

## I

The first orange-tipped butterfly to appear in Everdene that year was spotted by Robyn Moss. She had no idea it was the first, but was delighted by the sight of it dancing across the dunes, skittering above the marram grass as if leading the way for her through the spikes, for it meant winter was firmly behind them and bright days were ahead.

She tried to keep up with it as she ran from the track at the top of the dunes, where her truck was parked, down towards the beach, but eventually she had to accept that she couldn't. She paused to kick off her flip-flops, which were always a hindrance as the sand got deeper. It was cold, icy cold on the soles of her feet, as the early morning April sun was not yet strong enough to heat the ground. She stuffed the shoes into her straw holdall on top of her towel and two warm pains au chocolat in a paper bag that she'd picked up on her way through.

The shop in Everdene sold everything you might need for a trip to the beach, from body boards to sunscreen to sticks of rock, and it had a hot oven that served up temptation throughout the day: French sticks, fat pasties, roast chickens. Her mouth watered at the thought of the sweet, melting pastries, the perfect reward for the ordeal

she was about to face. Though on days like this, she didn't mind that their resolution this year had been to start each day with a swim in the sea unless the waves were really treacherous. She wasn't so keen when it was dreary and wet and the whole world seemed grey – the dunes, the sand, the sea, the sky all blurring into one.

Today, though, the colours were clearly demarcated. The grassy dunes were sage, the sand pale gold, the sea turquoise and the sky powdery blue studded with white clouds. And in between the dunes and the sea ran a meandering row of beach huts set out like a watercolour palette: blue, red, yellow, pink, green. They were all slightly faded after a long winter of assault from the sea spray; and they were all different sizes and shapes and ages. Some were immaculate, some battered and well worn, and it was inevitably the latter, the huts that had been in the same family for years, that held the most interesting people.

It was one of these huts that Robyn was heading to as she ran down the steep slope; one of the very first to have been put up on this stretch of beach in the sixties, when summers seemed longer and sunnier and more innocent, and ice cream didn't melt so quickly. When people knew how to change a bicycle tyre and recognised the chirrup of a stone chat, and were happy to eat potatoes from a tin. When there were three television channels and the *Radio Times* only told you what was on the BBC.

Being only just thirty, Robyn had no memory of this decade, but she loved the fact that her boyfriend's family had kept their hut almost frozen in time. Fondly known as the Shedquarters, it had bright floral curtains and Formica kitchen units and cracked old leather chairs

and a record player, together with a stack of retro LPs: the Beach Boys, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young. She and Jake often picked things up in charity shops to bring back there. It was a nostalgic hug of a place, somewhere to leave your troubles behind, pour a beer or a coffee and switch off. Jake, his dad and his brother Ethan were all crazy surfers, and one wall was stacked with surfboards and wetsuits, the air heavy with the coconutty scent of board wax. Robyn surfed too but it was out of the question at the moment. She wasn't taking any risks.

She arrived at the front of the Shedquarters to find Jake still asleep in the single bunk at the back in a tangle of blankets and pillows. She knew how warm and cosy it must be in there and was tempted to clamber in and fall back to sleep in his arms. She'd made a decision not to shack up in the Shedquarters with him when he moved out of his rented flat to save money, preferring to stay in the relative comfort of her parents' farm. But she still felt a pang at the sight of his little nest, and her heart melted at how cute he looked first thing in the morning, all stubble and sleepiness and messed-up hair.

'Hey!' Jake reached a burly arm around her and pulled her in towards him. How easy it would be, she thought, as they kissed as if they hadn't only seen each other ten hours ago.

'Mmmmmm.' Jake pulled her in closer. She laughed, knowing what he had in mind. But a resolution was a resolution.

'Come on. Our appointment's at nine thirty. We better get going,' she said, rolling off him and prodding him. 'I'll make you a coffee. Which is pretty noble of me.'

Going off coffee had been one of the first signs. She'd

taken one sip of her morning latte and thrown up, and hadn't touched one since. She flicked the kettle on as Jake headed to the bathroom, made him a coffee, then grabbed her wetsuit from a hook. The water was still pretty nippy in April and she didn't want to get a chill.

She inserted one leg into her wetsuit and tugged on the neoprene in an attempt to get it on in one go. It was always a struggle. It was going to become even more of a battle before long. She pulled the rest of the rubbery fabric over her hips and turned for Jake to pull up her zip as he emerged minty fresh from the bathroom.

Once she was done up, she turned to one side, automatically breathing in. 'What do you think? Does it show yet?'

He smiled quizzically. 'Isn't it only the size of a chick-pea?'

She counted on her fingers.

'Blueberry, raspberry, green olive, prune, strawberry – lime. I think we're on lime.'

Jake circled his fingers into a lime size. 'Wow.'

'Anyway, they'll measure it later. To work out the exact due date.'

She made an excited-but-scared face.

'Are you worried?' he asked, concerned.

'Of course I am. Aren't you?'

Jake looked again at the imaginary lime baby contained within his fingers.

'A bit, I suppose. But I know that whatever happens, we'll get through it.'

Robyn gazed at him. That was why she loved him. Jake was as solid as the rocks jutting out into the bay. Always there. Always the same. He never panicked or

catastrophised. Was that what had drawn her to him? A contrast to the emotional rollercoaster of life at Hawksworthy Farm, always rife with drama and crises? Not conflict, for her parents adored each other. But there was often something thrumming in the air that made her careful and wary. Maybe that was farm life? You were always at the mercy of Mother Nature; never fully in control. They'd learned that, to their cost.

