

One

CORNWALL, AUGUST 1928

‘I can see your underwear.’

Skye Penrose knew that the ordinary response of a ten-year-old girl to such a statement would be to stop cartwheeling along Porthleven pier like a gambolling star and restore her skirt to its proper position. Instead she paused to change direction, then turned two perfect cartwheels towards the boy who’d spoken. In the rush of her upward trajectory, she lunged at him and gave his trousers a swift tug, dislodging them from his waist and popping at least one button in the process.

‘Now I can see yours,’ she said, giggling. She’d meant to run away immediately to escape his likely anger, but his face was so astonished – eyes wide, his mouth a well-rounded ‘O’, just the right size for throwing in a toffee if only she had one – that she grinned and said, ‘I’m Skye.’

He reinstated his trousers, stuttering, ‘I’m Nicholas Crawford. Pleased to meet you.’ He spoke oddly: his words sharp-angled rather than round, emphasis falling on different vowels so that the familiar became strange.

‘I thought it only fair, if we’re going to be friends, that neither

of us should know more about the other,' Skye said. 'So I had to see your underwear too.'

Nicholas Crawford nodded as if that made perfect sense. He was taller than Skye, with near-black hair and striking blue-grey eyes, like the sea on an uncertain day. His clothes were clean and pressed, not grubby with play like Skye's.

'Friends,' he repeated.

'As long as you can keep my secrets.'

Curiosity shimmered aquamarine in his eyes. 'What sort of secrets are they?'

'The best ones. Come on, I'll show you.'

She grabbed his hand and took off. He didn't hesitate, didn't protest that he ought to tell his mother where he was going, didn't say he couldn't be friends with someone who'd robbed his trousers of a button or two. He ran with her, keeping pace, even though, given his accent and demeanour, he must be from somewhere far from Cornwall – a place where, most likely, one didn't often run free. Together, they turned right in front of the town hall and raced along the sand until an apparently impenetrable rock wall blocked the way.

'Through here,' Skye said, showing him a gap just big enough to crawl through.

On the other side of the wall, his mouth opened again, and she knew he was wonderstruck, just as she'd hoped he would be.

'You're the first person I've brought here,' she said.

'Why me?'

She considered how to say it: *I've never met anyone so wide-eyed*. It wouldn't sound right. 'I thought you'd like it,' she said.

They both turned full circle to take in the white-laced sea hurling itself against the cliff face to the left of them, the curve of the bay where the waves simmered in the dropped wind, the cave behind them, which was craggy and dark and promised feats of great derring-do.

'It's all mine,' Skye said proudly. 'See that house up there.' She pointed to the clifftop, where a weather-thrashed cottage sank its toes into the ground, holding on, just. 'That's where I live with my mother. And my sister. The only way you can get to this cove is through the gap in the rock wall or the path that leads down from the house. So it's mine. And now yours too.'

Nicholas furrowed his brow. His hand moved to his pocket and he pulled out a watch. 'If you're going to share your cove with me, then I'll share this with you.' He handed it to her. 'It was my father's. And his father's too.'

Skye ran a finger over the engraved gold of the case before opening the cover. Inside, she found dignified Roman numerals and a strangely misshapen half-moon.

'Where's your father?' she asked.

'Up there.' Nicholas pointed to the sky.

'You don't need to share this.' She passed the pocket watch back to him, understanding it was the most important thing he possessed.

'I want to. You can have it one day every week.'

His tone was firm. This well-dressed boy who didn't seem to have ever set foot on a Cornish beach had strength of will. And he could run. And he liked her cove.

'That means you'll have to come back tomorrow to get it,' she said.

He nodded.

'Do you want to see inside the cave?'

He nodded again.



Skye stood on the clifftop, Nicholas's pocket watch tucked safely inside a handkerchief, and watched her new friend squeeze through the gap in the rocks and trudge along the sand below. Just before he turned towards town, he looked back and waved. Skye performed a rapid series of cartwheels that she thought might make him smile. Then she went in to dinner.

Her sister, Liberty, who was younger than Skye by one year, pounced on her the moment she entered the cottage.

‘Where were you?’ Liberty whined.

‘At the beach,’ Skye said.

Liberty screwed up her face. ‘You’re always at the beach.’

