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## About the author

Katie had a ten-year NHS career before leaving to write full-time. She lives in the countryside with her family and her novels include the 2018 World Book Night pick *My Everything* and the eBook bestseller *A Life Without You*. She loves strong coffee, the promise of a blank page and stealing her husband's toast. *Unbreak Your Heart* is her fifth novel.

Say hello on Facebook @katiemarshauthor or chat to her on Twitter or Instagram @marshisms.

*Also by Katie Marsh:*

My Everything  
A Life Without You  
This Beautiful Life  
The Rest of Me

# Unbreak Your Heart

Katie Marsh



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*For Richard, with love*



*'Hope' is the thing with feathers –  
That perches in the soul –  
And sings the tune without the words –  
and never stops – at all*

*Emily Dickinson*





*Spring*



# 1

## *Beth*

**B**eth's sole aim in coming to the Lakes was to disappear, but it seemed that her car had other ideas. Heads turned wherever she went, following the grind and bump of the engine as she rattled past. Black smoke puffed from the exhaust as if trying to skywrite her arrival and it was becoming clear that, during her ten years living in the States, she had totally forgotten how to drive a manual car.

She jerked down a winding lane into another village, muttering 'Fresh start' at scattered white houses through increasingly gritted teeth. Pale pink clematis climbed up walls, fells rose majestically around her, but she was too busy trying to control her vehicle to drink them in. A clutch of walkers in sturdy boots and bright kagoules looked up from their maps to stare, and a woman in thick-rimmed glasses stopped watering the hanging baskets outside the village shop to peer in her direction.

Beth flushed. In the four hours since handing over the last of her savings she had discovered that the only part of her used car that was ever silent was the horn. Trying to wind the window down unleashed a squeal not unlike her own when she had accidentally sat on an ant's nest

last summer and she was becoming increasingly concerned that the driver's door was about to fall off. If evidence were needed that she hadn't thought any of this through, this car was it.

She put her foot on the brake and was pleasantly surprised when the wheels slowed in time to avoid flattening a sheep that was ambling across the low stone bridge in front of her. It moved on sturdy legs, wagging its black ears, a ragged purple patch sprayed onto its shaggy left shoulder. Its nose sniffed one way, then the other, before it decided to settle itself down in the middle of the road, about five metres from her rusty bumper.

Beth checked her watch, stress beginning to prickle. Her new start would become a dead end if she didn't get a move on. She had been travelling against time ever since leaving Brooklyn and her knuckles were so white they could give the smattering of late snowdrops swaying by her front wheel a run for their money. She pressed the horn again, but there was no sound. She tried to wind the window down, winced, and pushed the door instead. Unfurling herself from the seat, spine cracking after nearly four thousand miles of constant travel, she awkwardly climbed out.

Beth breathed in the sweet air as she looked around. Daffodils bobbed and waved in the chilly April breeze and she could hear birdsong and the bubble of the stream as it foamed over mossy stones beneath the grey arch of the bridge. To either side green hedges edged the lane, and purple crocuses were bursting through the grass as if arriving for a party that was just about to start. Gnarled

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trees arched above her, their twisted branches thinning out as they reached for the breathtaking blue of the sky. All around her the world was waking up from the grip of winter. Maybe she could come back to life too.

‘Fresh start.’ She swallowed. ‘Fresh start.’

As long as she could get to her interview on time.

She walked towards the sheep.

‘Excuse me? Could you move, do you think? I need a job, and you’re kind of in the way.’

The sheep glanced idly at her, before settling its head back down on its forelegs and closing its eyes. Beth looked around for back-up but the lane was deserted. The sheep twitched. Beth’s watch ticked on.

She decided to drive straight at it to scare it into moving, and got back into the car. She turned the key.

Nothing.

‘Noooo.’ Beth turned it again. A cough, and then silence. She stroked the steering wheel, trying to coax it, as if it were the hand of a patient coming round from an anaesthetic, eyelids flickering, the pain yet to hit. ‘Come on, car. We’re a team now. We can do this.’

One more try.

Not even a cough this time.

