

## IMPRINT OF THE PAST

### Prologue

The wind, once a soft, gentle breeze, now screamed and howled over the countless miles of open water, pulled by the heavens and ruthlessly churned by the wind the engorged sea rose and fell in huge mountainous peaks and yawning troughs. High above, the stars were momentarily lost from view as the small boat plummeted into another dark trench of roaring water. Spray was hurled upwards as the waves collided, only to be swallowed again by the next white-crested tumultuous wave.

Gradually the cliffs drew closer, jagged shards of rock thrusting up from the deep glistened in the moonlight, at the mercy of the elements the vessel was dragged this way and that, once even terrifyingly spinning sideways.

The man sat ramrod stiff, his legs braced against either side of the boat, one hand gripped the rudder, the other clamped the metal rail to his left. His dark wind-blown hair lashed across his face, narrowed eyes fixed on the approaching cliffs as they were fleetingly illuminated by the powerful beam from the lighthouse half a mile out at sea, fading for a few seconds before flashing out again. His clothing was saturated, his blue-tinted lips tight in feverish determination.

Breathing in through flared nostrils, he saw the cliffs disappear again as the boat plummeted into another dark, deafening maw.

Then, miraculously, he was rising again and this time the gigantic swell thrust the boat forwards and he heaved the rudder to the left, missing a granite shard of rock by inches. When the moon vanished behind a smothering of cloud, he roared out a savage curse as his visibility was reduced to a few feet. Suddenly, the beam of light lanced out again, the cliffs rising out of the darkness, the thunderous crash of the water sounding horrific, the boat slewed to the left and in the second of sweeping light he saw another jutting slab of rock. In that brief heartbeat he could do nothing, the boat slammed into it, the sound of timber cracking asunder lost to the boom of the waves.

The wind screamed in savage delight and the man snapped upright as the boat began to shatter around him. He hesitated for a moment, his dark eyes fixed on the cliffs that faced him and then he risked a look over his shoulder and saw another huge wall of water roaring towards him, the light shone out again, splashing over the huge swell. It took him a fraction of a second longer to make up his mind, if he stayed then he would die, so, taking a snatched gulp of air he launched himself forwards into the raging sea just as the wave hit. The boat was instantly reduced to shards of broken timber that were dragged back out to sea, while the man tore forwards, his powerful arms slamming through the water, legs thrashing as he was propelled into the yawning darkness.

Behind the gathering tumultuous clouds, thunder rumbled, and lightning crackled, the heart of the storm drew ever closer, the beam of light continued to flash, an ancient warning to those in peril on the raging sea.



Emily Green drove slowly along the winding clifftop road, mesmerised by the ethereal rays of sunlight that cascaded through the swirl of raspberry-tinted clouds, bathing the surface of the calm sea in splashes of infused light.

Sliding open the window of the Mini, she breathed in deeply, relishing the tang of the sea and the scent of the wild flowers that grew in abundance along the top of the cliffs.

When the lay-by appeared on the left, she pulled over and switched the engine off before lifting the handbrake and carefully checking the mirrors even though the road behind was deserted. She smiled at the hard-to-break habit before grabbing her rucksack from the passenger seat. After almost ten years working and living in London, you made sure you always checked your mirrors before you opened the car door in case one of the pushbike couriers was speeding past. Once, she had almost knocked a man flying as he went hurtling by, dressed in a pinstriped suit and wearing roller-skates, his man-bag over his shoulder.

Smiling, she stepped out and closed the door with a clunk, crossing the deserted road and climbing the wooden fence before jumping into the field that led down to the cliff edge. The grass was tall and dotted with a swathe of colourful wild flowers, butterflies flitted in the summer-scented air, grasshoppers chirruped, and flying insects droned as she adjusted the bag on her shoulder, her booted feet swishing through the dry grass.

As she drew closer to the cliff edge, she caught the hushed sigh of the sea that rolled lazily towards the pebbled beach far below.

The path led her to the left, her eyes taking in the breath-taking view that opened up before her. She stared out at the distant horizon where the sky fell down into the ocean, the two melding perfectly, no beginning, no end. Looking down, the languorous sea rolled softly over the pebbles, the sun's golden light twirled and braided by the rippling water, the hypnotic susurrations calling to her. Reaching the top of the steps carved into the cliff, she smiled before starting the long climb down to the beach below, her left hand sliding along the handrail, the metal highly polished by generations of people who had made the trek to the secluded cove below.

Halfway down she stopped and looked out at the view again, savouring the feel of the sun on her face, her dark hair teased by the calm sea breeze.

It had been eight months since she had moved to Clover with John and already it had been the happiest time of her life. She knew her husband felt the same, even though he still had to commute to the city every day, a journey that took an hour on a good day and up to three if the train providers were messing about, though she knew it was a price he was prepared to pay, he loved coming home to the peace and quiet and the fresh air.

