

Chapter One

Summer 1975

It was very strange that no one could agree when, and how, Madeleine Fletcher first came into their lives. Afterwards, in late autumn when the Bosky and Worth Bay seemed to be nothing but a golden memory, they could recall every little detail of the summer. But at first, it was always too painful to think about. They were emotional children; or at least, Cordelia was, her brother following in her lead. They could not mention the Bosky to one another without tears starting in their eyes, lips wobbling tragically: the wood pigeons lazily cooing in the trees, or the feeling of the fabric of the window-seat cushion worn so fine it felt like silk, or the cool sand behind the beach huts: dirty grey, mixed with pieces of bark from the pines, the brambles that nodded them along their way down to the water. The smell of the place, the sounds of the sea on the sand, the huge skies above them. Silly games that Daddy or Cord invented: 'Follow my Flapjack', 'Waves' and the current favourite 'Flowers and Stones', where you dashed into the huge patch of wild flowers beside the house with a blindfold on and picked up as many stones and flowers as you could in ten seconds. Points were added for different colours, and deducted for shells. Ben always won, though he was often sick with the excitement of it afterwards, and sometimes strayed into the brambles, scratching himself terribly.

Back in Twickenham, when the autumn rain fell in grey rods over the old house by the river, gradually giving way to winter,

the children would comfort themselves, parcelling the holidays up into days, or events, cross-referencing memories to keep them clear. 'We went to the ice-cream shop together seven times.' 'Mrs Gage made us boiled eggs for tea four times.' 'No, five! Because you remember after we'd been to Lulworth for the day the car broke down and we had tea in bed because it was so late.' 'I won Flowers and Stones ten times in a row.' 'We had fifteen different people to stay.' 'Daddy came down for twenty days.'

Even Althea, who swore she heartily disliked the place, could remember the colour of the kite that crashed into the porch and got entangled with the tassels on the cushion that summer of 1972. She remembered too the new kaftan tunic from Biba she had bought in 1973 the week before her annual exile to Worth Bay, Bertie's voice as he stretched out his lanky frame languorously on the porch and gave his pitch-perfect impersonation of Mrs Gage, who 'did' for them, until she got hiccups with laughing. And Althea could perfectly recall the sad little girl next door whose face, small and dreadfully pale, had begun to appear that summer of 1975 as she and the children were having tea every evening. But she couldn't remember exactly when she had first noticed her. Perhaps even the year before.

Benedick and Cordelia knew it all – the price of sweets in the beach shop, the times of the bus taking them into Swanage, the first lunch they had at the Bosky, laid out and left for them by Mrs Gage, (cold chicken salad, cold ham, tomatoes, crusty bread, cherries and clotted cream), the trouble with Mrs Gage's toes and the tide times printed in the little blue book, instantly pored over upon arrival each year. But they disagreed bitterly on when they first saw Madeleine. Ben didn't remember her at all, but Ben was in a dream world most of the time. Cord said she remembered Mads from long ago, that she'd played with her before, but when they asked, she couldn't ever remember where or when.

The truth was that the year Mads came into their lives was the summer everything began to change, when they all looked back on it. In the end, it was Tony who first properly met Madeleine, and that was when he almost killed her.

They always left for the Bosky first thing. If Tony was in a play, he insisted the bags be packed and lined up in the hall before he left for the theatre in the late afternoon so the car could be loaded at dawn and they'd be there for breakfast. This added to the staged sense of drama around their departure. Ben and Cord barely slept the night before: they'd be too excited. At five-thirty they'd be lifted into the car in their night things by Tony and would doze all the way, occasionally being woken by their own sagging heads. They would then gaze out of the window at the deep blue of the early August sky, the still, heavy trees just starting to turn a crisp dark green, the golden dawn bathing the roads out of London in warm light: nostalgic before they'd even got there. And it was always chilly, Cord's bare legs cold on the leather seats in the car, and they'd shiver, and moan, and go back to sleep, but all of them were always awake by the time they passed Wareham and drove the final few miles down the winding country road set high up against the looming chalk barrow that rose and fell away over towards the coast (and where Daddy had once told them in exasperation during a fraught teatime that a witch lived who would come for them if they didn't eat their liver and onion).

