

Chapter One

It didn't start with the river boy. It started, as so many things started, with Grandpa, and with swimming. It was only later, when she came to think things over, that she realized that in a strange way the river boy had been part of her all along, like the figment of a dream.

And the dream was her life.

Half-past nine in the morning and the pool was crowded already. That was the down-side to summer holidays, especially hot ones like this, but she knew she shouldn't grumble: she'd been here since six thirty, together with the usual hard-core of serious swimmers, and she'd managed a leisurely four miles without interruption.

But she did grumble; the mere sight of all these people flopping in like lemmings made her want to shout with frustration. She wasn't ready to stop yet, not by a long way. She had energy left and she wanted to use it.

She stuck to her lane, doggedly ploughing length after length, trying to ignore the splash of other swimmers. Sometimes she'd found that if she just forced herself to keep on swimming up and down her lane without stopping or swerving, the other users of the pool seemed by some collective telepathy to accept that space as hers, and leave it to her. But that wouldn't work today: they seemed to be jumping in by the score. Another quarter of an hour and it would be unbearable.

She locked into her stroke and drove herself on, her breath beating its practised rhythm in time with the strokes, as even as the chime of a clock. In for a gulp of

oxygen, her mouth twisted upwards to snap its life from the air, then face down again and the long exhalation to a slow, steady count, bubbles teasing her lips like tiny fish.

She loved this rhythm; she needed it. It kept her thoughts on track when they started to wander. Sometimes, when things were going well and she was feeling secure in herself and had something pleasant to think about, she was happy to let them wander; but if she was tiring or feeling vulnerable or worrying about Grandpa again, she focused on that rhythm and it settled her, sometimes even when she wasn't swimming.

But she was always swimming. She needed to swim. To be deprived of swimming would be like a perverse kind of drowning. She loved the sensation of power and speed, the feeling of glistening in a bed of foam, even the strange isolation of mind in this watery cocoon. Distance swimming was as much about will as about technique; and she knew she was strong in both. All she needed now, to set that will alight, was a big swimming challenge; something to test herself against. Something she could one day be proud of.

She heard Grandpa's voice calling her.

'Keep going, Jess!'

She glanced up at him as she flashed by, and smiled to herself. She knew what 'keep going' meant. Dear old Grandpa: he'd only been here twenty minutes and he was bored already. He ought to know by now that he could never fool her, of all people. His concentration span had always been short, except when he was painting, and his temper shorter still. Yet for some reason he always liked to come and watch her swimming.

She reached the far end of the pool, turned and kicked off the wall, and looked for Grandpa again. He'd wandered round to the shallow end and was standing there, watching some children. He was ready to go; but maybe she could squeeze in a couple more lengths to

finish off. She plunged down towards him, feeling for some reason slightly apprehensive. The children in the shallow end blocked her lane but they broke apart as she approached and she slipped in between them, wondering whether she should stop.

Grandpa called out again.

‘Everything’s fine, Jess. Keep going.’

She kicked off the wall and headed back down the pool, suddenly desperately uneasy. Something was wrong but she couldn’t work out what it was. His words rang in her head: everything’s fine, everything’s fine. And yet there was something in the very contrariness of Grandpa that told her he was trying to conceal something. He was such a stubborn, prickly old man, he would always say everything was fine.

Especially when it wasn’t.

She broke out of her stroke and stopped, treading water, and searched for Grandpa. There he was, still standing by the shallow end, watching the children. He looked all right; no different from before. Just bored. Perhaps she was imagining all this. He saw her and raised a hand to wave.

Then, to her horror, clutched it over his heart and crashed into the pool.

The hospital managed to keep him three days. He was meant to have stayed much longer but, being Grandpa, as soon as he’d decided he was feeling better, he rang for a taxi and, to the consternation of doctors, nurses, and a protesting taxi driver who was convinced his cab was about to turn into a hearse, discharged himself. As he informed the exasperated consultant, the family was going on holiday on August 20th and, as this was the 19th, he needed to get home to pack.