‘Then you could easily have found me.’

‘I’m hungry.’

Before she could remind her sister that the kitchen, not Skye, was the source of food, she saw, over Liberty’s shoulder, the Snakes and Ladders board set out on the table. Gold and green snakes wriggled towards illustrations of naughty children and Skye realised, her stomach twisting like the snakes, that she should be the subject of one of those drawings. She’d promised Liberty a game of Snakes and Ladders that afternoon. But she’d forgotten about it in the thrill of finding someone who loved the cove as much as she did – unlike her sister.

Liberty followed Skye’s eyes to the game. She flounced over and thrust it off the table. The dice clattered to the floor, momentarily obscuring the gentle hum of voices from the room next door where their mother was busy with one of her clients.

‘I’ll make you a cup of tea,’ Skye said. ‘And then we can play.’

Liberty didn’t reply and Skye thought she might march upstairs and sulk in her room as she was wont to do. But then she nodded and peace was momentarily restored. They sipped their tea as they played and Skye said nothing when Liberty, in order to ascend a ladder, miscounted the number of squares she was supposed to move. She said nothing either when Liberty protested that Skye had miscounted and needed to slide down a snake. Liberty won.



The following morning, Skye was up at dawn and in her swimsuit, waiting impatiently for Nicholas, his pocket watch held tight and safe in her hand. She sat in the window seat in the parlour, staring

at her beloved ocean, willing him to ignore propriety and come now, although it was too early even for breakfast. When Liberty appeared downstairs an hour later, she scowled at Skye's swimsuit and let fly with a spiteful foot, which Skye – who'd had plenty of practice – dodged. Then there was a knock at the door and Skye beamed. He too must prefer her cove to breakfast.

'See who it is, darling,' her mother called from the kitchen where she was standing at the chipped blue Royal Windsor stove, stirring a pot of porridge. 'I'm not expecting anyone until ten.'

Skye was already sprinting down the hallway and throwing open the door. Nicholas stood there, alongside a woman with a possessive hand clamped on his shoulder. Skye's smile faltered.

'Is this the girl?' the woman asked.

'This is Skye,' Nicholas replied.

'I would like to see your mother,' the woman told Skye.

'Come in,' Skye said politely. As she held the door wide, the cottage's coloured glass oil lamps – they were too far out of town for electricity – flickered with the ill wind the woman had brought with her.

In the kitchen, which smelled as always of woodsmoke, French cigarettes and coffee, Vanessa Penrose turned to greet the visitors. She was resplendent in her long and gloriously ruffled black silk embroidered nightgown, which had draped sleeves and a low neckline. The woman beside Nicholas stared as if Skye's mother were cartwheeling through the house with her knickers showing.

'Have you come for breakfast?' Vanessa said, which made the woman wrench her eyes away from the nightgown. 'You must be Nicholas,' Vanessa continued. 'Skye told me all about you. I'm Vanessa, or Mrs Penrose, whichever you prefer. Do you like porridge?'

Nicholas smiled at last. 'I do.'

'He does not,' said the woman.

'I do and I'm hungry,' Nicholas said with the same quiet determination Skye had heard in his voice when he'd said at the door, *This is Skye*.

'Skye has hollow legs,' Vanessa said to Nicholas, 'which means she's unable to stand up until she's eaten. You'll simply have to join us.'

Skye giggled and Nicholas sat down.

'I am Finella Crawford and your daughter owes my nephew an apology.' Nicholas's aunt had a voice like a fish hook: sharp and designed to hurt. It was accented like Nicholas's, but from her mouth it sounded abrasive rather than interesting.

'She ruined a perfectly good pair of trousers and stole a very valuable item,' his aunt continued.

Skye reached under the table and pressed Nicholas's pocket watch into his hand, hoping it would help.

'Thanks,' he whispered.

Vanessa took an orange from the bowl, cut it in half and juiced it. She poured the juice into a glass and passed it to Nicholas. 'Skye told me about the trousers. I can mend the buttons. But Skye doesn't steal.'

'You're wrong. She stole my nephew's pocket watch, left to him by his dear father, my brother.' Nicholas's aunt dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief but Skye rather thought she was enjoying her performance.

'I have the watch,' Nicholas said, holding it up.

