

CHAPTER 1

Down by the river, Kate can finally breathe. The sun is not quite up as she sits on the end of the pontoon dangling her bare toes in the murky green water, feeling suspended between night and day. Everything around her is dim and quiet, a light mist resting on the surface of the river, broken by the slender arms of the willow trees that dip down into the water.

As her light brown hair tickles her face in the breeze she scoops it up into a messy bun using the hairband that lives permanently on her right wrist, trying to remember as she does when she last showered. But the trees and the birds don't care about the state of her hair or her thrown together outfit of tracksuit bottoms and hoody. There's no judgment here by the river in the early hours of this late spring morning.

Leaning back on her hands, she practises the breathing exercises she has mastered over the years. *In, one, two, three, out, one, two, three ...* After each deep inhale she pauses, noticing

the quiet gurgles of the water and the smell of wild garlic in the air.

Her shoulders sink down as she exhales. For once she is able to hear the thoughts in her own head. Not that she wants to listen to them. Instead she tunes in to the swishing of the long grass in the meadow behind her. The freedom she feels down here by the water feels stolen but she grabs hold of it anyway.

The truth is, she shouldn't be here. Not this early in the morning and when nobody in the entire world knows where she is. It's not the kind of thing that someone like her should do, someone who, despite how she might sometimes feel, is undeniably a grown up with grown up responsibilities. She is thirty-two and has a mortgage and *life insurance* for goodness sake. But oh, the water feels so delicious against her toes.

A sound draws her attention to the riverboat moored a little way upstream, its roof covered in raucous flowerpots and a couple of beehives. It seems as though its inhabitant must be getting up, confirmed a few moments later by a curl of smoke escaping from the chimney. Kate takes the smell of the wood-smoke as her cue to reluctantly leave, glancing down at her watch and realising she's already stayed here far too long.

It's not just the activity on the riverboat that hints at a place that is poised to spring into life. For now, the doors on the brightly painted beach huts on the bank are closed, but the stacks of kayaks and paddle boards leant against them are waiting to be pulled down onto the water. A little way down the meadow people sleep beneath canvas in a collection of old-fashioned yurts strewn with bunting, but before long the doorways will be peeled back and the smell of sizzling bacon

will rise on the air along with the sound of giggling children running about in pyjamas and wellies.

There's a big part of Kate that wishes she could stay here. Stretch out on the pontoon beneath the rising sun and pretend she is somebody with nowhere to be and nothing to do. Or maybe finally find the courage to slip her whole body down into the cool water. She has thought about swimming but the water always looks so dark and deep here that the furthest she has made it has been dipping her toes. The water still calls to her, though, with its cool promise.

But Kate's time is up. There's only so long you can press pause on your life. It's time to get back to the reality of everything that is waiting for her. As she pulls on her socks and shoes she tries to push down the rising sense of dread that bubbles up at the thought of returning home. And to not think too hard about what it means that for the past few weeks she has woken in the early hours and tiptoed out of the house to come down to the river alone. So far, she has always made it back in time before anyone has noticed she has gone. She never mentions where she's been. Instead she slips back into bed, catches a bit more sleep if she can and then cracks on with the day as if everything's fine, all the time itching to get back to the river again tomorrow morning so that she can breathe again.

Everything *is* fine, isn't it? So what if she goes off on secret morning jaunts and sometimes fantasises about hopping in a canoe and paddling off into the distance? That doesn't mean there's anything out of the ordinary, she tells herself as she sets off through the fields towards home. Who doesn't want to escape their life sometimes?

Kate lets out a sigh as she climbs over the stile and joins the lane that heads back into the village. However much she tries to justify things to herself, deep down she knows that what she's doing is wrong. It's why she's been keeping these visits and the sense of release she gets as soon as she closes the front door behind her each morning a secret. Because you shouldn't want to escape your life when you have everything you've ever wanted waiting for you back at home.