

1



mat

Eleven forty-seven. Already the train was slowing into Exeter station and my options were dwindling to a big fat nothing. As the platform approached, I wondered for the millionth time if I'd made a huge mistake in coming here. Uncle Jack hadn't sounded exactly welcoming on the phone. But I'd been so determined to get away from Mum and Paul the four-eyed pillock that I hadn't let it worry me. Now was another matter. I hoped I'd imagined the coldness in his voice when I'd said I needed somewhere to stay. Forget butterflies in my stomach – they'd turned into giant carnivorous moths.

For a second or two I toyed with the idea of

going back to London. Then I steeled myself, heaved my bag on to my shoulder and stepped out of the train.

It was only till the end of half term – a week and a bit. I could manage that, couldn't I? Though to hear Mum panicking you'd think I was heading into unmapped jungle. She couldn't believe it when I'd announced the day before that I'd rung Uncle Jack and was going there whether she liked it or not. But what else could I do? With Dad off sailing, my bolt-hole had disappeared. There was no way I was staying in our house with Paul acting as if he owned it. I had to get as far away as possible, and Uncle Jack's was the only place left to escape to – all my friends are off with their parents doing fun things for the holiday. You know, like normal families do.

I stared up at the clock in the station. Was anyone coming?

Twelve and a half minutes after the train had left, Uncle Jack finally rocked up, looking hassled.

'Goodness, there you are, Matthew,' he said in a sharp voice, as if it was me who was late, not him. He peered at me from under windswept grey hair that matched his grey beard. He looked pretty much how I remembered him, even though it was ages since I'd

seen him last. It dawned on me that I scarcely knew him.

‘It *is* Matthew, isn’t it?’ he said. ‘Gone quiet, have you? What are you now, thirteen? That’s right, isn’t it? A year older than Tilda.’

I mumbled a hello and that seemed to be enough for him. He didn’t ask me how I was. As he led me over to his clapped-out Land Rover he glanced at his watch. It was obvious he had better things to do than look after me. And I’d just about forced him to take me in. What had I been thinking of? My armpits prickled with embarrassment.

‘Your mum all right, then?’ he asked suddenly, as we climbed into the Land Rover.

‘Suppose so,’ I said, and lapsed into silence. I didn’t mean to be rude but Uncle Jack didn’t seem to notice. He switched on the radio and got on with the driving. At least he had the decency not to bring up why I was here.

And then, just as I was beginning to calm down, we were on the moor.

Imagine a wilderness that goes on and on and on. Acre after acre of desolate landscape covered in dead bracken. That was Dartmoor. It could easily win first prize as the most boring place in the universe. And I’d

chosen to come here. *Insisted* on it. Only now, the thought of being stuck here for more than a day – no, more than half an hour – was doing my head in. And it was all Paul's fault. But anything had to be better than home.

I'd been here before, just not for a very long time, not since way before Aunty Rose died. I didn't remember much of it. The farm, obviously, and the cows and the sheep. A muddy walk into the depths of nowhere that ended with Mum and Aunty Rose having an argument.

It was strange that we'd hardly ever visited, especially with Dad keeping a boat on the river at Dartmouth, only thirty miles away. And ever since Aunty Rose died I hadn't set eyes on Uncle Jack, or my cousins, Tilda and Kitty. Though to tell the truth, I know why. Mum didn't get on with her sister, though she doesn't talk about it. And she really, really hates Dartmoor, even though she grew up here. She says it gives her the creeps.

We passed a white building, the first sign of civilisation I'd seen in a while. From behind its walls rose a storm of frenzied barking, and I jumped.

'The Hunt kennels,' said Uncle Jack, glancing at me. 'Foxhounds. They're probably being fed. The

farmers round here give them the dead livestock.’

‘What, like horses and cows?’ I said, revolted.

‘Mainly all the calves we can’t sell.’ He gave a short, impatient laugh. ‘What did you think they’d get? Pedigree Chum?’

I shut up, and stared ahead at the long twisting road over the moor, stretching into nowhere.

