

Summer appeared from nowhere that year in Everdene. Most people had given up hope of ever seeing it again, after two years of endless grey and wet with barely any respite. But suddenly the sun burst back onto the scene with unapologetic ebullience, throwing her golden rays with abandon onto the three miles of beach, turning the sand from sludgy beige to roseate gold. There was the touch of the show-off about her: the girl who knows she is the belle of the ball; the girl who relishes being the centre of attention.

Some, with typically British pessimism, said the glorious sunshine would never last, but those with a beach hut at Everdene exchanged secretive, gleeful smiles as day after day broke cloudless and bright.

Fifty-seven huts, painted in ice-cream colours, some immaculate, some dilapidated; some tiny, with barely room for a bucket and spade; others sprawling and substantial. You couldn't walk past them and not want to be inside one; to share the heavenly luxury of falling asleep and waking up with the sandy shore on your doorstep, and the sea itself only a few feet beyond that.

For the people lucky enough to have one, this was the summer of their dreams – a summer of hazy days and

balmy nights, of the kind read about in books; of the kind recalled in distant memories. A summer of picnic baskets and bicycle rides and ripe strawberries. Freckles and ice cream and stolen afternoon naps.

And love. Love blossomed and unfurled. The heat healed rifts and forged bonds and mended broken hearts, reaching across miles and spanning decades. Love in many different guises. Sometimes the love had waited patiently to re-emerge, blinking, into the sunlight. Other times it sprang up unexpectedly and surprised itself.

It was undoubtedly the sun that had coaxed love out of hiding, though, a golden, glittering orb that stayed fixed in the sky for weeks on end, only standing aside occasionally for the rain to moisten the parched earth.

Nobody wanted it to end.

*The
Winter Before*



ELODIE

The woman stood at the top of the steps. She knew, without counting, that there were twelve. Right now they were treacherously silver with morning frost. They ran from the terrace at the back of The Grey House down to the sweeping lawns, which in turn led down to the sea via a secret path. It wasn't a terribly well-kept secret, as secrets go, but it certainly gave off an air of mystery, its entrance hidden amidst clumps of marram grass, twisting its way down the cliff to the beach that was just starting to reveal a crescent of pinkish sand as the tide receded.

It was called The Grey House because it was built of the local grey stone, but it was in no way as cold or forbidding as its name might suggest, even on this dreary, indeterminate morning. On the contrary, it was soft and mellow in the morning mist, snuggled in amongst the twisted monkey puzzle trees, the oldest of a very few houses overlooking the bay. There were plenty of windows to break up the facade, and a set of French doors that led out onto the terrace, and above that a wrought-iron balcony that made the most of the panoramic view.

'We don't expect it to stay on the market long,' the estate agent warned her. 'Not now it's gone online.'

Elodie ignored him. Her eye was on a fat rabbit at the

far end of the lawn, nibbling on the first tender shoots in the herbaceous border. Well, what had once been an herbaceous border. It was choked with weeds that allowed only the most audacious of plants to push their way through. She recalled a time when that would never have been allowed. Two gardeners had kept the grounds manicured. Not into municipal, soulless precision – they had allowed nature to have her head up to a point – but into the joyful abundance of an English country garden at its best. Or the best it could be, given its exposure to the sea.

It was going to take some serious landscaping to get it back to its former glory. The lawn was ruined, speckled with moss and bare patches. She could see, in her mind's eye, a croquet ball rolling across the grass once again. She thought she heard the joyful cry of a child, but it was a seagull, slicing through the air with determination. She gave a shiver. There was no sound more evocative of the seaside. And summer.

That summer. More than fifty years ago now. Yet what struck her more than anything was the fact that it was the good memories that came flooding back to her, rather than the reminder of what came after. She had been right to come back. It wasn't the house, after all, that had done the harm. It was the people in it.

'I'll have it,' she said.

The agent blinked. 'You haven't seen inside.'

Elodie flapped the details at the view. 'When you look at that, the inside's almost irrelevant, wouldn't you say?' She didn't tell him that she already knew every last inch of the house; that she had imagined it sitting up and taking notice as she'd swept in through the stone pillars and up

the drive. That she had sensed its relief as she emerged from her car. A ludicrous notion, of course. Fanciful. But it was her imagination that had got her where she was.

‘It’s a magnificent property. The most coveted position in Everdene. This was the first house to be built here, so it’s in the prime position.’

‘Yes. I’ve read the details.’ Elodie knew more about the house than even the details revealed. That it had been built by a doting father for his convalescent daughter. That she had died, despite the sea air, and that the house had languished empty for half a century. That it had been home to a battalion of soldiers during the war, when they had practised manoeuvres on Everdene beach in preparation for the D-Day landings.

That once they had left, it had lain empty again, until—

The agent interrupted her thoughts. ‘Are you ... proceedable?’

