

SLIP KNOT

By Hayley Spurway

CHAPTER 2

From: lena_1976@hotmail.com
Subject: sand in my shoes
Date: 15 January 2008 19:26 GMT
To: ange@mediaeye.co.uk

hi ange. sorry to disappear without so much as a phone call, but I've swapped the winter smog for a fix of fresh sea air. it's a long story but I'm on the isles of scilly – a wild little paradise that has to be england's answer to the caribbean (except it's a few degrees cooler than the tropics).

news flash: i think dan and me are over. not ready to talk about it all yet, just need some space to figure stuff out. i'll be back soon. miss you. Lx

p.s. sorry i have to miss that gallery launch on friday – maybe you can persuade the new mystery man to come along ;-)

- send -

From the helicopter the caravans and holiday parks looked like Lego arranged in neat lines on Fuzzy Felt fields. Villages were diminutive, their people extinct from her bird's-eye perspective. Beaches were gleaming pearls between rocky outcrops. Treen.

Porthcurno. Porthgwarra. Sennen. Each one labelled by memories of bucket-and-spade holidays and her time spent in Cornwall over the years. Time she wanted to recapture; raid its bank of happy memories and relive them. It wasn't long before she spotted the litter of Jurassic humps poking out from the shimmering turquoise of the ocean. Some twenty-eight miles off the coast of Cornwall: the Isles of Scilly.

The harbour was asleep in the afternoon sun. There was no queue for the passenger ferry and onboard she stood on an empty foredeck where salty spray pecked at her cheeks. Left on the mile-wide island of Tresco she watched the boat putter away to its next island stop, leaving her stranded on a sandy smile of beach where seaweed was heaped like a mass of eels on the shore.

As she hauled her baggage along the bumpy tarmac of Tresco's only road, she sensed curtains twitching in the palm-fronted cottages that stared out to sea, the residents turning their eyes to the outsider who had arrived amidst the stony-quiet winter. It was her imagination of course. Most of the cottages would be empty out of season, reserved for the tourists who bagged them for the summer months.

Breaking the silence was a grunted conversation between three gardeners who leant on redundant rakes and shovels by the roadside. Their voices dried up as she neared.

"Afternoon m'am," one nodded.

Lena reacted as if they'd wolf-whistled from a car window or a building site, fixing her gaze to the ground.

"D'you need a lift some place?" the youngest of the trio persisted. Not daring to meet his eye she looked up from his mud-clad boots and grimy jeans as far as his Adam's apple. He gestured to an electric golf buggy loaded with gardening tools.

"No thanks. I'm not going far." She forced up the corners of her mouth into a prim smile.

"Not far to go around 'ere." They laughed, soft, jaunty laughs and her cheeks yielded to a rosy glow as she marched on, hearing their banter resume behind her.

Hers was a traditional granite cottage in a pretty seafront row interrupted by an incongruous half-built glass construction. Inside she took off her shoes to soften the eerie sound of her footsteps echoing in the hollow shell of a place unlived in. She pushed open the patio doors, gasping a lung-full of pungent seaweed that brought childhood memories tumbling down on her: being the first to see the sea on the long journey to Cornwall, winding down the windows to be christened by the briny kiss of the seaside, listening to the shush of the waves in the still of the night.

The swaying pampas beckoned her out onto the weather-beaten lawn, her bare-feet chilled by dewdrops and her soles stinging as she padded across the coarse sand. If it wasn't for the bite of the breeze it could have been the Aegean or the Caribbean. London loomed somewhere in another world. She was separated from its poison by land and sea. Trying to outrun all she'd left behind, she kept walking, watching the islands around her turn into silhouettes under a pink and orange sky where clouds thickened on the horizon.

*

It had been dark for hours. A dense blackness that shut out the day more completely than any nightfall in the city. Desert black. Lena pulled her knees up to her chest, her body sinking into the sofa, trying to burrow away from her emotions as all she had left behind chased her down, like the thunderclouds that raced across the skies and

engulfed the stars; like the flood of temptation that coerced her to open the first bottle of wine.

She looked at the phone. Should she call him? Should she have turned back and made up? she wondered. Her breathing was fast and shallow as a blow of fear crushed her chest. What would she do, where would she go, what would it be like without him?

What with Dan being a wealthy stockbroker and the opposite of Lena in so many ways, falling in love with him had taken her by complete surprise. Dressed in expensive suits and pin-stripe shirts he was never meant to become part of her long-term wardrobe, so why couldn't she conjure up the relief she was so desperate to feel now she'd left him behind? Hankering for something to ground her she'd been seduced by his charm and his easy approach to life, and despite their differences she let herself believe he could be the missing piece in her jigsaw.

