

Chapter One

2008

Jacob floated still and suspended beneath the surface of the water, his ears filled with the slow hissing swirl of blood and water spiralling on either side of his eardrums. If he opened his eyes, he would look up through warm water to the roses and cherubs that clung sightlessly to the ceiling above his head, occasionally dropping crumbs onto his hair and shoulders as he and Ella shivered in the draught from the badly-fitting window; but Jacob found it easier to concentrate with his eyes closed, his focus turned inwards.

His toes were clenched tight. He forced them to relax. His fingers were claws. He let them unfold. The dripping tap made the water tremble. He told himself not to think about it. His ears were filled with water, but the sounds of the house still came to him in waves. The rattle of the window as the wind kissed it. The sound of their parents' voices, their mother's piercing descant rising over the angry bass mutter of their father as they argued in the never-used morning-room, which he'd privately re-christened The Arguing Room because of his parents' persistent delusion that they couldn't be heard while they were in there. His little sister Ella, steadily counting. How was he doing? What number had she reached? Was she distracted enough from the chaos unfolding in the room below? And had he beaten the record yet?

As soon as he thought of the record, he knew he'd made a mistake. The idea of winning ignited in his brain a great surge of hope and excitement, racing down his spinal cord and out into his limbs, waking up nerves and muscles, burning through his reserves, and then he heard something that sounded like smashing, either in the house or out of it, and he knew it was all over and he couldn't stay under any more. With a gigantic whoosh he flung himself upright, grabbing onto the sides of the bath as he gulped down air like water.

"How did I do?" he asked, between breaths.

Ella was tightly cocooned in the towel he'd wrapped around her, to cover the places her swimming costume left exposed to the cold air. When they'd first played this game, she'd been happy enough to hop into the bath naked, but since her seventh birthday she'd insisted on a costume. ("You always wear one," she told him, "so now I should wear one too.") Her feet – once so pudgy and squeezable, now slender and vulnerable – were lifted onto the toilet seat to save them from the chill of the cracked black-and-white tiles. "Four minutes and forty-nine seconds."

"Really? I thought I'd managed at least five minutes."

"Maybe I counted wrong."

Now he was free of the warm imprisonment of the bathwater, the air laid a cold mouth against his skin, sucking away the warmth. Earlier that day he had fantasised about getting into a cold bath of water and never getting out again, soaking the humid stickiness from his skin for ever, but the storm had stolen all the heat from the air. ("That bathroom's too big for the house," their mother frequently said, a mysterious phrase which was sometimes followed up with "and this whole house is too big for us.") Jacob could see what she meant about the house – surely no modern family could possibly need six bedrooms, two large bathrooms, two staircases and all the half-empty rooms downstairs – but the too-big bathroom still baffled him. Perhaps what she meant

was “it’s too big to keep warm and dry,” which was definitely true. Especially when the storms blew in like raiders across the North Sea, driving salty rain against the windows and taking giant bites out of the crumbling mud cliffs that crept closer to their house with each assault. He wrapped a towel around his shoulders and dropped another onto the floor to stand on.

“We’ll be in trouble for using all the towels,” said Ella.

“I’ll be in trouble. They won’t shout at you. Maybe we can dry them before they notice.”

“And I’m sorry about your phone. Now we can’t time ourselves properly any more.”

He was sorry about his phone too, but there was no point telling her off again. The noises below were growing louder. Despite the distance of three rooms separating them, some mysterious confluence of pipes and walls and conductivity meant that whole sentences occasionally flung themselves into the room like stones. Ella seemed oblivious, but how long could that last?

(“You can keep me shut up here, I can’t stop you doing that, but I’m allowed to bloody well *write*, you unutterable bastard!”)

(“Then write about something that doesn’t upset you so much!”)

“Forget about my phone,” he told her.

“I can ask for one for Christmas and give it to you.”

“Stop going on, it’s annoying. Are you getting in or what?”

Still clutching her towel around her, Ella shuffled over to the bath.

“Maybe we should lie face down? That’s how the world record holders do it?”

“Don’t you dare.”

“You did it once.”

“Yes, and it made you cry because you thought I was dead.”

“But I’m older now, I know better. And I never last as long as you do, I need something to make it more fair.”

“Not a chance. What if you start drowning and I don’t realise?”

“But –”

“Not happening. Or I’ll pick you up and carry you out and we’ll never do it again, you hear me?”

He could see Ella wanted to press her point further – even at seven years old, there was a streak of stubbornness in her that would soon be a match for his sixteen-year-old strength – but his approval still meant a lot to her. Or maybe there was just enough anger in their house already. Ella shed her towel; he lifted her into the bath. She hurried beneath the surface to escape the tendrils of cold air creeping around the window-frame.