The first one to see the sea picked what they'd have for breakfast. Cord always won. She was eagle-eyed. 'There. There! The tide's out.' And she noticed every little change each year. Cord was born watchful, as her Aunt Isla used to say.

The soft crunch of the car on the sandy lane, that turn of the old key in the flimsy lock, the sound of children's feet, thundering up the stairs and along the worn parquet flooring

that sagged and dipped throughout the top floor, the windows that swelled shut in the spring rain and often had to be wrenched open with a little extra force if no one had been there for a while. That beautiful first smell of salt water beneath them, the distant call of gulls and of the sea, drawing back and then crashing over the sands: these were sensations all so dear, and familiar, forgotten every year and then there again, as though kept in a box that couldn't be opened until August.

'Shall we do the call?' Cordelia said to Ben, pausing in their running through the house and examining everything carefully for any alteration. She stood rattling the French doors that opened on to the porch. 'We have to do it ourselves, since Daddy's not here.'

Her arms full of freshly ironed linen for the airing cupboard, Althea watched them from the hallway.

'Don't pull the door like that, darling. Try the key.'

'I have, it's broken—' Cord tugged viciously at the door frame. 'Ugh.'

'I said, don't, Cordy! Listen to me!'

'Mumma. Please don't be mean and horrible like we're back in London, not exactly *right* at the beginning of the holiday,' said Cord, urgently. '*Please.*'

Help me. Althea turned away towards the airing cupboard, gritting her teeth. The previous year she had returned to the stage for the first time since having the children, as a young mother of two in a daring new play at the Royal Court. She had been required to do very little other than stand there and watch while her husband threw chairs around and complained about the state of the world. The description of her character had been: 'Vicki, Harry's wife, sweet-faced, patient, nurturing, a typical young-mother type.' (Of course, as her sister Isla had grimly pointed out, the play had been written by 'a typical Angry Young Man type'.)

Every day, Althea would get up, promise herself she wouldn't shout at the children or be irritated by them, and every day by five-thirty when she had to leave for the theatre she would once again feel awful about making one of them cry for not allowing an extra biscuit, or refusing to turn on the television, or some such. Once at the theatre, she'd don Vicki's simple smock, brush blusher on to her cheeks and simper sweetly at Harry for two hours whilst hugging the two angelically behaved children who played her offspring and then a car provided by the theatre would take her home and the whole business would start again the following day. A cereal bowl thrown against the dresser at breakfast, a poem pinned to her bedroom door entitled, 'Why is Ar Mother Never Hear?' *She* was neither patient nor nurturing, and her darling children were not angelic. By the end of it, she felt she might be going slightly mad.

And now a month on her own with them. Bloody Tony. *He* should be running through the house with the children, flinging open the doors and playing hide-and-seek. Every year, on arrival, he'd stand on the porch and call over the bay, his beautiful voice ringing out, Cord and Ben wriggling with excitement next to him. He should be here having this marvellous time with them that he was always telling her was so vital to family life, instead of . . . instead of getting up to God knew what in London. She loved the children to distraction, but they were so *loud*. Asking questions *all the time*. Wanting to play games when she wanted to sit on the porch and read a Georgette Heyer. Or chat to whatever guest was down . . .

Althea squared her shoulders and opened the cupboard door, inhaling the calm smell of fresh linen and lavender. Well. With Tony away, she'd damn well invite whom she wanted this year. If he was in London, she'd ask Bertie – he hated Bertie. And Simon – yes. She nodded. This was the year Simon ought to

come. If she handled it well, it could all be arranged for the best. Rather hastily shoving the sheets into the airing cupboard, she brushed down her skirts as she always did when she was nervous or flustered, then turned back to the children.

‘I don’t want to do it without Daddy,’ Cord was saying.

