

Chapter Two

Call to Adventure: The Boys' Club

'Macho does not prove mucho'

Zsa Zsa

Gabor

'I don't want to belong to any club that will have me as a member.'

Groucho

Marx

'Showing off is the fool's idea of glory.'

Bruce Lee

Within a few weeks of Cornish life I start to see flaws in my perfect plan to move to Cornwall and learn to climb. There is climbing to be had, but I'm facing two major stumbling blocks. Firstly, it rains here. A lot. Slithering around on slippery granite getting chilled in damp Gore-Tex and generally not having much fun is not a good way to start climbing outside.

And secondly, it is harder than I expected to find friends to go climbing with. I have been having sweaty-palmed flashbacks to 1991, when I joined a new school to do my 'A' levels. I can remember desperately trying to find someone to hang out with at lunch time and the crushing awfulness of the first few days on my own in the common room. Since I left behind my awkward teenage years I have generally found it fairly easy to make friends.

To tell the truth, within a few weeks of living in Falmouth I have made fantastic friends with some of the people on my course: warm-hearted, wonderful, dance floor diva Liam; Man-brador and surfing amigo Joe; silver haired, calm and thoughtful Judy; Scottish, soulful, plain-talking David; and generous, kind, anarchist Emily. The list goes on. But, none of them, not one, has the remotest interest in climbing.

I really need to find a proficient climber to show me the secret and great climbing spots around Cornwall and teach me how to climb outdoors. Someone who I get on with and someone who has the patience to climb with a relative novice like me, a novice with a phobia about falling down stairs. Not

that much to ask then.

So on a damp and drizzly February evening I step into my metaphorical harness, dust my hands with imaginary chalk and go along to the first meeting of the newly formed Falmouth Climbing Club, in the back of Weatherspoons, by the books.

I turn up a bit late, so as not to be the first, buy a £1.49 pint of locally brewed Lizard ale and wander around looking hopefully at groups scattered around the bar. I'm wearing my most 'outdoorsy outfit' of Gore-Tex jacket, hooded top and mountain trainers - a marvellous invention, halfway between walking boots and ordinary trainers. They are almost the holy grail of my 'perfect shoes'. Two young lads raise their eyebrows at me as I make a nervous sweep of the back of the pub and I go over. And thus the awkwardness begins.

Andy, the long haired one, says,

'Well you look like a climber.' My carefully chosen outfit had worked!

Steve, the dark hair one, smiles and says nothing. He says this a lot during the evening. Following this good start, we stall somewhat. Andy and Steve can't be older than twenty, both geology students, laid back and kind. A 31 year old woman who clearly doesn't know all that much about climbing is outside their sphere of reference. They treat me like a mildly embarrassing Aunt at a family wedding.

Two people had raised their eyebrows as I approach, but there are actually three people around the table. The third person, whose eyebrows remained distinctly un-raised, is a boat builder called Pauli. His squinty features are tightly arranged around the middle of his face, finished off with an angry red and white spot in the centre of his chin, like an evil cherry on a Bakewell tart.

'So where are you from?' I ask.

'Midlands, originally, but there's not much call for boat builders in Gosforth.

'No? Where's Gos -'

'But lived here for five years. With my girlfriend.'

'Ah right, and is she a boat builder too?'

'No, pharmacist.'

Pauli shifts his chair away from me slightly. But at this point a few more people trickle in, all handsome young men, most under 21, with a few possibly pushing 25. There seem to be two body types: men with shoulders the size of millstones and big round upper arms, or men like strips of knotted sinew. Pauli is out of place, with his slack flesh and pot belly riding high in the middle of his torso. I wonder if these men, like Maestri, choose to rearrange themselves in the height of passion to maximise exercise potential. Then I blush. I'm the only woman here and *I'm* the one thinking about sex.

But I am also out of place, not only because I'm a woman, with arms like strands of spaghetti, but because of my lack of knowledge about pitons, cams and the like. The talk focuses on where people had climbed and famous climbers they know. They size each other up, compiling a mental hierarchy; who's the toughest, who's the craziest. I half expect them to unzip their trousers and whap their members onto the beer soaked table to see whose is biggest.