“Are you ready?”

“Ready.”

Shrouded in towels, his feet already aching with cold, Jacob watched his little sister’s face sink below the water. He began the count.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

Which storm was it most important to shield Ella from? The one raging in the morning-room below, where their mother and father tore into each other with the weary expertise of seasoned gladiators? Or the one driving the sea into a frenzy, raising towering cliffs of water that threw themselves against the soft mud and raced back to the ocean bed with chunks of land clutched tight within the heart of the waves? (*Fifteen. Sixteen. Seventeen. Eighteen. Nineteen.*) That dream she’d described to him when they first came here, their house falling and the water taking them. And his ridiculous promise, *we’ll learn to hold our breaths underwater and then we’ll be fine even if the sea does come.*

(“You’re a bastard. Do you hear me? An absolute bastard...”)

Twenty-three. Twenty-four. Twenty-five. Getting the pitch and tone of the count right was tricky. Count too loudly and the echo-chamber effect working in reverse would summon their parents upstairs. Count too quietly and he risked losing

his thread among the strangeness of sitting in this cold, badly-lit tower-room, looking out to a boiling sea that edged closer with every storm. Living in this house was like making a wager with the water. *Bet we can grow up and escape before you can eat your way through the cliffs. Bet you we'll be gone before you get here. Bet you're not strong enough.*

“He’s still looking, Richard, he’ll always be bloody looking! And the amount you drink, you’d never see him coming...”

Ella’s face was still and blank like a mannequin, the planes of her face just beginning to sculpt into the beauty that belonged to their mother, and that would one day surely be hers. When Ella was smaller, they’d climb in together and lie down at opposite ends of the bath, her small body crammed into the triangle of space beside his legs. Now, despite the giant-sized bath left behind by the madman who built this house, they could only fit one at a time. But that was okay. He was happier when he could watch over her as she lay beneath the water. *Forty-eight. Forty-nine. Fifty.*

“Of course I bloody well drink, who wouldn’t drink if they had to live with someone like you?”

One and seven. One and eight. One and nine. One and –

The rumble that shuddered up through the house’s bones was strong and lasting enough to be mistaken for an earthquake. Ella bolted upright, brushing frantically at her hair and face as the cherubs sent down a shower of white dust and spider webs. The window jumped and juddered in its frame, and Jacob held his breath, waiting to see if the glass would break. If the pane gave way, that would be the end of the game. The bath at the other end of the house, which they were supposed to use, was too small for even Ella to lie full-length in. But the glass held, and the frantic panicky movements of wood against wood subsided into the usual fretful rattling, and they both let go the breaths they’d been holding.

“That was loud,” he said, forcing himself to smile. Ella’s answering smile was small and careful.

“How long did I manage? That wasn’t a proper go, was it? Can I get my breath back and try again?”

“Maybe, but it’s getting late –”

“Kids! Kids!” Their father’s voice, booming up the thin steep staircase that had felt like luxury when they first moved there. (“It’s a servants’ staircase,” their mother had laughed, “we’re going to live in a house with a servants’ staircase! How about that?”) “Kids! Are you okay?”

“We’re fine!” Ella shouted back, before Jacob could shush her. “What? What’s the matter?”

“Now he’ll know where we are – oh, never *mind*, there’s no point getting upset now.”

“Are you up in that bathroom again? How many more times do I have to tell you, use the *other* one. How about you, Jacob? Are you up there with Ella?”

“Yes. We’re fine, everything’s fine, Ella’s not scared or anything, don’t worry, we’re fine –”

They could hear their father’s tread in the corridor now, and the creak of floorboards as he grew nearer. His breathing was heavy. Was their mother there too? “Come out here where I can talk to you.”

Because there was no point doing anything else, Jacob lifted Ella out of the bath, wrapped a towel around her shoulders, took a deep breath, and opened the door. He knew the underwater-breathing ritual made their parents angry and upset. He still didn’t understand why – any more than his parents could understand why they both felt so compelled, in the face of all the ferocious tellings-off and punishments they’d received, to keep doing it – but he knew what was coming next. Their parents, united for once. Their father, red-faced and powerful, his breath sprayed with whiskey. Their mother like a one-woman Greek chorus, joining in with the most important parts. He felt Ella’s little hand slip inside his and squeeze his thumb.