‘Go on, darling,’ she said. ‘Daddy’ll want you to.’

‘You do it with me.’

‘Gosh, no,’ said Althea, in horror.

Ben pushed the door open for his sister and they stepped out on to the wooden porch, shaded in the late-morning sun. Althea watched them, Ben’s thick golden hair that stuck out in clumps, his small square shoulders in striped towelling T-shirt, the tiny mole on the back of his neck. He held his little sister’s hand tightly, though she led the way, as she always did, and she turned back to her mother with a small smile, her heart-shaped face lit up, her halo of messy dark hair a web of black through which sunshine flooded.

‘Come on, Mumma,’ she said.

The cool breeze and the sounds of the bay soothed Althea after the long drive. It would be all right, here without him. Damn him. She swallowed, as Cordelia put both hands on her chest and bellowed, ‘*HOW NOW, SPIRIT! WHITHER WANDER YOU?*’

She nudged Ben, who said, more timidly, ‘*Rejoice, you men of Ang— Ang—*’

‘Anjeers,’ Cord interrupted him. ‘Anjeers, it’s a place in France, Ben. ‘*REJOICE, YOU MEN OF ANJEERS, RING YOUR BELLS,*’ she hollered, and Ben shuffled to the side, watching her half in exasperation, half in resignation. ‘What else does Daddy say to start the holiday?’

‘*Look, but where he comes and—*’ Ben began, but Cord interrupted him again.

‘*LOOK, BUT WHERE HE COMES—*’

‘Cordelia! That’s far, *far* too loud.’

‘LOOK, BUT WHERE HE COMES,’ Cordelia began again, totally ignoring Althea, her voice ringing out over the bay, and Ben joined in. *‘AND YOU SHALL SEE / THE TRIPLE PILLAR OF THE WORLD TRANSFORMED INTO A TRUMPET’S FOOL.’*

They stepped back, and looked at each other, satisfied.

‘Was that right?’ Cord asked their mother.

‘Wonderful. It’s strumpet, by the way, not trumpet.’

‘What’s a strumpet?’

‘Ask Daddy. Now, come into the kitchen, you two, that’s enough noise. Cordelia, can you—’ Her daughter blinked furiously. ‘Cord, sorry. What’s wrong?’

Cord pointed at the wall. ‘Look, the picture of the boats has gone. What’s that? A painting? Who is it? Who changed it?’

Althea, heaving a box of food on to the kitchen counter, paused. ‘Don’t know. Oh, it’s Daddy’s aunt. The one whose house it was.’

‘Where’s the picture of the boats?’ Cord demanded.

‘I don’t know. Maybe Daddy moved it when he was down in May.’

‘I hate it when things change,’ said Cordelia, furiously. ‘He shouldn’t come down without us.’

‘Yes,’ said Ben. ‘It’s not fair.’

‘You two, honestly. Go and wash your hands and then we’ll have some breakfast.’

‘Daddy always makes the scrambled eggs – who’ll do it now?’ said Ben, looking worried.

‘I think I can scramble some eggs, Benedick.’

‘Don’t call me BeneDICK. I hate it. And sorry, no, you can’t, Mumma. Sorry.’ Althea laughed. ‘Well, you can’t. You can’t cook anything.’

She felt rather stung. ‘That’s not true.’

‘Daddy can’t either,’ said Cord, helpfully. ‘Oh, I miss him,’ she added, moodily sweeping her hand across the dining table. ‘I wish he was here.’

‘I know. Look, we’ll try our best to eke out some scant seconds of muted enjoyment for ourselves without him,’ said Althea, evenly. She glanced at the blue Bakelite clock on the wall, wondering when, whether, if the phone would ring.

‘It’ll be hard,’ Ben sighed. ‘Is Aunt Isla coming at all?’ Althea’s sister, a brisk, jolly headmistress who retained the accent and flavour of her own upbringing, was a great favourite with the children. They had been to Kirkcudbright to stay with her in the white Georgian terraced house in which the sisters had grown up together. It was a beautiful spot: Isla had converted their painter father’s old studio at the bottom of the long rambling garden into a playhouse, below which flowed the River Dee, where the tugboats and fishing vessels slid past the glistening brown waters out to the Solway Firth.