So he was home again.

She knew it was a mistake. Much as she’d been yearning to see him back, she knew the moment he

arrived that this time even his independent spirit had misled him. He'd turned up at the door looking like a skeleton and they'd put him straight to bed. He seemed barely well enough to move, let alone go on holiday.

The next morning, at Grandpa's insistence, they started packing, though only after Dad had forced him to agree to let them call out Doctor Phelps. Jess liked Doctor Phelps but went up to her room when she heard him at the door. She knew what the outcome would be: once Grandpa had set his mind on something, that was that, and if he'd decided he was going on holiday, nothing anyone could say or do would change his plans. So Doctor Phelps, pleasant man though he was, would get short shrift.

She sat down at the desk and stared at the swimming medals on the shelf with her birthday cards propped up among them, the big jokey one from Grandpa most prominent of all. But neither swimming medals nor being fifteen seemed relevant right now.

She frowned and let her gaze wander out of the window into the street, already clogged with cars and buses and taxis struggling towards the city centre. The omens for a good holiday seemed remote indeed.

Some time later she heard a tap at the door.

'Come in, Mum,' she said, not looking round.

Mum came in and put a hand on her shoulder.

'Do you recognize all our knocks?'

Jess glanced up at her and tried to smile.

'Suppose so. Has Doctor Phelps gone?'

'Yes.'

'And was Grandpa horrible to him?'

'Not horrible. Just . . . you know . . . '

'Grandpa-rish.'

Mum laughed.

'Yes. Grandpa-rish.'

'So we're still going on holiday?'

'Yes.'

Jess sighed.

'He shouldn't be home. And we shouldn't be going on holiday. He's not well enough.'

'I know. But let's not think the worst. He's such a stubborn character he'll probably pull through out of sheer bloody-mindedness just to prove us all wrong.'

Jess scowled down at the desk.

'I still think he should be in hospital.'

'Well, you won't change him,' said Mum. 'You know what he's like. Dad and I aren't happy about it either. If he has another turn where we're going, it might not be easy to get him to a hospital. It's a very isolated place, apparently. But he's set on going so let's just hope it does him some good.'

'He needs rest. Lots of rest.'

'Try telling him that. Anyway, are you ready?'

'Yes.'

'Well done.' Mum leaned forward suddenly. 'Jess, give your dad plenty of support. I know you will anyway but, remember, if it's hard for you, it's worse for him. OK? See you downstairs.'

Mum kissed her and left the room, and Jess thought over what she had said. She was right, of course: it must be worse for Dad, as Grandpa's son, and an only son at that, even though the two of them seemed constantly at loggerheads. But that was hardly surprising: they were such different men, one fiercely independent, fiercely driven; the other mild and unambitious.

She glanced out of the window and saw Dad in the street, fitting the roof box to the car, and smiled to herself. That was about the extent of Dad's ambition: DIY projects that never quite came off. He'd always liked making things. Working with his hands seemed to take some of the tension out of him after a day's teaching, though whenever he produced anything, the unfortunate object never quite looked as if it had come into the world with a willing heart.

The roof box was no exception; and the fact that everyone in the street now called it 'the coffin' did nothing to make her feel more comfortable.

He walked back into the house and a moment later she heard his voice as he climbed the stairs.

'Jess? You packed?'

She picked up her suitcase, hurried forward and opened the door of her room to find him standing there.

'I'll take the case,' he said.

'It's OK.'

'No, here.' He reached out to take it, then suddenly, as though on an impulse, put his arm round her instead and held her to him. She looked up at him, expecting him to speak, but he didn't; he just held her, his eyes staring over her head; then—just as suddenly—he let her go.

'First day for ages you haven't been swimming,' he said.

'Didn't feel like it somehow.'

'I know.'

He took the suitcase and started down the stairs. She followed, trying to see the expression on his face but unable to catch it.

'How long will it take us to get there?' she said.