All of a sudden something huge and dark hurtled past my ear and into the car. I yelled out – I couldn’t help it – and Uncle Jack swerved violently. A black bird was inside, slamming frantically against the rear window, struggling to find a way out. The car was filled with flapping wings and terrible raucous shrieks.

‘Wind your window down! Wind it down!’ Uncle Jack was shouting, and I was trying to, but not fast enough.

The bird flew wildly back to the windscreen and then smack into Uncle Jack’s face. Ahead, I could see the boulder coming towards us at speed. We hit it with a crunch and the car engine cut out.

I opened my door and tumbled out on to soggy bracken at the side of the road. In a whoosh of black, the bird was out of the car and gone.

Uncle Jack sat in the front seat for what seemed like ages. Then he got out and inspected the damage.

There was a big dent at the front of the Land Rover, but the car was so old I didn't think it mattered much. He gave a heavy sigh, glared at me and got back in again.

'Infernal pest,' he said, and for a moment I wondered whether he meant me or the bird. 'Are you all right?'

I nodded. It was all I could do.

'Come on, then. Let's get to the farm.'

Back in the Land Rover, I shrank into my seat. My heart was thumping and I could still feel the bird's frantic wings against my face. I was sure Uncle Jack blamed me for veering off the road. Why had I ever wanted to come here? It was a horrible place.

We soon turned off on to a tiny lane, with high hedges that cut off all the light. And there, at the bottom of a hollow, was Parson's Farm – a low grey stone building with a slate roof and tiny little windows, surrounded by rickety old barns. Everything seemed too close together for comfort, crammed into the hollow as if breathing was the last thing people needed to worry about.

My cousin Tilda appeared at the front door of the farmhouse as we drove up. She didn't look like the annoying little kid who'd tagged along after me any more. Now she was tall, perhaps almost as tall as me,

and her dark red hair was piled on the top of her head in a kind of untidy fountain. She watched us get out of the car, with one hand at the neck of a huge black dog that looked disturbingly like a wolf, and this massive scowl on her face. Uncle Jack called her over, but she didn't bother to move.

The smell of the farm hit me as I picked my way through the puddles, and I just about gagged. How could they stand this stink of manure? It was gross. Tilda just stood there, curling her lip and staring at my trainers like they were alien beings. And there was nothing wrong with them, let me tell you – they were brand-new and pretty nice. It wasn't as if she had anything to be smug about in her mud-spattered wellingtons and mud-coloured coat. In fact, if you left out the pale face and violent red hair she could have been auditioning as a swamp.

Finally she looked up at me.

'Thought you were coming to some posh party, did you?' she said. Then she turned and disappeared inside, the hairy hound following her like she was a plate of pork chops. I was so taken aback I didn't know whether to walk in after her or turn around and go home.

Uncle Jack rolled his eyes. 'She'll be OK later,' he

said. 'I'm sure you'll get on fine.' He didn't sound as if he believed it. 'Well, you're here now. Let's get you installed.'

He clomped into the farmhouse, leaving me to carry my bag on my own. Reluctantly, I trailed into a dark hallway. A wooden sideboard was heaped with clutter, and there were boots and coats everywhere. I followed Uncle Jack up a narrow staircase covered with tatty fraying carpet.

The room I'd be staying in faced out back on to a little vegetable garden, then fields. In the far distance to the left I could make out a purplish patch of wood, and closer in, a grim old stack of stones on top of a hill. I know about this – it's a tor, a load of eroded granite left by the ice. Geography last year, Mr Perrin, 72 per cent. After design and technology, definitely my best subject.

'Are all these fields yours, then?' I said, politely.

Uncle Jack wheeled round and stared at me. He took so long to answer I wondered if he'd heard me right.

'Some of them,' he said. 'Not many. The farm's . . . shrunk a bit recently.' He put his hands in his pockets. 'Right, I'll leave you to settle in. I've got to see to the cows.'

In other words, *Get on with it, you're on your own now*. So much for blood being thicker than water. If only I could change my mind – but it was too late now. I was stuck here.