“Right,” their father said, and Jacob felt the first stirrings of uneasy surprise, because their father was alone. “There’s a

chunk of cliff gone again. Your mother's gone out for a bit, to look at the damage from the storm, so I need to go after her and... and look after her, make sure she's... make sure—" His breathing was heavy, as if he'd run up the stairs, as if he'd run for miles. "So you both stay inside, you hear me? Stay inside. Do not go out of the house. It's pissing with rain—"

The word shot through Jacob like electricity. Their father never, ever, ever cursed in front of them.

"— and you'll catch your death of cold. Understand?"

Did he understand? There was something mysterious here, something in the look on his father's face and the sound of his breathing, and the air that was chilled with more than Nordic winds and driving rain. He was glad for the feeling of Ella's hand still tucked inside his like a nut in a shell. His father shook his head in despair.

"God almighty, the pair of you... Get to your rooms, you hear me? And not another peep out of you tonight, or you'll know about it. Right, I'm going to find my boots, I might be out for a while."

Baffled and breathless, Jacob watched his father's lumbering shape disappear down the narrow staircase.

"Did we not get in trouble?" Ella whispered at last.

"Maybe. Or maybe he's just saving it up for later."

"Or maybe he didn't notice we were wearing our costumes." Ella nibbled at her thumbnail and grimaced. Their mother was forever painting her nails with aloe to try and stop her, but her fingers remained gnawed and raggedy. "Where's Mum? Why wasn't she with him?"

"She's gone out to look at the storm."

"But where is she? Should we look out of the window?"

"We can look out of the window if you like, but don't be surprised if you can't see anything, it's pitch-black out there."

Ella hopped back into the bathroom to press her nose against the window. Outside was no more than a wall of driving raindrops in an ocean of black. Jacob sighed.

"Wait a minute, I'll put the light out."

“No, don’t, I don’t like it in here when the light’s out!”

“You can’t be scared, I’ll be here.”

The darkness flooded in. Ella squeaked, but waited by the window for him to join her so she could grab onto his hand again. After a minute, the night began to resolve itself into a murky series of shadows, in which shapes moved that could be their mother and father, or the bushes and trees bending before the power of the wind.

“Where are they? I can’t see them, I can’t see anyone.” He could feel Ella shivering. “Where are they? What if they’ve gone over the cliff?”

“Of course they haven’t gone over the bloody –” he forced his voice lower and softer. “They’re fine, you dipstick. They’ll be out there somewhere, don’t worry.” His gaze snagged on a long finger of light that stretched briefly back towards them before turning outwards across the garden. “Look over there. That’s a torch. That must be them.”

“Where? Where?” Ella’s fingers on his hand were tight enough to be painful. “Is that both of them? I can only see Dad. What’s he doing? Why’s he going so slowly?”

Their father’s huge wavering shape was bent double as he strove against the weight of wind pushing him back. Was their mother with him? It was impossible to say. Ella’s teeth had begun to chatter. “I think Mum’s there too. Yes, I can see her. There beside him, look. See?”

“I can’t see her. What if she’s not there? What if she’s lost?”

“She’s not lost, she’s right there with him.” Their father’s progress was painfully slow, but he was almost sure now he could see a second shape with him. They were close together, leaning on each other for support. He was surprised by how happy that sight made him. “Come on, it’s time for bed.”

“Just another few minutes. Oh!” She grabbed his arm. “Is that another light? Is it? Is it Mrs Armitage’s house? Has she put the light on for us?”

The rain made everything uncertain. He cupped his hands around his eyes to form a tunnel to peer into the night. For

a moment he saw another brief gleam, wavering as if the person holding it was struggling to stay upright.

“No, it can’t be her house, it’s moving around. Maybe it’s Mum with her own torch.”

“But you said you could see her with Dad, isn’t she with Dad?”

“Well, then it must be Mrs Armitage then. She might be out looking at the damage as well.”

“Or maybe she’s gone diving.”

“She’d never get the boat out in this weather.”

“She goes diving when it’s rough sometimes,” Ella said, pressing her cold little nose against the window. “She says when you get below the surface everything turns quiet and calm.”

Jacob thought of Mrs Armitage, slick in her black scuba suit, striding out across the cliffs as if they belonged only to her. The first time they’d met her, Ella had been terrified.

“Or maybe,” said Ella through shivering lips, “maybe that was her house. That noise, I mean. Maybe it was her house falling into the sea.”

“No, of course it wasn’t.”

“But it might have been. It’s closer to the edge than ours.”

“Look, it wasn’t Mrs Armitage’s house. Mrs Armitage is fine, Mum and Dad are fine, we’re fine. Now it’s time to go to bed.”

“But should we wait and see —”

“Stop arguing. Bed.”

“Will you carry me?”

“No! You’re too heavy.” Ella’s face crumpled. “Oh all *right* then, but no more messing around, okay?”