Trying to heal the guilt in the wake of mistakes she'd made with her father, she'd sacrificed her own wants and wanderlust to try and fit the mould of the woman Dan wanted her to be. She'd convinced herself it was the right move for them both when she rented out her flat and moved into his silk-lined pockets; pockets that had no room for her dreams of waking up to the chorus of seagulls, of stepping beyond the shallows of a regimented lifestyle and living to the beat of the waves. But the final blow came with the revelation that his pockets had no room for her dreams of having children. And so putting his infertility at the root of her discontent, she blamed of him of robbing her future happiness.

Only by drowning out reality with bottle after bottle of wine had she learned to detach herself from the frustrations of a woman anchored to the wrong place. To the wrong man. Yet adrift from her own dreams and constrained by the expectations of her career and city life, she'd held onto him for far too long; her anger exploding in childish tantrums, her bony fists punching his rigid torso and her words beating his withering brow.

But now she was finally breaking free. And by leaving, she realised she was not only unshackling herself, but setting Dan free as well. Would liberation really prove to be so easy?

She looked at the empty wine bottle, disappointed with herself for going back on her promise not to drink for at least a few days. She'd wanted to prove she didn't need the sedative effect of alcohol in her veins.

She looked at the phone again. Picked up the receiver, then slammed it back down as their final scene replayed itself in her mind.

*

The second punch had shattered the light bulb; its shards flying through the air like a thousand blades.

"Call yourself a man?" She sputtered blood and saliva over his salt and pepper stubble.

His face, up close, contorted with rage, snorting breath heavy with whisky.

She braced herself. Then launched another missile. “You’re fucking useless. Firing blanks.” She wanted to hurt him, to destroy what was left. Although she was unusually tall for a woman, she was no match for the strength of Dan’s gym-fit body – a model of masculinity he honed to try and hide its flaws. So she turned to words to fuel the clumsy tango of drunken fights that lasted into the small hours of the morning.

His fingers gripped her collarbone, the frame of the mirror pressed into her spine. She looked into his wild, glazed eyes, searching for a hint of softness, something of the man she had fallen in love with. Wishing for a moment she could fold into his muscular arms and let her tears rain down the lapel of his Armani suit. But there was nothing left between them. They’d wrung out their feature-length romance and were determined to unravel a tragedy from its remnants.

“You bitch.” His words thundered through her. “You used to say you never even wanted kids. Thought they’d interfere with your selfish independence. Snatch away your freedom.”

“You still should’ve told me... Given me the choice.”

“I did,” he insisted, his squared jaw clenched.

“It was too late then.” They had been over and over this too many times. By the time she’d found he was infertile, she’d already moved in and kicked her dreams from their love-nest. She – foolishly, she now realised – gave up everything to fit in with his life. Now she wanted a way out. “You lied to me. You ruined everything for me. You should’ve told me!” Her manicured nails clawed the shirt from his chest.

Dan struck the side of her head, his fat gold ring scraping her scalp. “What about me, Lena? What about my life?” He shoved her to the floor and slammed the door

behind him, the echo of his footsteps leaving carnage and tears in their wake. The bittersweet taste of making up was abandoned, left in the wings, waiting for another scene; for another couple.

*

Hammering on the windowpanes made her jump. Pellets of rain lashed the windows and rattled the cottage as if being pounded by the brushes of an industrial car wash. Seized by fear she sat rigid for a moment, like a child holding her breath when an imaginary ghost or burglar entered the room. She shrank into the cushions. The storm outside was as angry and violent as the storm within her.

She tried to find comfort in the warm glow of the log burning fire as she watched the flames lick the glass; red and orange tongues trying to escape. But what good would it do to escape when they wouldn't exist without the wood that made them burn? Hadn't she too often broken away when she'd felt trapped, only to find she'd left behind what fuelled her? And having thrived on the early burst of freedom, didn't she then always find herself lost, dislocated? She had cut ties to places and people in every part of her transient life, always moving on, erasing her footsteps, leaving nothing behind. And now there was nothing to go back to except a city life she loathed. The only other life within her grasp was what lay ahead. What she made of the future.

Now she was alone. No anchor. No safety line. Her arm reached out. Right now the future needed uncorking from a second bottle of wine.

- End Chapter 2 -