

## CLIFFHANGER

She opened the car door, wincing at the screeching noise the stiff hinges made. It seemed to split the night air. She stepped out. Icy fingers stroked her face, and she slipped on a frozen patch on the rough ground, grabbing the car door to steady herself. She stopped, listening. No sound. The moon was partly obscured by clouds but it didn't matter. Up here, high on the cliff top, a brisk wind sliced straight through her coat.

'Here, Beau,' she called, and the Yorkshire terrier moved from the passenger seat to the driver's seat. He poked his head out after her, pulling back at the last minute. He whined, uncertain at the late-night adventures, and unsettled by her own anxiety. She breathed hard to calm herself. It would soon all be over. She picked him up, along with her bag, and buried her nose in his silky coat, trying to warm it up.

'Not long, now,' she whispered, as she carried him over to where the low branch of a nearby tree jutted out. She tied his lead onto it and placed her bag on the floor next to him, her mobile phone sitting at the top. He sat, trembling with cold, as she walked away. She wished she'd remembered his fleece-lined coat; his fine hair would do little to keep him warm. His shrill yap cut through the air, and she turned back.

'Ssh. It's OK. I'll be back in a minute.'

The dog quieted, but his eyes never left her. He licked his lips and panted, anxiety getting the better of him.

She returned to the car, checking all around was still deserted. This place was similar to Beachy Head on the south coast, but much less well-known, in a far-off corner of Northumberland—rugged, windswept cliffs and the swirling, crashing sea below, with lethal

jagged rocks jutting out of it. It wasn't touristy; there was no beach, and not a single café or hotel for miles. It was reached by driving down an overgrown track, littered with potholes and ruts. Only the locals knew about it and, way back, her grandmother had been one of them. Now there was little to draw her back and nothing to keep her here. After tonight, she'd never return again.

Beau whined. She ignored him. At least he wasn't barking. She needed to get it over with quickly. She opened the boot and looked down at the man lying on his side in there. He didn't blink, move or breathe. She'd known he wouldn't. Corpses don't, do they? Alan was just as dead as when she'd bundled him in earlier. Even though she was young and strong, she'd had a hard time getting him out of the house and into the car on her own. Thankfully, the house had a door leading directly into the garage, so there was no risk of her being seen. Just as well. It had been near impossible. She'd almost given up at one point, as he kept flopping around. She'd get one body part into the boot and the weight of him on the ground would pull it back out again. Only sheer guts and determination kept her going. She didn't like to lose.

She felt nothing as she looked at him. No pity, no fear, and definitely no love. The one she loved was Danny. It had always been him. She hadn't thought he'd have been happy with her going through with marrying Alan, but he'd said it was *a means to an end and nothing more*. Their life together would be worth it all in the end.

She'd thought her time with Alan would be longer and more fruitful, but it wasn't to be. As soon as he'd threatened to blow the whistle, she'd known that was it. She couldn't risk him destroying everything she'd worked hard for. The scams she'd set up were fetching money in; for just a few hours a day on the phone and sending out emails, she was starting to see an impressive pile of non-traceable cash building up after bouncing through several

different off-shore accounts and ending up in the final one. She'd also been embezzling money from Alan's firm and that amounted to way more than the scams. Being his accountant for so long, she'd had access to everything. She had no idea how he'd found out what she was up to but there was no question he would do the right thing. Dear, dependable Alan, with his cable-knit jumpers and green fingers, and penchant for tea shops and lemon drizzle cake. Good old, boring Alan; upright, honest and moral. And so bloody judgemental! He must have been onto her for some time. She gazed down at him now. Had she ever loved him? Maybe not, but she'd loved his money and the affluent lifestyle it had briefly afforded her. Alan's son, Joe, had seen through her straight away.

'You're only after Dad's money,' he'd yelled at her once, after a particularly hurtful and bitter row. 'Dad, what would Mum say? She would never have been taken in by this... creature. How can you trust her?'

Alan had gone mad, not wishing his dead wife to be dragged into it. Course, she'd collapsed into Alan's arms, sobbing and victimised. It hadn't been long after that that she'd discovered Alan's will had not been changed after they married. It still left everything to his two children. After Joe's accusation, she hadn't dared mention it, figuring it would be changed in the long run, when the dust had settled a bit. Then he'd discovered what she'd been up to, quite by chance when he'd taken a call from the bank meant for her, about a discrepancy with his account. She'd been careless and slipped up.

Beau whined again, bored and cold. She reached into the boot and managed to haul Alan out, by gripping the lapels of his brown tweed jacket tightly in her fingers. She yanked harder, knowing it wouldn't tear. It was indestructible. He'd had it thirty years. It was one of the reasons he said quality stood the test of time.

