘I’d better get back on the road.’ The tractor driver looks bemused. ‘You two, take care, eh?’

They watch him stamp away, listen to the thuds as he climbs the serrated metal steps to the cab of the tractor. Lorna doesn’t know what to think.

Jon does. 'Hold tight! Look out for Bambi. I'm going to reverse down to the crossroads. We're going back to civilization and a nice cold beer. And not a moment too soon.'

Lorna presses her hand on his arm, enough pressure to show him she means it. 'It'd be ridiculous to turn back now. You know it would.'

'You heard what the guy said.'

'We need to see it for ourselves, if only to discount it, Jon.'

He shakes his head. 'I'm not feeling it.'

'You and your feelings,' she says, imitating his earlier comment, trying to make him laugh. 'Come on. It's the one venue I'm desperate to see.'

He beat boxes the wheel with his thumbs, considers his position. 'You'll owe me.'

She bends over the handbrake, crushes her mouth against the warm bristle of his jaw. He smells of sex and digestive biscuits. 'And what's not to like about that?'

A few moments later, the little red Fiat turns off the road, then rolls like a drop of blood down the wet green drive, the canopy of trees locking tight behind them.