'I couldn't believe it, I fell off a Severe. And I'd done it the week before.'

'Yeah and then there was nowhere to put my next piece. Like nowhere. And it was only supposed to be a VDiff.' What on earth were they going on about?

In the midst of all this jargon I give up talking to Pauli and spend the rest of the evening crossing and uncrossing my legs, trying not to jump to my feet and shout, 'For God's sake, stop being so macho.'

'Look who I met last month.'

Pauli passes around his phone, showing a picture of himself and a big chinned man. The others murmur their approval. I don't want to ask who it is in case Pauli interprets my question it as some sort of marriage proposal.

'And I also met Joe Simpson. I was dressed in a cassock.' He pauses, taking a sip of his pint, waiting for the obvious question. No one says anything.

'And Joe Simpson came up to me and whipped my cassock over my head and tried to pull my pants down.'

The thought of Joe Simpson, one of the UK's most famous and well respected climbers, trying to wrestle a pair of boxers from under Pauli's sweaty cassock temporarily strikes me dumb.

'We were all hammered; I didn't really know what was going on.'

'Why did he do that?' I ask.

No one answers.

I wonder what my friends back in London are doing.

Just before leaving London, Kai and I had gone into Massala Zone in the Angel. Behind Kai were a young gay couple holding hands over their thalis; to my right were a Chinese family with two young children; to their left an older couple with white hair and embroidered waistcoats; next to them a group of five young black men in cheap leather jackets.

I look around the Weatherspoons at the shelves of fake books, shiny metal rails and thick airport style carpets. I wonder, in particular, what Kai is doing.

Following the Joe Simpson story, Pauli has the attention of at least half the group, and goes on to regale the table with his thoughts on sports climbing - the only type of climbing I had ever done.

Definitions of Sports and Trad (Traditional) Climbing from **The Complete Rock Climber**

- Sport climbing - Sports Climbs originated in Europe and generally have fixed bolt protection. They have a different ethos and style of climbing than traditional climbs.
- Traditional climbing – The form of climbing where protection is placed by the lead climber and removed by the second.

Sports climbing routes have bolts drilled or glued into the rock face. When you lead a sports route, you climb up with the rope, aim for each bolt, clip a quickdraw onto it and then clip your rope onto the quickdraw. You are then protected if you fall. Trad routes, on the other hand, go up clean rock, give or take some chalk. When you are leading a trad route, you take small pieces of gear up with you and jam them into cracks and crevices where you can. These pieces of gear are called cams or sometimes, quite strangely, 'friends' and they take the place of bolts in sports climbing.

Trad climbing is harder, as you have more to do at each point, and it involves more risk. While a sport's bolt is very unlikely to work its way loose, a little metal nut jammed into a crack in the rock just might. This increased

risk is not the only reason many climbers prefer trad climbing. It is seen as a more natural way to interact with the rock and also more British. We invented it you see.

I've never climbed trad and find leading sports routes exceptionally hard. Any lead climbing involves climbing 'above the rope'. This means if you fall, you fall further. If you are half a meter above the last piece of protection, you fall a meter and then some due to slack in the rope. Falling down is the very thing I fear. It is one of the reasons I love top roping, climbing up with a rope already in place, because if you slip from a hold, you fall about three inches. Trad leading seems as achievable as flying to the moon.

'What a waste of time – no it is trad or nothing for me' says Pauli and I'm not at all surprised. As he talks on, calling sports climbers a bunch of yellow-bellied idiots, my will to live drains out of me and collects in a puddle on the floor under my chair. The group of friends I climb with in London, a mixture of men and women, ranging from 23 to 40 plus, are welcoming, supportive and encouraging. One of the things I've always liked about climbing is that there isn't a huge gulf between male and female climbers at an amateur level. Physical strength is important but so are flexibility, fearlessness and determination. What was I doing here in this strange, awkward place? Would I ever be able to bring myself to climb with this group? And more importantly, would they want me too?