'Hard to say, not having been there before. There'll probably be lots of tourists on the roads. That could slow us down. And it's a very remote place. Miles from anywhere and difficult to get to, judging from the map.' He glanced at his watch. 'Can't see us getting there before dark.'

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and left the suitcase with the others. Mum appeared at the kitchen door.

'Is the coffin on the car?' she said.

Dad frowned.

'Yes. But, listen, can we stop calling it that?'

'Pop won't mind,' she said. 'He was the one who called it that in the first place.'

Dad looked at her.

'It wasn't him I was thinking of.'

Mum's eyes softened at once.

'We'll call it the roof box,' she said quietly. 'Jess, can you go and check Pop's all right?'

Grandpa was in the sitting room in his favourite chair, his head thrown to one side, and she thought at first he was sleeping. Then she caught a sparkle in the eyes.

'How are you, Grandpa?' she said.

'Still dodging the undertaker. Is the coffin ready?'

She chuckled.

'Dad's just fixed it on the car. But how are you really?'

'Fine.' He glanced at her, then gave a wink. 'Long as you're around.'

She looked away, trying not to show how much it hurt her to see him as frail as this. The Grandpa she'd always known had been a man of vigour, energy, passion, despite his age. It seemed somehow unjust to see him any other way. She tried to take her mind from the thoughts she feared most.

'Do you think you'll remember the place?' she said.

'Course I will. I was born there.'

'But you were only fifteen when you left.'

'That's right. Same age as you.'

'And you've never been back since. So it'll be different.'

He sniffed.

'I'll remember it. You wouldn't forget this place, would you?'

She looked down.

What was it about Grandpa that was so reassuring yet so unsettling? He seemed utterly unconcerned about his condition. He had always been fearless, or at least appeared so, yet somewhere within himself he must have pondered the dark possible outcome of all this: the thing that preyed on her mind and no doubt on Mum's and Dad's minds too; the thing no one mentioned.

She saw her father at the door.

‘All right, Dad?’ he said. ‘Jess looking after you?’

She wished he wouldn’t keep raising his voice every time he spoke to Grandpa. He’d only started doing it since yesterday and it made it seem as though the heart attack had not only weakened Grandpa but rendered him deaf as well. Sooner or later there was bound to be a caustic response. But Grandpa merely raised an eyebrow this time.

‘Jess is looking after me fine.’

‘Well, let’s get you in the car, then.’

He let them help him to his feet, then quickly waved them aside and reached for his stick. Jess stood back and watched his painful progress out of the sitting room, Dad hovering anxiously close by in case he fell. Mum was waiting in the hall.

‘All right, Pop?’

‘Yes, yes, for God’s sake. How can I be anything else with you lot fussing over me all the time?’

Mum chuckled and stood aside to let them pass; then she caught Jess by the arm.

‘Come with me,’ she said.

Jess followed her through to the study and there on the table, propped against the wall, was an unframed painting, unmistakably one of Grandpa’s yet unlike anything he had done before; and clearly nowhere near finished.

‘Do you know anything about this?’ said Mum.

Jess shook her head.

‘I’ve never seen it before. I didn’t know he was working on anything.’

Mum looked hard at her.

‘He did this last night.’

‘You mean—?’

‘When he got back from the hospital. We put him to bed—remember?—and he must have waited till we’d all turned in, then got out again and come downstairs and fetched his brushes and what have you, and worked

through the night. And now he tells me he wants to take the thing on holiday to finish it. I don't know what drives that man, I really don't.'

Jess stared at the picture.

It was so different from his usual work. There was a river, which dominated the scene, not a river she recognized and perhaps not even a real one at all, just a fantasy river. The picture was strange and amorphous, so different from his other paintings, yet it was eerily beautiful. The banks were a subtle hint of green that the eye barely took in, being somehow drawn into the pale waters and away towards a hidden sea. There were no animals, no birds, no people; and it felt right that way. There seemed no place for living things in this remote vision. Yet for some reason she found herself thinking of the coming of autumn, after a long, rich summer.