Frustration brought tears to her eyes. She hit the wheel, biting back a sob, and turned the key one final time as her mobile began to ring. It was probably Jas, wondering where the hell she was. As she reached for the phone the engine sputtered into life and Beth was so shocked she released the hand brake and rolled forwards before she could check what was coming.

Crunch.

‘No!’ She braked sharply, her fingers fumbling with the seatbelt, eyes scanning the road. Two bikes had appeared from nowhere and she could see a figure on the ground. A child. His arm was thrown back above his head and he was still. Too still. Then, as her mouth was opening to scream, his hand moved and he pushed himself up, blue cycling helmet askew.

‘Thank God.’ Her only thought was to get to him. She was opening the door when the airbag belatedly realised that there had been a collision and inflated with surprising speed. Now she was pinioned against her seat, a man’s face blocking her window. It was seventy percent beard, but the remainder was pure rage. His brown eyes flashed and a deep line bit into his forehead. He yelled at her to wind the window down, not that she needed to. She could hear him quite well enough as it was.

‘You didn’t even look!’ He climbed off his bike, and lowered it to the verge. ‘Didn’t anyone ever teach you to drive?’ He turned around and dropped to his knees in front of the boy, eyes searching, hands checking for injury.

‘I’m so sorry.’ Beth started fighting the airbag, struggling to get out. She managed to extract her left arm, and then her leg, holding her breath in case it made it any easier to escape. With her mind playing relentless disaster scenarios – haematomas, brain injuries – she finally managed to slide across into the passenger seat and stumbled on unsteady legs around to the man and child.

‘It’s OK, Dad. She didn’t hit me. Just the bike. The bumper’s a bit scratched.’ The boy was pale, with tousled

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red hair and skin splattered with freckles, as if a paintbrush had been flicked at his face. He was wearing a bright green sweatshirt dominated by The Grinch's grin and long denim shorts that flapped around his knees.

Beth looked at the bike. A scratch split the red paint in two.

'I'm so sorry.'

The boy glanced at her, then away, addressing the man still bent over him. 'I'm alright, Dad. Can I get back on my bike now? I'm not tired at all.' He stood up straight. His huge white trainers were almost cartoonish below his slender ankles. He only looked about five. God, the damage she could have caused.

His dad didn't move. 'I need to make sure you didn't get hurt before we go anywhere.' His fingers tracked a huge black bruise on the boy's calf and Beth caught her breath.

The boy followed her eyes. 'It's OK, I had that anyway. I get lots of bruises.'

His dad frowned as he finished checking every inch of every limb. From the severity of his expression Beth suspected she had a lawsuit coming her way.

'Dad.' The boy put his hand on the man's shoulder. 'I'm fine. Let's go.'

The man lifted the boy's leg, still searching, clearly certain that damage had been done.

'Did you hear me? Dad? I'm OK.'

'Are you sure?' His dad looked up, shielding his eyes from the sun.

'Yes. Come on.' The boy's voice had a note of impatience now.

‘You should have looked.’ The man turned towards Beth.

‘I’m so s-sorry.’ She couldn’t stop shaking. No matter where she went she was a liability.

The man looked like he had plenty more to say, but the boy tugged him away.

‘Come on, Dad!’

The man pointed his finger. ‘Make sure you drive more carefully next time.’ He picked up the boy’s bike and wheeled it across to him.

‘I can give you money?’ The second it came out she knew it was the wrong thing to say.

His eyes narrowed. ‘No thanks.’

‘To repaint the bike, I meant?’ Beth ran a mental list of things she could go without in order to pay for her latest mistake.

‘We don’t need your money.’ This man did a great line in looming. He was part human, part grizzly.

She held her hands out wide, palms upwards. ‘I just wanted to try to make up for what I did. I wasn’t . . .’ His expression was incredibly forbidding. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Aye, well, that doesn’t really help, does it?’

‘I can take you anywhere you need to go?’

He took a good look at the car, which was wheezing beside her. He shook his head.

‘No.’

‘Are you sure? I feel so bad, and I—’

‘One hundred percent sure, thanks.’