However, I did manage to discover one interesting thing from my evening with the boys' club: a guy called Bob runs a climbing wall from his barn in hard-to-find, corner of the Cornish countryside. There was talk of Bob being ex-SAS and rumours that he had been in trouble with the law in the past. The one thing everyone agreed on was that you can use his barn whenever you want as long as he isn't messing around with his plane. I imagine a huge hanger with a tiger moth in one corner, walls covered with Cornish climbers sheltering from the rain.

The next day I moan to Judy about my efforts to fit in, hamming up Pauli's shifting discomfort. I talk about climbing and feeling like something is holding me back, fear of falling. She mentions that her husband, Andy Britnall might be able to help. A few days later, I get an email saying that Andy would be happy to do a free session of hypnotherapy and NLP (Neuro Linguistic

Programming) for me if I was up for it. I am a bit dubious about hypnotherapy, being a rational scientist type. But I'd had had NLP before and it'd really worked. I thought 'why not' and we arranged a meeting in St Austell on a Saturday at the end of term.

The first contact I have with Andy is on the phone. We talk about what it is I want from him, what I'm scared of and how scared I am of it. I'm in the kitchen of my Falmouth 'home.' Sometimes I can get reception in my room, and not the kitchen. Today I can only get reception in the kitchen.

'So I am quite a fearful person really,' I say. At any moment one of the other students I share with or my lovely landlady could come in.

'You are good at getting yourself to feel like this. How do you know how do it?'

'I don't do it on purpose' I think, bridleing. It's a physical feeling in my stomach, I tell him. I often see an accident - sometimes happening to me, sometimes to the person I am climbing with. It's fear and nerves I guess and I can't make myself carry on. I know I need to push myself out of my comfort zone to improve but I can't make myself. I never get to the point where I am out of control.

'Right. OK. I want you to think of the thing you are scared of. How does it look?' I imagine myself bouldering - climbing at a fairly low height without a rope. An image jumps into my mind, bright and fresh. I see myself clinging to a boulder, scared to go up or down. I can feel the fear, feel my fingers holding on tight, my legs trembling. He asks a few questions: Is it in colour? Is it moving? Are you watching yourself? Yes, Yes, Yes.

'Right, now I want to you think of something you do really well.'

'OK – um. Really well.'

'Yes.'

'Errr.' There is a silence as I think. There must be something I can do well. I laugh nervously.

'Do you ride a bike?' he asks.

'Yes, but I feel quite scared doing that at times.' God how pathetic.

There must be something.

'Anything else?'

'Ummm.' There really must be something. Eureka, my teacher's pet mind thinks of something I am good at and I blurt it out.

'Typing.'

There's a moment's silence on the other end of the phone. Oh my God. TYPING?

'Typing?' he asks. To give him credit, he doesn't burst out laughing or slam the phone down in disgust, snorting, 'hopeless case.'

In a rush it comes to me.

'SWIMMING,' I shout.

'Yes, swimming.' I can hear the relief in his voice.

'I'm a good swimmer, I can swim well.'

'Right, so now I want you to picture yourself swimming.' I imagine myself dodging verruca plasters in the chlorinated blue of Hackney Baths.

'What does it look like?' he asks. It is a moving image, in a frame, but not that bright.

'OK, good. I want you to take away the frame..... make the image fill your whole inner vision. Good. Now, make it bright. Bright.' I see myself, arm arcing, a string of water droplets knocked off before they have a chance to fall as my arm plunges back into the water. I see a wake curling out on either side of me as I power through the water.

'Right Jen, now back to the thing you are scared of.' The pool disappears; the lonely granite reappears. I am gripping hard onto the sloping holds. The wind is blowing.

'I want you to freeze the moving picture.' The lamest climbing film in the world which is currently playing in my head - freezes.

'I want you to turn the picture black and white.' My frozen self melts into grey.

'I want you to put a frame around the picture.' A thin black frame appears.

'Move the picture away, so it is far off and up high.' My snap shot disappears into the distance. I can see it, but only just.

'How does that feel?'