'Mystery solved.' Vanessa made quick work of three more oranges before sitting down.

'I'm sorry for making a button fall off your trousers,' Skye said to Nicholas, using her best manners.

'Buttons and Skye go together like the sea air and smooth hair,' her mother said, glancing at Finella's wind-ruffled coiffure.

Nicholas's aunt changed direction. 'I was told that you divine the future.'

'I do,' Vanessa replied.

‘My sister-in-law would like a reading.’ The words squeezed from Finella’s mouth as if the idea were as repugnant as animal droppings. ‘She has suffered a great loss – the death of her husband, Nicholas’s father. I’ve brought her from New York to the country of her birth under the instructions of my doctor; she requires sea air and repose. Given what she’s suffered, I’m prepared to allow her to indulge this whim.’

Skye’s mother poured honey onto Nicholas’s porridge. Liberty’s eyes widened at the quantity and she opened her mouth to protest, but Skye shook her head furiously at her sister. That honey offered a solidarity that could not be spoken of, yet. Like Nicholas, Skye and Liberty did not have a father.

‘I will take your sister-in-law on for readings provided you let Nicholas continue to play with Skye,’ Vanessa said. ‘I think they’ll be good for one another.’

Nicholas’s aunt acquiesced with a nod, then turned to leave, forgetting her nephew, but Skye solved that problem by calling out, ‘Nicholas will be home in time for dinner.’



Over the next month, Skye introduced Nicholas, who was a year older than her – eleven, rather than ten – and who came from a faraway city of skyscrapers, to her world. The world of fossicking in rock pools for hermit crabs and hairy crabs and seeing whose would scuttle away the fastest once put down on the sand. The world of scraping mussels and limpets from rocks, working alongside the red-billed oystercatchers. Of searching for cowrie shells, the fairy-sized, peach-coloured slivers that were so easy to miss and therefore all the more precious, to add to Skye’s collection.

Initially, Liberty joined them, trailing behind as they skidded down the path to the cove, bargaining with Skye. ‘I promise I won’t kick you if you stay home and play with me.’

‘Come and play out here instead,’ Skye said, knowing she could usually avoid her sister’s feet anyway and that summer wasn’t a time to sit inside.

But rock pools and shells weren’t to Liberty’s taste. She sat on the sand, back turned towards her sister, glaring at Nicholas when he tried to give her the biggest and fastest crab to race. Eventually, Skye forgot that her sister was there and, hours later, realised Liberty had gone back up to the house to talk to her collection of dolls, who all preferred tea parties to limpets.

One morning, Liberty was particularly annoying on the way down to the beach. ‘Don’t leave me alone,’ she whined, over and over.

‘If you come with us, you won’t be alone,’ Skye reasoned.

So Liberty did, but once on the sand, she shoved a crab down the back of Skye’s bathing suit. It nipped Skye in fright.

‘You’re a beast!’ Skye shouted at her sister.

Liberty threw a fistful of sand in Skye’s face and burst into tears.

Skye watched Liberty run home. The sand scratched her eyes in the same way the words she’d yelled at her sister scraped her conscience. She would play two games of Snakes and Ladders with Liberty that night, she promised herself.

‘Let’s go in the cave,’ she said to Nicholas.

He nodded and followed her in.

They lay on their backs in the darkest, deepest part, where nothing could be seen. They were silent for only a moment before they began to tell stories that couldn’t be told out in the light. Nicholas’s story was about his father, who had died from ‘an excess of emotion’, whatever that meant. His mother had then suffered an excess of emotion of a different kind, but hers had sent her first to bed and then back to England – where she had lived before her marriage – rather than up into the sky to join her husband.

‘So my aunt looks after me now. My mother doesn’t go anywhere, except to see your mother for readings,’ Nicholas finished, and Skye

heard in his voice that he hated it: the loss of his father, the vanishing of his mother, and being subject to the custody of his aunt.

The Penroses would care for him, she vowed. But first she needed to tell him who the Penroses were.

‘None of the children in town will play with me. Or with Liberty,’ she said. ‘It’s because my mother tells fortunes.’ A gust of wind screeched into the cave, forcing more of the truth from Skye’s mouth. ‘And because Liberty and I don’t have a father. Not in the way that you don’t have a father. We’ve *never* had one. My mother has never been married. But you’re meant to be married if you have a baby.’