She took a breath, trying to get her trembling under control. Fresh starts weren’t all they were cracked up to



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be. ‘Well, let me know your address. I’ll bring you some paint, at least?’

‘I told you, we’re alright.’ The man checked the boy was safely on his saddle, then mounted his own bike.

‘Come on, lad.’ He tucked a lock of long brown hair behind his ear.

She stepped towards him but they were already moving off. ‘Are you sure I can’t . . .?’

‘Yes. I’m sure.’ He waved a hand dismissively as they rode slowly along the lane that had borne her here, back towards the cluster of slate-roofed houses nestling at the foot of the hills.

She called after them. ‘Please?’

The boy looked round. ‘We’re the first cottage on the left as you come down the lane into Thistlethwaite. Number 1, The Rise. You can’t miss it.’ He wobbled dangerously.

She heard his dad’s reply as they rounded the bend. ‘You shouldn’t have told her.’

‘Why? She did say she’d like to . . .’ Their voices faded into the distance.

Beth turned, leaning on the car, pressing her hands against her forehead, as if she could somehow expel the memories that had followed her across the Atlantic. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to focus. The car creaked gently as if in sympathy. She opened the door and hit button after button until she managed to get the airbag to deflate, catching a glimpse of herself in the rear-view mirror. It was still a shock. She had cut her long brown hair short a few weeks ago before the final

hearing, craving agency, needing control over something. Now she stroked her cropped fringe self-consciously, wishing that she hadn't made her face feel so exposed. She had nothing to hide behind now.

It was time to go. She turned the key, checked her mirror and blind spot at least ten times and drove off, stopping for every twig, every squirrel, every bird hovering on the breeze. Half an hour later, after several detours down tiny lanes leading to farm gates or ramshackle huts, she arrived at a health centre with a predictably rammed car park. She squeezed into a corner space and walked to the parking meter, noticing as she queued that the contrast with her last workplace could not have been greater. The Mercy View Hospital in New York had been all gleaming windows, steel and light – this place was grey concrete, brown brick and NHS blue.

The entrance door slid open to reveal her old friend Jas, in blue scrubs, her hands thrust deep in her pockets. Beth waved and Jas strode towards her, dark curly hair still fighting to escape from her ponytail as it always had. Seeing her took Beth back twenty years and she was eighteen again, reaching for a croissant in the uni cafe. 'I'll fight you for it,' Jas had said. In the end they had both eaten half, and by the final bite they were already looking for flats to rent together.

Jas threw her arms around Beth.

'All these years of friendship, and interview day is when you choose to start being late?'

'I'm sorry. I got lost. A lot. And I hit a child too.' Beth's voice cracked.

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‘You what?’

‘I hit a child. With my car.’ She felt sick thinking about it. ‘I mean, I hit his bike.’

Jas’s eyebrows disappeared into her hair. ‘Is he OK?’

‘Yeah. Thank God. But I might not be if I ever see his dad again. Man, he was angry.’ Beth got to the front of the queue for the meter and started feeding change into the slot with shaking fingers.

Jas watched, arms folded. ‘Well, of course he is. Someone accidentally bumped Saffy with a Tesco trolley the other week and I wanted to kill them.’

Beth pushed her final coin in. ‘Oh God. I feel so bad about it.’ The machine whirred and clanked before begrudgingly issuing Beth with a ticket. She turned and Jas walked with her back towards the car. ‘Was Saffy OK?’

‘Yeah. She was teaching the checkout guy how to do the Floss five minutes later. Nothing keeps my daughter down.’ Jas put her arm around Beth’s waist. ‘It’s so good to see you.’

‘You too.’ Beth stopped in front of her car. Jas gave a low whistle. ‘This is yours? No wonder you were late. It’s a miracle you made it at all.’

‘Hey.’ Beth patted the bonnet, only to receive a loud groan in return. ‘She may not look like much, but . . .’

‘What a colour.’ Jas grimaced. ‘Reminds me of A&E shifts at drunk o’clock.’