Taking another deep breath of sea air, she set off again, skipping down the steps, eager to reach the beach below, the rucksack bouncing as she quickened her pace, her smile growing as the sound of the sea amplified within the curl of the cliffs that formed the cove.

Less than a minute later, she reached the bottom and tilted her head, closing her eyes, letting her senses take in the sound of the sea, the warmth of the sun and the occasional plaintive sigh of a seagull.

'Love it,' she opened her eyes and started to walk across the pebbles, her boots sinking slightly as the ground moved and shifted beneath her feet.

Making her way around an outcrop of rock, she watched the sea, mesmerised as the blue-tinged water rolled towards her, the gentle waves tipped with white foam, the view beyond stretching out to the sun-kissed horizon.

Another sigh of contentment escaped her lips, she slid the bag from her shoulder and opened it, pulling out the bottle of mango juice. Unscrewing the lid, she took a sip then moved over to a flat slab of black rock, sat down and delved back in the rucksack. Half a minute later, she had the drawing pad out on her knees, the charcoal pencil hovering over the virgin white of the paper.

She watched as the sun appeared in full, evaporating the gossamer clouds and forcing her to raise a hand to shield her eyes against the flare of light.

Deciding to enjoy the moment, she slotted the pencil into the metal corkscrew binding, placed the pad by her side and eased back. With the palms of her hands flat on the rock, she tilted her head, feeling the sun's heat on her face again as she closed her eyes.

She thought of her time trapped in the rat race and wondered how she had managed to cope for so long. Before they moved here, her days had consisted of dashing around the city, spending hours on the tube, like a mole tunnelling from one destination to the next, as she showed an endless stream of clients – who had more money than sense – a selection of massively overpriced properties.

At the end of every working day, she would make her way to the small spare bedroom – a space she had laughingly christened her studio – to work on the paintings and sketches.

John would occasionally stand and watch her, a bottle of something cold in his hand, a smile on his face, the hated tie he had to wear for work now loosened as he sipped the drink.

'Another commission?' he'd asked as she put the finishing touches to the painting of a couple of black Labradors.

She could remember looking over her shoulder and smiling. 'It is, I mean, it's not Rembrandt but I'm getting over a grand and for that I will paint anything.'

John had nodded in agreement before moving up behind her to admire her work. 'Bet Rembrandt couldn't have painted a better pair of mutts.'

'Smooth talker,' she had replied as he bent down to kiss her.

Now, she opened her eyes, the smile widening as she eased the memory of what followed from her mind.

'At this rate I'll get nothing done,' she said to herself as she rose to her feet and climbed higher up the rocks.

The sea swept in from her left, finding its way into the cracks and forming small pools of clear water teeming with microscopic life.

Scrambling further upwards, she stopped and looked up at the cliffs, she could see the gulls shining white against the dark, forbidding rock face, watching as they rode the thermals, moving in lazy circles like vultures looking for something to scavenge.

Turning slowly, the sea came back into view, the seemingly endless vista appeared constant and yet in reality was forever changing.

Lowering her gaze, she felt the breath catch in her throat and stepped back in fright as she saw the man sprawled on the pebbles below, he was on his back, his head on one side, long black hair obscuring his face, wearing dark jeans and a battered-looking brown leather jacket; he lay immobile as the water slid in, brushing the soles of his worn boots, before retreating with a hiss.

'Oh my God,' she gasped and dashed forwards, sure-footed on the rocks, hurrying down towards the man.

Her eyes kept glancing towards him, hoping to see a flicker of movement, a sign of life.

She jumped the last three feet, her boots sinking in the shale and pebbles as she sprinted to his side and dropped to her knees, both hands hovering over the man, like a shaman trying to raise the dead, her face fraught with tension, unsure what to do.

Easing back, she snatched the phone from her pocket and tapped frantically at the screen.

When she failed to get a connection she looked down, her eyes widening as she saw the *no signal* icon flash.

'Oh no,' she leapt to her feet, her eyes desperately flicking from the phone to the man who lay at her feet.

Raising her head, she scanned the cove, the fear building, hoping to see someone, anyone, on the cliff steps but the area was deserted. At her back the sea rolled in again, closer this time.

Her eyes flicked to the man and she took a fear-filled hitch of salty air as he slowly lifted his head from the pebbles, his mouth twisted in a grimace of pain, the veins in his neck standing rigid with the effort.

'Help me, I need to...'

Emily found herself looking into the darkest eyes she had ever seen, eyes brimming with a mix of emotion, there was fear, but also a burning flash of determination.

When she saw the pebbles beneath his head were smeared with blood, she felt the fear inside twist at her gut, but before she could reply, his head fell back with a thump, his startling eyes closing.