When he lifted her, her towel unravelled and fell to the floor, shortly followed by the one around his own shoulders. The draught from the rattling window was like a cold mouth moving over his bare skin. With his sister in his arms, he staggered awkwardly down the corridor to the relative warmth of her bedroom, where a plug-in oil-filled radiator created a

small unmoving patch of dry air and her discarded pyjamas lay like a shucked pink skin at the end of her bed.

“Come on then. Cossie off. Pyjamas on.”

“I don’t want to, I’ll sleep in my costume...”

“No you won’t, it’s soaking wet. You can’t get into bed in wet clothes. Hurry up.”

She looked up at him hopefully. “Can you take it off for me?”

At moments like this, when she tried to take them both back into the years when she was small enough to pick up and put down at will like a downy little pet and he was her hero, he both loved and resented her. Resented her because he was a boy of sixteen and he was cold too and he didn’t want to be responsible for her, he only wanted to go back to his own room and shut the door and pretend everything was fine in his family, and their house wasn’t too big and too old and their parents were downstairs watching a box-set and the storm wasn’t bringing the North Sea ever closer to their back doorstep and when he woke the next morning it would be to a bright and ordinary day. Loved her because he couldn’t help but love her. He sighed, knelt down and peeled the costume from her shoulders and torso in a single brutal movement like tearing off a plaster.

“There. Now get your pyjamas on. And your socks and dressing gown. And then get into bed.”

“Can you read me a story?”

“God, can you let me go and get warm first, please! Okay, yes, I’ll read you a story, but only if you’re in bed when I come back.”

He closed the door on her quivering lip and retreated to his own room to shiver into his nightwear. He’d thought he wouldn’t need this again until winter, but the storm had stolen all the heat from the air. Long-sleeved pyjamas, thick dressing gowns, socks and slippers, clothes for children from old-fashioned storybooks to go with their old-fashioned storybook house. He thought again of Mrs Armitage in her

scuba suit, of her body disappearing beneath the waves to find the quiet places beneath the churning brown water. When the waters closed over her head, did it feel warmer than the air?

Somewhere downstairs, a door banged in the wind – once, twice, three times. Was that his parents coming home? Was it really possible his father hadn't noticed that he and Ella were dressed in their swimming costumes? Perhaps if he was quick enough he might get the bathroom cleared up before they saw any evidence. Or were his parents already on their way upstairs? He listened hard, but the house remained silent. His feet slithery because of the slippers, he hurried down the corridor to the bathroom.

A few minutes of frantic effort, and the evidence of their crime was as gone as it was going to be that night. The bath was drained and empty, the pools of water mopped from the floor, except for the one by the window which was not bathwater but rainwater, and which he left as a small reproach to his parents for complaining about the water they spilled from the bath when the house itself was so far from weatherproof. (As he thought this, the downstairs door began banging again.) He stole the clothes-horse from the junk-room, set it up in his room by the radiator and hung the towels out to dry. He hid their wet costumes at the back of the airing cupboard behind the boiler, then opened Ella's door a cautious half-inch. Perhaps she'd have drifted off to sleep and he would be free? He peered in. Ella was cocooned in the heavy duvet, but her eyes were wide open and her gaze was fixed on the door.

"Do you want some hot milk?" he asked her, to make up for being cross earlier.

"Yes please."

"Hang on then."

The kitchen was like a freezer with a gale blowing through it and the back door threw itself back and forth as if it was trying to beat its own brains out against the wall. After a few attempts, he caught it and forced it to shut. Their father must have left it open when he went out. How long had their

parents been out there now? He poured milk into two mugs and put them in the microwave. He despised the taste of hot milk, but it would give him something warm to hold while he read to Ella. Please let her not pick one of the Rainbow Fairy books. The back door rattled and tried to break free. He gave it a kick as punishment.

Back up the stairs to Ella's room, where Ella was growing sleepy beneath the duvet. When she saw him she reached out a warm little hand and took hold of his arm, trying to draw it under her chin.

"Hang on, let me put the milk down first." He balanced the mugs on the drawers by her bedside, orange pine and as ugly as sin. They were supposed to contain her socks and knickers, but she'd filled them with an assortment of dried-up felt-tip pens, empty Kinder Eggs and plastic giveaway gifts from the fronts of magazines. "Right, what am I reading you?"

"Can you sleep here with me tonight?"

"No I can't, there's no room. Am I reading you a story or what?" Ella held up something thin and mauve and glittery, watching his face to see if she was pushing her luck too far. "Oh come on, no, I'm not reading that, forget it. Right, I'm picking." Rummaging through the pile of books, he found the Ladybird *King Arthur* he'd inherited from his father and loved fiercely for years. "We'll have this one."