'Um good, I think.' Is that what I am supposed to say? But it does feel good – sort of. He explains what he has done. He has taught me to think of something I am scared of in a new, positive way. He helped me to transplant the way I thought about swimming to the way I think about bouldering. You can do this with other things you are nervous of. Just work out how you think about something you do well (but not bloody typing) and something you don't do well – and swap em. See. Easy.

The next day I think about my ill-fated meet with the climbing club and with my new-found ability to freeze frame my doubts, I realise that if I'm going to get along in Pauli's world of trad climbing, it would help to understand some of the climbing jargon. I email a friend - a climbing instructor at the Castle - to ask for some help.

Hi Jen,

Sorry to hear you had a bit of an unwelcoming start to your climbing club, Yes, feel free to phone and pick my brains. Here is what it all means,

Mod (moderate) - if your head's in the right place most of these can be soloed (well I can). This means climbed without a rope.

Diff (difficult)- really easy, the rock does tend to be polished cos they get a lot of use by beginners

VDiff (very difficult)- easy and as before, polished

Diff and VDiff, tend to be a little awkward but not hard, you know when you do a 4a and suddenly get surprised that you have to use your brain for a mo and it throws you a bit, they're like that. They are a little dull to second because of their ease and offer a bit more interest to the leader but are usually good to warm up on

S (Severe) - not too hard, slightly smaller holds, but usually a bit more exposed or

flatter wall, technical grades come into use now e.g. S4a

VS (very severe) like S but a bit more so

HVS (hard very severe) I'm sure you get the picture

E, (Extreme) - these come with a number E1, E2, basically the higher the number the more likely you'll deck out and die if you fall off, either because of the height of your first placing and then the distance to your next.

We'll get you up to the Peaks this spring on some Gritstone, maybe we can find a day when you're on your Easter hols and you can learn a bit more, best also to have an idea of what good rigging looks like in case you find yourself climbing with a muppet! Remember don't trust them blindly just because they say they know what they're doing and you know you don't; young, male and arrogant can equal complacency and risks - not wanting to be the voice of doom just be careful.

Gotta go now, take-out just turned up, hhhm crispy duck pancakes.

Hope you still well and happy, look forward to seeing you at Easter

Lorra luv,

Soph -x-

So a climb classed as 'difficult' is really easy, and a very difficult is a bit harder but still easy.

What's that all about? This is known as the adjectival grading system and it's unique to the UK.

Most sports have a neutral way of grading difficulty.

Ski runs are colour coded with a green circle for easy to Ian Fleming style double black diamond for the most demanding. Unemotional kayakers grade

rapids simply 1 to 6. Surfer actually go the other way, playing down the size of the waves they slice across,

measuring height from the back of the wave. Imagine if ski runs were labelled, IB (Icy Beware) VIB (Very Icy Beware) or rapids were graded RD (Risk of Drowning) or HRD (High Risk of Drowning). What were climbers



Quick on the draw

doing when they chose these labels? And why was I choosing to throw myself into this world, where a simple piece of kit, comprising of two clips on either end of a piece of flat material, becomes a quickdraw?

One thing was certain though, meeting the climbing club and talking to Andy had made me more determined than ever to find a partner and get climbing. By the end of the following week, I had two possibilities to follow up; a friend was going to introduce me to a climber in his Samba band and while scouring www.ukbouldering.com, I'd found a group that climb out of Newquay.

Bring it on.

Chapter Two – Glossary

NLP: Neuro-Linguistic Programming is a type of counselling or therapy used to help people look at and improve the way they think, act and react.

St Austell: Pronounced 'snoozle' by locals. The largest town in Cornwall, home to the marvellous St Austell brewery and Tribute Beer, but its name comes from the Cornish *Sen Ostell* rather than an illustrious local saint.

Bolts: A permanent anchor fixed into a rock face. Either made by gluing a bolt into a drilled hole or by using an expansion bolt.

Sloping holds: Climbing holds that are less than 90 degrees from the rock, hard to hold on to and can be a good hold to teach you how to use your feet effectively. When you hold them you don't feel secure and they are sometimes called 'not positive' holds.