Then she was sprinting over the stones towards the cliff face, every few seconds she would hurriedly check the phone, praying for a signal. Reaching the steps, she started to dash up, her breathing light and fast, her body now coated with a sheen of sweat as she climbed.

Reaching the halfway point, she stopped to draw breath and check the phone, when she saw one bar of signal she tapped at the screen, her lips moving in a fevered prayer.

*'Hello, which service do you require?'* the male voice asked.

'Please, I need an ambulance right now.'

*'Can you provide your location, please?'*

'Half a mile out of Clover, I've found somebody injured on the beach at Seaview Cove.'

*'Male or female?'*

'Male,' Emily answered hurriedly, as she pushed a swathe of hair from her eyes.

*'Can you tell me if he's breathing?'*

'I thought he was dead,' she gasped. 'But then he opened his eyes and spoke to me, but he has a bad head wound and you just need to get here as quickly as you can,' she urged.

*'The paramedics are being dispatched, but could you stay with the injured party until they arrive?'*

'Yes, of course I'll stay, but I've had to climb the steps from the beach to get a signal, so please hurry.'

*'Understood.'*

The phone beeped, and she peered at the blank screen, her teeth now nibbling at her bottom lip as the tension flooded through her mind.

Turning, she looked down, though the spot where the man lay was hidden by the large outcrop of rock. Wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of a shaking hand, she started to descend again, only this time there was no stopping to admire the view or enjoy the warm summer sun on her face, this time the descent was crammed with fear and concern.

Reaching the pebbles, she sprinted forwards, her booted feet struggling to find traction as the ground shifted beneath her.

She caught a brief glimpse of her rucksack and art pad as she scrambled upwards over the rocks, her heart picking up speed as she prepared herself for the worst. Reaching the peak, she turned and stopped in her tracks, her eyes widening in astonishment as she looked down to find the patch of pebbles where the man had been was now empty.

She felt the confusion crease her forehead and then she looked up, searching the cove, the frown growing deeper as she saw no sign of him. Moving forwards, she made her way down to the beach and stood looking at the spot where the man had been, the sea swept in again before slowly retreating.

'No blood,' she whispered as she studied the dry pebbles where his head had fallen back to the ground.

Emily Green suddenly felt a shiver of unease pass over her warm, sun-kissed skin and then she was looking out to sea finding nothing but the gentle waves that curled onto the beach.

High above, the seagulls continued to circle, their plaintive cries filling the sultry summer air.

Climbing behind the wheel of the car John Green snatched off his tie in irritation before tossing it onto the passenger seat, the train had been running late again, the announcer sounding apologetic and bored in equal measure as he broke the unwelcome news, while the passengers groaned and cursed realising they were in for another tortuous journey home.

It had been two hours since he had left the city and been deposited at the small station at Ryde, to add insult to injury thanks to the train running late it had then cost him another five pounds to pay the car parking fee.

'Money-grabbing sods,' he started the engine and slid the window down, letting out the heat that had built up inside the vehicle during the hot summer's day.

Pulling off the station car park, he joined the rush-hour traffic crawling through Clover town centre. The main street was lined with a mixture of outlets, he watched people dressed for the summer amble along the pavement, stopping to look in shop windows, while those on their way home from work weaved their way through the holidaymakers, their faces red with annoyance.

He passed three antique shops in a row, one seemed to deal in clocks of all shapes and sizes, its neighbour had furniture in the window, a highly polished writing desk alongside a Japanese lacquered screen embellished with a writhing dragon of gold and red. The last in the row looked at odds with the other two, the front window crammed with bric-a-brac, a jumble of useless stuff that would have looked more at home in a skip.

Front and centre stood a tall dolls' house, paint peeling from the woodwork, the chimney tilted at an angle.

'Should have a fence around it with a *danger unsafe building* tape attached,' he mumbled and then smiled as he started to relax.

Once clear of the town, he headed towards Marine Drive, it would take him an extra ten minutes to arrive home, but over the course of the last few months he had automatically found himself taking the scenic route. It allowed him time to relax and let the stresses of the day melt away as he drove along the road that hugged the clifftops, the view to his left looking magnificent no matter what the weather. Today the sun was beaming down from the azure sky and he lowered all the windows, relishing the warm sea-infused air that flowed through the vehicle, bringing a smile of contentment to his face.

Resting his right arm on the open window, he slowed down, the need to rush evaporating as the sea came into view. When Emily had first suggested moving from the city, he had been more than surprised, in fact, of the two of them he had always thought of Emily as the city girl. She seemed to love the hustle and bustle of the place, savouring the fast pace and enjoying the large circle of friends they had shared. So, when she first broached the idea of moving, he had thought it was just a spur of the moment idea, a daydream to banish the city blues that could occasionally swamp even the hardiest of city dwellers.

'But what about this place?' he'd asked.