All her life Skye had been told by sneering adults and jeering children that it was a sin to lose one’s father in the way that hers and Liberty’s had become lost. To die was heroic; to be merely absent was ungodly.

Nicholas said, ‘I like that your mother tells fortunes. I like your mother. And you’re my friend.’



Not long after, Skye was able to show Nicholas the best thing of all. Early one morning, Vanessa drove them to a grassy paddock that served as an airfield and pointed to a de Havilland Gipsy Moth.

‘It’s a beautiful day for flying,’ she said.

‘Flying,’ Nicholas repeated, eyes fixed to the canvas biplane before them.

‘You can go first,’ Skye told him.

‘Don’t leave me here by myself,’ Liberty sulked but Skye had no intention of sitting in the car with a sister who hated flying. Instead she ran beside the Moth as it bounced and then leapt into the sky. Nicholas, helmeted and scarfed and jacketed to withstand the chill, waved down at her from the front seat of the open cockpit, and her mother sat at the controls behind.

Then it was Skye's turn. Once the Moth ascended, Skye took over; her mother had started teaching her to fly six months ago. Vanessa's voice gave directions through the Gosport tube that connected front passenger to back, although Skye hardly needed them any more.

She handled the turn, and then did what she'd seen her mother do hundreds of times before: she flew into the wind, giving the Moth full throttle, then climbed vertically until the plane inclined onto its back and she felt the stomach-roiling thrill of looping the loop.

She heard Vanessa say in a bemused voice, 'Let me know if you get into trouble.' But the Moth anticipated Skye's every move. At the right moment, she eased off the throttle and adjusted the ailerons to keep herself vertical. The plane arced downwards like a gentle dove to complete a perfect circle.

Skye wanted to cartwheel along the wing, looping her own loop, but she'd pushed against her mother's equilibrium enough already. She let Vanessa take the rear controls to land.

As soon as the plane had come to a halt, her mother lifted her out, saying, 'I don't know whether to shout at you or to laugh.'

'I prefer laughing,' Skye said. Then she called to Nicholas, 'Did you see me?'

'That was you?' he said admiringly.

'That was most definitely my daughter,' Vanessa said. 'Trying to show me she's more than ready to handle a take-off and a landing. Perhaps next year we'll have you looping the loop too, Nicholas.'

Nicholas placed both hands on the canvas wing of the plane. 'Do you really think I could do that?' he asked.

'I'll teach you,' said Skye's mother. 'I think you have the right temperament for flying – level-headedness is actually more important than daring, no matter what Skye thinks. I'm sure you could teach her a thing or two.'

'I don't think anybody could teach Skye anything,' Nicholas said,

whereupon Vanessa laughed, ruffled his hair and said, 'Unfortunately I think you might be right.'



All too soon summer was over and school interfered with their days at the beach and their flying lessons, but even school was tolerable now that Skye had Nicholas as her friend. That fact was confirmed at the end of the very first day when they were walking out of the school gates together and Skye heard a gaggle of children hiss their usual taunts: 'Witch's daughter! She-devil!'

Skye drew her sister closer as the biggest boy, the butcher's son, knowing that Liberty was the weaker mark, picked up a rock and flung it at her. Skye deflected it with her arm, refusing to wince at the sting and the blood. Liberty started to cry.

Skye was unsurprised when Nicholas turned away from them and towards the taunters. She'd expected that once he saw how despised she was, he would make other friends; those whose lives weren't besmirched by illegitimacy and sorcery.

Nicholas stood in front of the butcher's son and said, politely, 'Legend has it that every time you say the word "she-devil" in the presence of one, your teeth will turn grey and then fall out.'

The butcher's son put his hand up to his mouth to cover the gap of a missing tooth on one side and a greying tooth on the other.

After that, it was accepted that Skye and Nicholas were inseparable friends. And because Nicholas was the smartest kid at school, nobody wanted to risk disbelieving what he'd said.

In the afternoons, they would walk together to Skye's house, where Nicholas would do more schoolwork in the kitchen. The first time, Skye had questioned him about it, telling him she never even bothered to look over her spelling words.