‘No, Aunt Isla’s away with the school for the summer.’

‘Ohhhh,’ said Ben and Cord together, exaggeratedly. ‘Ohhh, noooo, that’s awful.’

Althea paused. ‘Perhaps we’ll have some other people down. Like Mummy and Daddy’s old friend Simon. Do you remember Simon?’ she added, carefully.

‘No,’ said Ben.

‘He used to live with Daddy. He has blonde hair and Daddy gave him a haircut on the porch once, and we could see the goldy hair through the slats for the rest of the summer,’ said Cord, pachyderm-like. ‘He brought you a scarf, Mumma. And he helped you with the washing-up all the time.’

‘That’s him. He might come. And – Uncle Bertie.’

‘Yippeee!’ said Cord. ‘But, oh, I’m still sad about Aunt Isla. I wanted to show her my new book.’

‘I wanted her to teach me to fish again,’ said Ben. ‘If Daddy’s not going to be here to do it. She’s great at catching little fish.’

‘I can do that,’ said Althea. ‘I used to fish all the time.’

‘No, Aunt Isla knows how to fish properly. Her house has a river at the bottom of the garden.’

‘Oh, good grief. I grew up in that house,’ said Althea, exasperatedly. ‘I know how to fish. In fact,’ she added, wildly, ‘I was much better at fishing, and crabbing. Aunt Isla only liked playing dolls.’

The children stared at her in a politely disbelieving way; Ben rubbed his nose. ‘Oh. I thought you were just pretty, Mumma,’ he said. Althea closed her eyes, briefly, and then gave a huge start as Cord flung her arms around her waist.

‘You can’t help not being awfully good at some things,’ she said, seriously. ‘I’m sure we’ll have a great time without Daddy and Aunt Isla, Mumma.’

Althea hugged her fiercely, and after a moment said, ‘Thank you, darling. Now, for the last time, go and wash your hands. And get changed into shorts, please. You can go to the beach afterwards. No, just go, otherwise there’s nothing to eat.’

Tony loved an audience: that was the great difference between them as actors. Althea relished the feeling of being curiously invisible that becoming someone else gave her, as though being on stage neutralised her, so she wasn’t being stared at every day for her height, her hair, the beauty she knew she had but never really got used to. She liked to hide behind the camera or the footlights, to change herself so that she became invisible as herself. Whereas Tony looked forward, through them, past them, seeking to connect, to draw people along with him. At home in London he knew the names of the river boatmen, he remembered every London cabbie, the rag-and-bone men who often made a special detour to see him; he leaped aboard buses and talked genially to conductors and passengers who didn’t know

who he was. Here, down at his beloved Bosky, he was even more in his element, greeting old friends, tickling children under the chin, scurrying up the steps of beach huts to help women down with their wicker picnic baskets, joshing with the old men sitting on the bench outside the pub – he was theirs, and they all loved him. He was very lovable.

‘What a shame Mr Wilde can’t get away till later,’ said Mrs Gage, putting the crockery down on the table.

‘Yes, very sad. Children!’ Althea called, raising her voice. ‘Come on. I can hear you downstairs. Stop mucking about and come up for some food, please.’ She turned to Mrs Gage. ‘It’s been a huge hit, and they’ve extended the run.’

‘What play is it, then?’

‘*Antony and Cleopatra*.’

‘Oh.’ Mrs Gage didn’t seem that impressed. ‘I read it at school, long time ago now. We saw a play at Christmas, I wanted to tell him about it. Ever so funny it was. *No Sex Please, We’re British*, and it’s about this wife, and she orders some smutty magazines by mistake, and they start—’

Althea interrupted. ‘Could you get the children, please, Mrs Gage?’