They had been sitting in the two-bedroomed flat, the constant drone of traffic drifting in through the open window, the air redolent with the sour odour of diesel fumes.

'Well, I've been thinking about it for a while, and the truth is, the commissions are coming in thick and fast and I simply can't balance the work and painting anymore,' she had explained before taking a sip from her coffee cup.

John could recall the excitement in her eyes, excitement that she tried to quell, not wanting to appear too keen, giving him the chance to raise any concerns without pressure.

'OK, but what about the financial side of things?' he had asked.

Emily had placed the cup on the table, opened her laptop and tapped at the keys.

'Well, I've been looking into that and I have over thirty solid-commissioned offers, so...'

'Thirty?' he had asked in surprise.

She had looked across the table at him and nodded. 'If I choose wisely and pick say five to work on, then that will bring in over twelve thousand in about four months and hopefully other offers will follow so I can be more selective.'

John could remember thinking that twelve thousand over four months was OK, but the truth was Emily was earning more as an estate agent.

She had sat back and folded her arms, waiting for him to respond.

'When you talk about moving, did you have anywhere in mind?' he asked, expecting her to say, "not yet".

But Emily had spun the laptop around and he had found himself looking at a small cottage with a thatched roof that appeared almost black with age, the front door even had a rambling rose growing around it, attached to a twisted wooden frame, red blooms smothering the wall, the front garden looked wild and overgrown but even there he could see flowers growing amongst the tall grass and weeds.

'What's this?'

'Rosebud Cottage,' she'd replied, scrolling through the images available. 'I'll admit it needs some work, but it has two decent-sized bedrooms and a large kitchen with an AGA,' her voice had changed slightly as she failed to mask the mounting excitement.

'Do you even know how to use an AGA?'

When she beamed at him and shook her head, he found himself smiling.

'No, but you were brought up in the country so for you it'll be a doddle,' she said with confidence.

Another image had popped up on the screen, revealing a long rear garden, bordered by a waist-high, drystone wall, once again the grass was tall and matted with weeds, though he could see vibrant red poppies thrown into the mix and a large purple-flowering butterfly bush over near the far wall.

'I assume there's a lawn under there somewhere?'

Emily had glanced at him and grinned widely. 'And then we have this,' another key tapped, and an image of the sea and cliffs popped onto the screen. 'You always said you wanted to learn to windsurf, so that would be your playground, *and* it's only a five-minute walk from the cottage.'

John could remember holding the sigh at bay, not wanting to shatter her dream as she continued to smile at him with a hopeful look in her eyes.

'Look, John, I know it sounds crazy, but you know how much the painting means to me and at last I'm making money. Now, I can either carry on doing it as and when I get the chance, or I can take the leap of faith and quit the job. I know there are risks involved and I won't pretend that the prospect doesn't scare me, but I don't want to spend the rest of my days living in this city and...'

'But I thought you loved the city?'

Emily had nodded, the smile slipping slightly. 'I do and I love our friends, but I'm getting tired of all the madness. I want us to have the chance to relax somewhere with fresh air, not at some roadside café eating a meal in a cloud of car fumes. I want to go to sleep with the window open, listening to the sea, rather than drunks taking a pee against the garden wall and wake in the morning to birdsong and the distant sea not angry car horns.'

John had pursed his lips before rubbing a hand across the back of his neck. 'Where is this place?'

'It's on the coast, I've checked the transport links and it should take an hour from work to home,' she paused and sighed, 'though we know what the trains are like, so chances are on most days it would take longer.'

'Well, the other day it took me two hours to travel five miles by car, and besides I might be able to swing it so I can work from home for a couple of days a week.'

He had watched as the excitement reignited in her eyes. 'So, what do you think, would you like to go and take a look at the place?'

John had hesitated for a moment, when he had replied his answer had surprised even him. 'Yeah, why not.'

The road swept to the left and he glanced at the cliffs and the sea beyond, and felt the smile curl his lips.

Five days later they had headed out to Clover and instantly fallen in love with Rosebud Cottage, they had sold the flat in the city and the truth was they had done better than they had hoped, leaving them with a smaller mortgage to pay on the cottage on the cliffs.

He had even managed to convince his boss that he could work equally well from home on the computer twice a week. So far, it was proving to be a success and he was actually doing more work on the Monday and Tuesday from the cottage than he had ever done from the city office. In fact, just before he had set off for home today, his boss had suggested just coming into the office on a Friday for the usual team meeting.

His smile grew wider as the warm summer breeze drifted through the car, Em would be thrilled when he told her that from now on he would only have to travel into the city once a week, leaving them more quality time together, plus, it would save a fortune on train fares and the parking fees at the station.

With that thought in mind, he continued to enjoy the drive, relishing the sunshine and the scenery, all was good with the world as he headed back to Rosebud Cottage.