Mum spoke again.

'It's got a name.'

There was something in her voice—something too casual, too detached—that betrayed her excitement. And Jess knew why. Grandpa never gave his pictures names. He just painted them and left others to make sense of them, if they could. Mum turned the picture over and pointed to the words Grandpa had scrawled there. Jess read them aloud.

'River Boy.'

The words seemed to carry a strange resonance, as though they were somehow important to her, yet why that should be so she could not tell. And there was a further mystery.

She looked round at Mum.

'There's no boy.'

'Exactly. Strange, isn't it—I mean, for him to be so specific. Still, he hasn't finished it yet so maybe he's going to put the boy in later. I made the mistake of asking him about it.'

'Mum! You should have known better.'

‘I know, but I couldn’t resist it. It’s such an unusual picture, especially having a name. I suppose you can guess the response.’

Jess didn’t need to guess. She knew what Grandpa’s response would have been.

‘He told you it’s not up to the artist to explain a painting because each picture has its own life and its own language, just like a poem, and we either understand it or we don’t. And he said painting’s hard enough work as it is without having to waste time telling every idiot—’

‘Ignoramus, he said.’

‘Every ignoramus what the thing means. And if artists had to explain their pictures to every Tom, Dick, and Harry who came along, they’d never get any work done. And he said—’

Mum interrupted her, laughing.

‘Something like that. Anyway, I was hoping you might know something about this painting, seeing as you seem to be a sort of a muse for him.’

‘Muse?’

‘Someone who inspires an artist.’

She knew what the word meant. Grandpa had often used it when she went to watch him paint, but generally it was just to say that the muse wasn’t being kind to him today, or that he’d have to be nice to the muse today as he had a difficult bit to work on, or something like that. He’d never suggested the muse had anything to do with her. Indeed, she’d always thought he meant some kind of goddess, not a human being at all. And it was hard to imagine anyone, even a goddess, having any influence over someone as wilful as Grandpa.

‘He doesn’t need me to inspire him,’ she said. ‘He’s been painting all his life.’

Mum ran her finger round the edge of the painting, as though debating whether to answer; then she spoke, in a quiet, thoughtful voice.

‘But he’s only really found himself in his painting

since you were born. His earlier pictures all lacked something. They had plenty of technical skill, but the magic wasn't there.' She paused. 'But after you were born, it's like something started to motivate him, and it's gone on motivating him ever since.'

'But he's never called me a muse or anything like that.'

'He wouldn't. And he's never said anything to Dad or me either. He probably doesn't even see it that way himself and if anyone asked him about it, he'd say they're talking rubbish. But there's something—I don't know what it is—but something he gets from you, something really important to him. Dad and I both feel it.' She stroked Jess on the cheek. 'I don't know why I'm telling you this, but keep it to yourself and don't let it make you vain—not that you would. Just treat it as a sign of his love.'

Jess looked back at the painting and said nothing.

'So you don't know anything about the river boy?' said Mum.

'Sorry.'

'Not to worry. Well, let's get going. Bring the picture out to the car, can you? Not that I can see him having the energy to finish it on holiday, whatever he thinks. You know how worked up he gets when he's painting.'

Jess picked it up.

'I'll be along in a moment.'

'Well, don't hang around. We've got a hell of a journey in front of us.'

'OK.'

She waited until Mum had gone, then stared down at the picture again; and the words slid into her mind once more.

River Boy.

It was strange, but no doubt, as Mum said, Grandpa would put the boy in later. If he was strong enough to paint. That was the big worry. He might never lift a brush again, though she doubted that. He was so

obsessive about a painting once he had started it, and this one—this one she sensed was important to him. And, for some reason, also to her.

She didn't know why. She only knew that the more she looked at it, the more the presence of the absent boy seemed to grow, until finally it overwhelmed everything, the banks and the sky and even the river itself, pulling her into the picture and onwards, irresistibly, towards the sea.