The room was pretty old-fashioned: faded cream-and-brown flowery wallpaper and an iron bedstead with a cover in every colour under the sun, the kind your granny might have knitted if she had a lorryload of wool and plenty of time on her hands. There was a huge dark wardrobe with carvings on it, a chest of drawers, a couple of shelves full of old nature books, and a stool beside the bed with a frilly lampshade that was frankly embarrassing. That was it. No telly. No computer. Even worse, my phone had no bars at all.

There wasn't much to do but unpack. I shoved my clothes away and tucked my ship's flag into a loose piece of cable at the top of the wall. And finally my camera and my phone. That was the lot.

I went to the window and stared out. As I was wishing I was back in London, or anywhere else in the whole of Britain except here, the door burst open. Almost buried in a giant-sized navy fleece was a small girl in rainbow-patched jeans with a tousled halo of red-gold hair. My cousin Kitty. She'd been a baby

when I'd last come here, but now she looked about five.

'You're Matt,' she accused me, plumping herself on to the bed. 'Do you like this?' She patted the lurid cover that *had* to be some sort of hideous family heirloom. 'My granny made it before I was born.' Got that one right, at least.

'Well, it's a bit more . . . homey than I'm used to,' I said guardedly.

Kitty beamed like a demented frog. 'I put it there,' she said. 'I wanted it to be all nice for you.'

At least *someone* in the Parson family was looking out for me.

'What's that?' She was prowling round the room, checking out my additions. The ship's flag had caught her eye.

'It's a burgee, for a sailing boat,' I said. 'A flag. It was my dad's, from the racing club he belonged to.'

'Why have you got it?' Kitty asked.

I shrugged. 'It's old. He was going to throw it away so I kept it.'

'Why?'

To my horror I could feel tears sneaking their way into the corners of my eyes. I blinked them back fast.

'Look, I just did.' It came out a bit sharp, but I

wasn't exactly going to tell her that Dad had left the burgee behind when he cleared out of our house eighteen months ago. I'd salvaged it from the box of his things Mum was chucking in the bin.

Kitty switched tack abruptly. 'Let's go downstairs and have some juice,' she said. 'Come on.'

It wasn't like I had a better offer right now.

'Yeah, OK then,' I said.

Kitty took me down to their vast bare kitchen. Compared to ours, it looked like it came from another century – no units, no steel, just ancient pine cupboards and painted wooden shelves laden with heaps of crockery. It all looked a bit dusty.

Kitty clambered on to a stool and handed me a couple of mismatched glasses. 'Take these,' she instructed. 'And one for Tilda. I'll call her.'

Probably not a good idea, I thought, but I kept it to myself.

Tilda slouched down in response to Kitty's bellow. The faithful hairy hound followed her. Joined at the hip, those two. That must be what happens when you have 368 square miles of wilderness instead of a social life.

'There's biscuits,' said Kitty, 'but only custard creams.'

I helped myself to one.

‘How long are you staying?’ asked Tilda, her arms folded across her chest.

‘All of half term, I think, unless my dad gets home sooner.’

‘Great,’ she said flatly. She couldn’t have summoned up more enthusiasm if I’d been a cockroach.

I didn’t get it – why was she being like this? It wasn’t like I’d done anything to her, apart from refusing to play with her when we were kids – and, now I come to think of it, putting worms down her back one summer. But that was a long time ago.

‘Why aren’t you staying with your mum?’ said Tilda, her eyes narrow and hard. ‘Why do you have to land on us?’

I felt my stomach clench.

‘It’s because your mum’s gone off with someone else, isn’t it?’ she went on. ‘Like, your new dad.’

I couldn’t believe she’d just come out with that. My forehead started to burn.

‘Shut up,’ I said. ‘Just shut up.’

I could feel my hand shaking and I put down my glass with a clank, upsetting the carton of juice. It pooled on the wooden table and began dripping over the edge.

Kitty sat open-mouthed. Tilda was smiling. A dark patch of liquid expanded slowly on the red stone floor.

I pushed my chair back so hard it fell over, then I walked out and slammed the door.