‘Have you quite finished?’ Beth put the ticket on the dashboard and shut the door. She locked it, even though she was certain no thief would be stupid enough to take it. ‘She’s vintage.’

‘Scrapheap material, more like.’ Jas stared at Beth. ‘Wow, you look so US of A. Love the hair. It really suits you. And your teeth are so white they’re blinding!’

‘Sorry.’ Beth covered her teeth with her hand. ‘Is that better?’

‘No.’ Jas walked as fast as ever and Beth trotted to keep up. ‘Now you just look knackered, even with all that make-up on.’

Beth swallowed. ‘Oh God. Is it too much? I did it on the plane. I haven’t slept in weeks so I was trowelling it on. Should I take it off?’

Jas arched an eyebrow. ‘I was joking – you look great. Where’s your sense of humour gone?’

‘Missing in Action.’

‘Not surprising. And believe me, once we’re done here we’ll head straight to the pub and you can tell me all about it.’

‘I’d rather just get drunk.’ Maybe with enough wine inside her, she might sleep.

‘We can do that too.’ Jas came to a halt in front of the entrance, leaning over and adjusting the collar of Beth’s green blouse. ‘I’m so sorry about everything that’s happened.’

‘Me too.’ Beth stared at a patch of chewing gum stuck to the pavement, tears prickling her eyes. ‘I’m so stupid, Jas.’

Her friend’s voice went up a note. ‘You are not stupid. You’re going to ace this interview, you’ll see. I’m not on the panel, for obvious reasons, but you’ll be great.’ She leant closer. ‘Don’t let Tyler ruin things for you, OK?’

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‘I’m perfectly capable of ruining things all by myself.’ Beth barely felt capable of doing her teeth, let alone convincing strangers to employ her. ‘But thanks for telling me about the job – whatever happens.’

‘Don’t thank me. Really. We’re crying out for people like you to be school nurses.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’ Jas exuded a certainty Beth couldn’t even begin to feel. ‘Of course you’re madly overqualified. And it’s not like we can offer you any perks, either, unless Digestives and cups of tea count. Though . . .’ She grinned. ‘The boss is pretty great, so I hear.’

‘Is that so?’ Beth was relieved to find she was still capable of smiling. ‘I won’t have to call you boss though, will I? If I get it?’

‘Not every day. Just on Fridays, when you buy me lunch at the pub and give me a head massage.’

‘Hey.’ Beth punched her lightly on the arm.

‘Stop that!’ Jas shook her head as they walked through the sliding door into the small grey foyer of the health centre. ‘You’re meant to be looking professional!’

Beth shook her head, clouds looming again. ‘I don’t feel it. Not after . . .’

Jas held up a hand. ‘Beth, stop. You’re a bloody great nurse. OK?’

‘How can you say that?’ Beth’s voice was tiny.

‘Because I know you.’ Her friend pulled away, hands on Beth’s shoulders. ‘Top of the class at uni, and Ward Sister at a leading hospital in NYC? Trust me. You’ve got game.’

*Katie Marsh*

‘But . . .’ The lump was rising in her throat again.

‘Now is not the time for this.’ The kindness in Jas’s eyes only made Beth feel worse.

‘I . . .’

‘No, Beth.’ Jas shook her head decisively. ‘Not now.’

She had a point. Beth dug her nails into her palms to stop the tears.

‘Come on, then.’ Jas held out a tissue. ‘Wipe that snot off your face and let’s get this show on the road.’

Beth turned to follow her.

One step at a time.

Stop crying. Get a job.

Don’t look back.

*EMILY!!!!*

*I hope you enjoyed your party last week. I did. I ate so many iced buns that my tummy stuck out like Dad's does. He didn't look very happy when I told him we matched. Grown-ups are weird, aren't they?*

*It's time to start our plan. The one we talked about at Christmas? You were right – Dad needs a girlfriend. I don't want him to be alone. I've been watching Jean's soppy films after school and falling in love doesn't look too hard. I know Dad's a bit hairy, but he's really good at hugs. He can burp the whole alphabet too. I'll get him a girlfriend, easy.*

*See you soon.*

*Love,*

*Jake xxx*