Proceedable. It was one of those estate agent euphemisms that basically meant: have you got the cash?

Elodie looked at him. Her eyes were as grey as the stone of the house, only at this moment not nearly as forgiving. ‘I wouldn’t waste your time if I weren’t,’ she told him.

He nodded. ‘I can assure you, that’s not the case for everyone. But I do apologize.’ If he could get this one tied up, that was next month’s wages paid. ‘Are we talking asking price?’

Elodie didn’t answer. Her mind drifted, to a day when the sun had baked the pink sand so fiercely you could barely stand on it and a motorbike roared through the frill of surf at the tide’s edge. She could feel her outrage as if it were yesterday. She could see the rider’s eyes dance as he came to a halt five feet in front of her – there were no

safety measures in those days; no helmets required – and smell the hot, oily exhaust. How dare he invade their privacy; the Lewis stronghold? Everyone knew this was their stretch of beach; no one dared venture onto it unless invited. It was an unspoken lore.

‘Oi!’ She’d marched up to him. ‘What do you think you’re doing? This is a private beach.’

‘Actually,’ he said. ‘It’s not. There’s no such thing. Haven’t you read the Magna Carta?’

Elodie had – well, some of it – but she wasn’t going to let herself be intimidated by history.

‘Bugger the Magna Carta,’ she said. ‘No one comes here unless they are invited.’

‘Ah,’ came the reply. ‘Well, I have been.’

Elodie wished she were wearing something more fetching than her old school swimming costume with the life-saving badges sewn on. Normally, she never cared what she was wearing on the beach but she suddenly felt underdressed.

The stranger smiled at her.

‘Your father has asked us for the weekend. My parents are coming down by car but I can’t stand it when they squabble over the map-reading so I made my own way.’

‘Oh.’ The wind was taken out of Elodie’s sails somewhat. Her father had mentioned the visitors at breakfast. The Jukes, she thought they were called.

That was the whole point of The Grey House, after all. The never-ending stream of summer guests – friends, relations, business associates, hangers-on – that swarmed through its walls during July and August, when the Lewis family decamped en masse from Worcestershire to Devon, staff and all. Elodie never bothered to keep track of exactly

who was who or why they were there. She was socially adept and gregarious, equally comfortable joining in or doing her own thing, depending on the circumstances; as happy organizing a game of rounders on the beach for the youngsters or mixing cocktails before dinner for the grown-ups.

This guest, she decided, was much more likely to require a gin and tonic than a glass of squash. The cigarette he pulled out of a gold case stored in his trouser pocket confirmed this. He proffered one and she shook her head. She wanted to get back to the house as quickly as possible. He snapped the case shut, put it back in his pocket, put the cigarette in his mouth and looked at her.

And in that moment, she knew this man – who wasn't that much older than she was, a month short of nineteen – was going to shape her future.

If she had known then what she knew now, would she have walked away? She took in a deep breath at the memory of the first time his gaze met hers; the flicker of something strange and new and terrifying yet irresistible. A feeling that had made her feel concomitantly vulnerable and powerful, because she had looked in his eyes and seen surprise; shock even. Elodie tried to push the image away.

Today, the sea lapped the shore beneath The Grey House in the same rhythm as it had that day, and the dunes were as soft as ever they were. The only visible change from this vantage point was the row of brightly coloured huts that had ventured further down the beach. Back in the day there had been no more than a dozen, home to an exclusive but hedonistic crowd intent on merriment over the summer months. Now she could see at least another twenty.

'Does the hut still come with the property?' she asked.

The hut belonging to The Grey House had been the last one in the row then, allowing the Lewis family to spread themselves out as far down the beach as they liked. Now it was smack bang in the middle.

'I believe so,' said the agent. 'Although it's been rented out for the summer of late. It provides quite a good income.'

'Good,' said Elodie. There was no point unless she had the whole package. The Grey House was nothing without its beach hut.

'So – do we have a deal?'

'We do. How quickly can we tie things up?'

'The owner had to go into a home a month or so ago. She's very fragile. We're going to have to arrange house clearance on her behalf before proceeding, but if there's no chain involved on your side we're looking at ... six weeks? Assuming no snags.'

Elodie looked away, gazing out at the horizon, chewing the inside of her cheek. There was a lump in her throat suddenly. She took in a couple of deep breaths to dispel it before she spoke again.

'Good. As quickly as possible. There'll be no snags.'

'Are you absolutely certain you don't want to see inside?'

Elodie nodded. She was quite sure. She wanted to be on her own the first time she went in. She had no idea how she would handle it, but she certainly didn't want a stranger gauging her reaction or feeling the need to hand her a handkerchief. Privacy was paramount to Elodie. She didn't share easily. Once she had, and that had taught her a lesson: never give any of yourself away.

Until, of course, the time was right.