‘Anyway, that *Cleopatra* was a nasty piece of work if you ask me,’ muttered Mrs Gage, moving slowly towards the door. ‘I’ll tell him when he comes.’

Althea nodded, then stood up and, taking a deep breath, glanced into the mirror, then behind her reflection at the newly positioned portrait of Aunt Dinah. She peered at the older woman’s eager smiling face and long pointed nose, the disconcerting familiarity of her that she couldn’t quite put her finger on. She stared at the picture.

‘What’s got into him, in the last year or so? Do you know? Oh, I wish you could tell me, but you won’t.’

The tread of the children’s feet crescendoed and they appeared,

skidding into place at the table. Althea smiled at them and poured them each a glass of milk, then sat down, smoothing a napkin over her dress.

‘Here we are. Eggs, bacon and fried bread.’

Ben glanced at his younger sister, who had changed into shorts and put her hair into stubby bunches, like brushes stuck on either side of her head.

‘Thanks, Mumma—’ he began.

‘Mother,’ Cord said. ‘We want to tell you something.’ Ben picked up a piece of bread and crammed it into his mouth.

‘Go on,’ said Althea, as she seemed to pause.

‘We are changing our names. Aren’t we, Ben.’ Cord looked at her brother, as if for reassurance. ‘We don’t like our names any more. It’s silly having names after Shakespearean people.’

‘They call me Dick at school and I hate it.’

‘They call *me* Lime Cordial.’

Althea said nothing, but nodded.

Taking encouragement from this, Cord said, ‘So can you please tell everyone. That . . . da-durr . . . please hear a drumroll now –’ Ben tapped gently on the table – ‘that our names are now Flash Gordon and Agnetha.’

Althea let out an unintended burst of laughter. ‘No, I can’t,’ she said, and they both turned their faces towards her in astonishment.

‘Well,’ said Cord, solemnly, ‘When we are back from the Bosky we are going to go to the Council and get a form to change them in law. You can’t say no.’

‘Yes, I jolly well can.’

Ben shook his sister’s arm.

‘Cordy, you said she would . . .’ he hissed, and Cord shook it off.

‘I’m not calling you Flash Gordon and Agnetha, and that’s the end of it,’ Althea said, torn between amusement and exasperation. ‘Your names are fine. They’re lovely names!’

‘But we don’t like them, Mumma,’ Ben said, too loudly, the sign that he was getting upset. ‘And we’re not babies. You can’t stop us.’

‘I jolly well can, darling. Now, eat your food.’

‘I hate you,’ said Cord, suddenly. Althea’s eyes snapped open.

‘How dare you,’ she said, her patience gone. ‘Don’t ever say things like that.’

‘It’s not rude, it’s true. And you – oh!’

She gave a small sharp cry.

‘What?’ said Althea, sharply, swivelling her head round.

Cord had jumped up. ‘Who’s that? Oh – is it a ghost?’

Ben clutched his mother’s hand fiercely. There came the pattering echo of footsteps, beating on the porch steps down to the beach, and Althea stood up. ‘Who was it, did you see?’

Cord’s face was red. ‘It was a ghost. It had silvery hair. It was staring at us.’ She pointed out of the window with one shaking, nail-bitten finger. ‘It was Virginia, the witch like the one I saw that time in the grass. Virginia Creeper. Come back to kill us and then to haunt us.’

‘Sit down, darling, it’s not. It’s a little girl, not a witch. I saw her running away. She’s not going to kill you.’

‘I’d be upset if you died,’ said Ben. ‘And Cord.’ He slid his hand into hers. She squeezed it.

‘Agnetha, you mean.’

They both gave a small smile. ‘Yes, of course I meant that.’

She stood up, and dropped a kiss on both their foreheads.

‘Daddy’s coming, isn’t he?’ Cord asked, almost under her breath.

Althea kissed the crown of her daughter’s head fiercely, so she couldn’t see her face. ‘Yes, darling. Of course he is. In a few weeks. And in the meantime we’ll have an absolutely glorious time, I promise.’