Yep, she thought. That was what had drawn her to him. That and the fact he looked super-hot in his board shorts – no wetsuit for him. She looked admiringly at him as he sipped his coffee. Broad shoulders, flat stomach, strong legs, shaggy dark hair. He was solid, in both senses of the word.

'Come on,' she said. 'Let's get going or we'll be late for our appointment.'

They set off across the beach, their fingers entwined. The tide was out, and it was a good few hundred yards across the damp sand, scarred with ridges from the pounding of the waves. The air here was forever filled with their noise: they were rarely silent, only in the highest pressure at the height of summer when the water was unusually flat, like a sheet of glass, and the surfers complained and looked on their apps for somewhere else along the coast to take their boards. A lone runner plodded along the shoreline; in a little while, the dog-walkers would start to appear. They had come to recognise the regulars: a frenetic Dalmatian, a pair of rescue greyhounds, an ancient basset whose ears dragged along the sand.

Robyn wondered if now was the time to mention what was on her mind? Probably not. Best to take it one thing at a time. Anxiety about the scan was making her

thoughts whirl, and they would settle once it was over, she felt sure. It was weird, she thought, how one small change of circumstance could make something you thought you'd made peace with start to press on your conscience.

Ten feet from the water she stopped dead.

'It looks cold today.' The sea always looked more glacial with the sun on it. As bright and clear as arctic ice.

Suddenly, she found her legs going from underneath her as Jake scooped her up in his arms and started running towards the water's edge.

'You can't do that to me!' she shrieked, laughing as he surged through the first of the waves. 'I'm carrying precious cargo!'

He looked down at her lovingly. 'Oh, yes,' he said. 'So you are.'

He bent his head to kiss her and just as she shut her eyes to kiss him back he dropped her into the water, prompting a squeal of outrage.

They frolicked for about quarter of an hour. After two minutes, the water always felt warmer, and Robyn floated on her back, watching the sun rise higher over the dunes and letting her thoughts and worries drift away. It was all good, she reminded herself. The Linhay was coming along faster now. It was impossible to tell how much longer it was going to take, because you could never tell, with building projects, especially if you were doing them in your spare time. Even with professional help from Jake's dad, it had seemed to be taking for ever. But in the past month, the plastering and wiring had been done, the kitchen and bathrooms were being installed, and although the outside was a quagmire, all churned up with mud, their little house was starting to move on after all the

seemingly endless, back-breaking, bank-account-draining hard work.

It was Jake who'd pushed the boundaries. Who'd fought for the plate glass wall in the bedroom that took advantage of the view over the wild ocean, and then found a Japanese soaking tub to go in front of it. And who'd suggested the oxide-red corrugated-iron roof instead of tiles, as a nod to the building's agricultural heritage. As soon as Robyn had seen it go on, she realised he was right. It had transformed it from a derelict cattle-shed into what would become a proper home. Their home. Their *family* home, all being well.

He'd consistently pushed the project a little further to tie it in with the natural world around it and make the most of its breathtaking location. He had a quiet vision and an eye for quirky design that Robyn found inspiring after being brought up by farmers who appreciated the practicality and longevity of UPVC. She looked at him now, powering out towards the horizon with his crawl. In a moment, he would turn back and swim to her and they would walk back up to the hut together and get dressed, eat their breakfast. And then it would be time.

She felt a little flutter inside her. It must be nerves, for it was too early for it to be anything else. All being well, this morning would be a turning point. They could tell everyone their good news. Start making preparations. The room at the Linhay that was next to the master bedroom would officially become the nursery.

It was all the architect's fault. She had pushed them to put extra bedrooms on the plans.

'This is going to be your for ever house. You don't want to wish you'd made it bigger in five years' time. You don't

want to go through the stress of building an extension. And you might not get permission. Much better to think big now and factor in everything you might need.'

And once the rooms had been there on the drawings, they seemed to be crying out to be filled. Robyn had half-joked to Jake that they might as well start trying for a family straight away. They'd been together four years, after all, and were both keen on the idea of children, and agreed they wanted them sooner rather than later as Everdene was such a wonderful place to bring up kids.

'We might as well crack on now. We're both the wrong side of thirty,' she pointed out.

'Only just!' protested Jake, vainer than she, but he'd agreed.

And boom! Two months later, she was pregnant. They were shocked, delighted and alarmed in equal measure. Now they really did have to get cracking with the house. The idea had taken some getting used to at first, and Robyn had felt a bit off-colour, made worse by the strain of keeping it quiet. But not for much longer.

Robyn sculled herself around in the water for a few more minutes, wondering if this was how the baby inside her felt, weightless and floating and free, like a little astronaut in space. And no matter how hard she tried, another image kept coming back to her: a young girl, panicking, worrying, wondering what to do for the best. The image had been haunting her over the past few nights, waking her several times, along with the need to pee, both impossible to ignore.

Suddenly, Jake's head popped up beside her like a friendly seal.

'Will you stop doing that?' she laughed.

He always took her by surprise, gliding underneath the water and bobbing up when she least expected it, making her jump.

‘You OK? You look miles away.’

‘Fine. Just anxious about the scan, that’s all.’ She didn’t tell him the truth. It was a quandary she didn’t want to share with him. Not yet. ‘Come on. Let’s go.’

She swam back towards the shore, Jake following behind her.

In the hut, she jumped under the lukewarm trickle that passed as a shower – another reason she wasn’t shacking up with Jake while they waited for the Linhay to be finished – then fell upon her pain au chocolat. The morning swim always sharpened her appetite, and the nausea she’d felt in the early weeks of pregnancy was thankfully fading.

She pulled on her clothes, trying not to think too much. In two hours’ time, she thought, I’ll know if everything is OK. And if it was, then she could decide what to do.