"I don't like that one, it's silly."

"It is not silly. Why is it silly?"

"Because the sister, the one who can do magic I mean. What's she called again?"

"Morgan le Fay?"

"Yes, Morgan le Fay. She says her son is the King's son. But he can't be, because the king's her brother. So why does she even say it?"

"Never mind that. Look, it's this one or nothing, so which is it going to be?"

"Can I hold your arm while you read?"

“As long as you let me have it back when we’ve finished.”

Crammed awkwardly into the spaces where his little sister wasn’t, Jacob propped himself up with the pillow and began to read. Ella yawned widely, exposing the clean pink of her mouth and tongue, and snuggled against his arm. He could smell the cooling milk on the bedside table. Ella began to twitch and fidget, a sure sign she was about to fall asleep. He made his voice as low and boring as he could. Ella’s eyelids fluttered shut, then open, then shut again. Her breathing grew slow and heavy. He shut the book, watching her carefully to see if she would wake when his voice stopped. She sighed, muttered something and squeezed his arm tight. He waited a minute longer, then slid off the bed and pulled his arm out from Ella’s sleeping grip. His little sister was asleep. He was free.

The storm was beginning to blow itself out at last. The rattle of the windows was gentler, and the rain on the glass no longer sounded like handfuls of flung gravel. His room was foggy from the drying towels and his bed was cold, but at least he was alone now, his responsibilities over for another day.

Just another two years and he would be entirely free. What would happen when he left home? Did Ella have any idea how close he was to escape? Did she even realise yet that such a thing was possible? Her whole universe was contained in the brown sea, the frowning sky, the flat fertile fields, the sunshine that lit up the landscape like a torch and turned everything briefly beautiful. When he left, would it be enough for her?

Never mind. As much as he loved Ella, she was his mother and father’s responsibility, not his, and they’d surely be back soon. It was strange that they weren’t back already. Perhaps he should go out and look for them. But that would mean leaving Ella in the house on her own, and besides, he was finally growing warm now, the heat from his body spreading out in the bed so that he no longer had to lie rigid and unmoving for fear of touching a chilly patch. He’d done

enough for today. He was allowed to go to sleep and let his parents take over.

And as he had this thought, he heard the kitchen door opening and closing, and footsteps clattering into the house. So they were safe and well, and not at the bottom of a cliff. It was a good thing he hadn't gone out to look for them, they'd have killed him if they found he'd left Ella alone...

Later, his sleep was dimly broken by small sounds that told him his parents had not yet found their own rest. Footsteps in the corridor outside. A door opening; a small whimper of protest from Ella. *They must be checking she's asleep*, he thought blearily, and then, as Ella's voice, made young and soft with sleep, came to him through the wall, he thought, *just let her sleep, will you? I've done all the hard part for you*. The sound of footsteps retreating again, heavier and slower this time. Silence. And the peace that came from being in one of the few warm spots in a cold world.

I should go and make sure she's okay, he thought. *Sometimes they wake her up and she doesn't go back to sleep because she's scared*. But he was finally warm, and Ella was seven years old and it was time she learned to settle herself, and in the end he closed his eyes and let sleep reclaim him.

In the years that came after, he wondered what might have happened if he'd done everything differently that night. If he'd gone out into the storm to search for his parents. If he had given in to Ella's request and slept in her bed instead of his own. If he'd got up to check she wasn't lying awake and petrified, staring into the dark. But when he woke the next morning to the sight of his father looming over him, pale and gaunt and reeking of alcohol, a dreadful artificial smile stretched out across his face like scar tissue, his first thought was simple resentment. *I wish you wouldn't come into my room when I'm sleeping*, he thought. *I wish you'd stop coming into our rooms and frightening us like that*.

I've been thinking lately about becoming someone else. I haven't decided quite who I might become yet, but whoever she turns out to be, she will be someone quite different from me. She will be small where I am tall. She will be sturdy. Not fat, but stocky like a farmer's wife, where I am waify and lanky and underfed, like a weed grown in the dark. Apparently, I am beautiful. So, when I become whoever it is that I am going to turn into, I will have to stop being beautiful.

The woman I am going to become will be cold and strong where I am warm and feeble. It's too easy for someone to charm their way into my bed. I like it too much when they're there. But when I put on my new skin, no one will ever come near me in that way again, and I will no longer crave it because I will have learned at last how dangerous love is. I will love nobody and nobody will love me. I think perhaps that will be better for everyone.

The hardest part, I think: she will be someone who can leave behind people who she cares for, and who care for her. She will be completely free.