With one final pull, gravity took over, and he slid to the ground. With no time to stop she dragged him, puffing and panting, by the feet, towards the driver's open door. At one point, his jacket snagged on a sharp stone, and she heard a satisfying tear. She fought back a grin. *See! Not so indestructible after all.* No more than its owner. She freed it and glanced around, breathing hard. Sweat pooled under her armpits, despite the savage cold. This would be the hardest bit, getting him into the driver's seat. She'd need every ounce of strength she possessed. Beau barked again, spurring her into action. She manhandled him into a sitting position, propping him up against the car, thankful for the fact he was so meticulous about his diet. If he put on a few pounds, he had to get it straight back off, foregoing all treats and alcohol (definitely no lemon drizzle) until he was back to what he called his *fighting weight*. It was little more than what she herself weighed, but it was still hard going. She thought how he would hate to be seen like this; an undignified, ungainly lump of flesh. He'd always carried himself ramrod straight, believing how you present yourself to the world to be of the utmost importance. His skinny backside grazed the seat more than once as she heaved him into it, hanging on to him as he threatened to slide back out. Finally, she had him in the seat, with his weight holding him back. She let go. He slumped forward, hitting his head on the steering wheel. She tutted. He had to make everything so awkward all the time. It was almost as if he was doing it on purpose. She wished Danny were here to help but he'd said it wasn't worth the risk of them being seen together. He was waiting for her back at the flat they'd shared together before she'd married Alan.

She stood back and surveyed the scene. The handwritten suicide note was in Alan's pocket, if anyone ever found it. She left his seat belt off. Even Alan, in a suicidal frame of mind, wouldn't bother to put it on.

'Bye, darling,' she said.

She took the car out of gear and tried to roll it. Nothing happened. Then she remembered the bricks she'd placed there yesterday, the ones the front wheels were resting against now. She hurried to the front and kicked them out of the way. She heaved again, and the car began to inch forward, the tyres crunching on the stony ground. The angle was perfect. The rental car she'd parked the day before was a mile away from here, hidden from view, and ready to transport her back home. If anyone passed as she was walking to it, all they'd see was a woman walking a dog in the early hours and dog walkers are practically invisible, aren't they? No one would remember her. That was the only reason she'd brought him.

The car was gaining momentum now, and Beau yapped again. She looked back over her shoulder at him. His tail was wagging and his front end was down low, leaving his back end up in the air. He must have decided it was all a game and wanted to join in. She was glad he'd stopped trembling.

'Quiet!' she said, her breath coming in short gasps, and he sat down again, tail still waving behind him like a flag.

Her feet slipped again on another icy patch, and she banged her knee on the hard ground. Alan's head was lolling back, hiding the bloody hole where she'd hit him with the claw hammer the night before. He'd been on one of his woodworking projects and was still holding it when he confronted her about the embezzlement. They'd had an almighty row, and she'd snatched the hammer from him while he was picking up the phone to call the police. The blow hadn't killed him but the pillow over his face had. If the car didn't get washed out to sea, the head injury would be just one of many endured in the crash.

Alan could be a morose person, prone to fits of brooding, dark depression, so would anyone be surprised that he'd attempt suicide after a particularly severe bout? He'd even had stays in expensive clinics that had tried to help. It was well documented and no secret, even though he pretended to himself it was. No one knew of their unhappy marriage; Alan being keen to project a façade of togetherness for the outside world. She would play the grieving widow like a pro. The big life insurance policy wouldn't pay out for suicide, so Joe and his bitch sister Sophie wouldn't get a penny from it. She already had enough money from the scams and embezzlement to buy a nice house outright for her and Danny, somewhere far away from here.

The car was going faster now, surprising her with its speed. It was time to let go. She slammed the driver's door and got ready to watch it tip over the edge and disappear from sight. She was suddenly wrenched off her feet and dragged along on her knees. She panicked, as she realised what had happened; her coat was caught in the door. She grasped the handle and yanked it hard. It was locked. Alan always locked the car door, and it was one of those cars where you could lock it without the remote by depressing the button before you closed it. She'd done it to add the final touch of authenticity to the proceedings. The scream caught in her throat as she was dragged closer to the edge. *Take the coat off!* her mind screamed at her. Her fingers found the zip. It was stuck, and the car was moving so fast she couldn't get a proper hold on it.

The car groaned and metal shrieked as the front wheels tipped over the edge. She yanked at the zip as hard as she could. Still stuck! Her feet slid over the ground as she scrabbled to get a grip. But of course, she couldn't stop a car. It was game over. She screamed and looked back over her shoulder, not wanting to see the drop that was coming. In the moonlight, the last thing she saw was Beau, wagging his tail and dancing about,

barking frantically now. *What would become of him? When would he be found?* The noise was drowned out by the screech of metal scraping on the rocky cliff edge and the nose plunged down fast, the back end flipping over it as the car somersaulted all the way to the waiting sea at the bottom.

Beau sat down and whined just as the mobile phone screen lit up with the words *Incoming call Danny.*