'But don't you want to escape?' he'd asked, then shook his head. 'You don't need to. But I need to know I can go anywhere I want to when I'm old enough.'

Escape. Skye had dropped into a chair, understanding hitting her forcefully as she realised how much he hated being trapped with an aunt who spared him no love, waiting for his mother to recover. After that, she not only sat beside him and did her spelling words but tackled some mathematics too.

In that way, the year passed quickly by and summer came again. Days were once more spent at the cove, or the airfield with both Skye and Nicholas taking lessons from Vanessa, or exploring the downs and moors behind the house. Occasionally, Skye's mother held weekend house parties and fabulous people descended upon Porthleven, some staying at the house, others cramming into any available room in town. Skye didn't know most of the people, but that didn't matter. The parties were a spectacle, like a sudden summer storm: electric, skin-tingling, alive.

Vanessa would talk Nicholas's aunt into letting him stay the weekend and Skye, Nicholas and Liberty would camp in the garden, having surrendered their rooms to the guests. They'd bathe and dress in the best clothes they owned, and Skye would actually brush her tangled knot of dark brown hair. Then she and Nicholas would slip into the window seat from where they could see everything.

Liberty, who adored the parties, would circle the room, studying the women's clothes, eavesdropping on conversations, staring at people with pleading eyes until they beckoned her over. She would beam and chat – and nobody would ever guess that she was disposed to slipping crabs down people's backs – until the adults bored of her and returned to their grown-up circles. After those parties, Skye would hear her sister reenacting the evening with her dolls; the dark-haired doll called Liberty would always be given the starring role at the centre of everyone's devoted attention.

At one such party, a year after Skye first met Nicholas, Vanessa Penrose entered the room later than most of her guests, looking like someone Skye had never met: a woman with curled and shining near-black hair, and the reddest of red lips. She wore her 'French

dress', as she called it: a cream silk bodice with a deep V-neckline, and a skirt made entirely of ostrich feathers dyed in various shades of cream and gold. The exposed skin of her décolletage was supposed to be partially concealed with a matching scarf but Vanessa never bothered with the scarf. The combined effect of her lustrous hair, glossy lips and the unexpected gold feathers was that Vanessa Penrose spent the whole night dancing.

There was one man who came to every party and who was always allocated more than his fair share of dances with Skye's mother. Skye watched Vanessa smile at him – a smile unlike that which she bestowed upon her daughters or any of her other guests. They danced beautifully, like movie stars, and even Liberty sat quietly, entranced by their magnificent mother.

The man's lips whispered against Vanessa's ear. Skye didn't want to watch any more. Liberty had leaned her head against the wall and her eyelids drooped so Skye tucked a blanket over her legs. Then she led Nicholas outside, sighing.

'I wish I could dance like that,' she said.

'I can show you.'

'You can dance?'

He shrugged. 'My parents made me learn. They said all gentlemen danced.'

Skye laughed. 'If you're a gentleman, you'll need a lady to dance with. We both know that, according to the town of Porthleven, the Penrose women aren't ladies.'

'I think you are.'

He bowed to her with a flourish and a grin, which made her feel less awkward. He didn't tease her for her clumsiness but moved them both through the flawless full-moon night, showing her what to do. In accompaniment, silver ribbons of light waltzed across the sea below them.

'We'll have to do this again when we're older,' Skye said, once she had the basics under control. 'The clifftop deserves a more splendid

dress.' She indicated her white dress, which was simple and clean but lacked the panache of gold ostrich feathers.

'What if we're not friends by then?' Nicholas asked, stopping suddenly.

Skye just missed squashing his foot. 'Why wouldn't we be?' She stood beside him, both of them facing out to the ocean.

'My aunt says that we'll go back to New York soon. I have to go to school there, the same school my father went to. We'll leave as soon as my mother's better.'

'Will she get better?' Skye asked. She only saw Nicholas's mother when she came to the house for Vanessa's prophecies and she always seemed wraith-like; a creature who might simply slip into the sparkling waves and disappear.

'I don't know,' Nicholas said.

It was the first time Skye had ever seen him hesitate. She took his hand and squeezed it. 'You'll stay here forever,' she said. After all, she had a mother who told the future so she could claim some authority on this.

'I hope so.'