

SLIP KNOT

By Hayley Spurway

CHAPTER 1

Water seeped through her snakeskin boots and spray spat at her knees as she gunned through puddles on her way to the station. She wanted to howl with laughter; to behave like the mad woman she'd become. Her life here had pushed her to diabolical limits. And finally, she was turning her back on it.

Anger-fuelled adrenaline led the way. Away from Dan. Away from the grimy crush of city life. It was time to cast off again. To somewhere where she could feel the caress of the sea breeze and fall back in love with life. To a place where she spent simple family holidays wearing jelly shoes and clutching crabbing lines. The same place she wasted away her college days on the beach and in the ocean. Since then she'd travelled much of the world, but nowhere had stolen Cornwall's place in her heart.

Engines rumbled impatiently, waiting for a signal to depart. The station clock slowly pushed the seconds forward one by one. Suddenly the carriage jolted forwards, taking her away from the horrors of the evening. Beyond the borders of London. And out of the grasp of the woman she'd become.

The cabin – with its child-size bunks and a sink the size of a soup bowl – was a far cry from her king-size double and Egyptian cotton sheets. But she was grateful for its tiny pocket of privacy as she made her escape, nursing a Jack Daniels to try and recapture the blissful assurance that helped her pack her bags just hours ago.

Rolling through the dark she didn't see the red cliffs at Teignmouth, the beaches at Dawlish, or the watery tongue of the River Plym. As she stared out the window into the night, all she saw was the red-eyed reflection of a woman she hardly recognised staring back. Small eyes, slightly too close together, peering out from the grey moon-face of a woman in her early thirties. Gone was the young girl Lena still expected to see when she looked in a mirror. And when she closed her eyes the events of the evening swam through her head; a foggy filmstrip she'd been forced to take part in without an audition.

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"You can't ever give me what I want." She'd hurled the words at him, cracking his armour. "Admit it, you're no good to any woman."

Another fist. Blood in the corner of her mouth.

Tossing him the blame, she'd given herself an excuse to walk away.

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When she reached over and opened the blind, Lena saw the first light of the morning squashed under a wall of black clouds. Penzance, announced the sign. Mounts Bay looked eerie under the low winter light; at high tide the sand had been eaten by murky waters and the fortress on St Michael's Mount had been swallowed by pregnant clouds and a curtain of fog.

Clacking up Market Jew Street, she looked for the town that had once inspired her with its quirky characters, hippy-tinged ethos and eclectic mix of vintage stores. It didn't look back. In its place were boarded-up shop-fronts plastered with posters, deserted amusement arcades and a littered spit of beach.

Lena leant against the sea wall and stared out to a handful of boats left moored in the harbour to weather winter's storms. She hugged her elbows, curling away from the cold wind. Wishing she'd blown her carbon footprint and gone to the Caribbean. Wishing she could hop onboard one of the yachts, let the wet breeze sweep her away to another, warmer place. How much further did she have to go to escape from herself, she wondered? To sever the umbilical chord to her past and be free to start again.

She slumped in a waterside café; the wicker chairs and rickety pine tables worlds apart from the sanitised ambience of the Starbucks she was used to. Loneliness etched into her bones. What, she wondered, had possessed her to land, unannounced, on the shores of a past life? She resolved to freshen up then call her old friend, Lucy, who she still came to visit after all these years. The rest of the college clan had trickled away into other lives. But not Luce. She'd moved to a village on the outskirts of Penzance and married surfer-Tom. When Luce fell in love with something she stuck with it.

"Strong black coffee, please." Lena tried to disguise the tremble in her hoarse voice, looking away from the waitress and eyeing the display of calorific cakes.

"Espresso or Americano?" asked the singsong voice of the young girl. In the Cornwall Lena knew there only used to be a choice of black or white. Life was simpler then.

Back then she thought she knew what she wanted. But somewhere along the way she'd become too scared of walking away from what she had. How she missed the young girl who let her decisions ride on reckless spontaneity. The girl who broke free from her father's control, desperate not to inherit his obsession with power and money, determined to succeed in the search for something different with which to fill her pot of gold. The girl who clung fast to the desire of living a life fuelled by her visceral need to take the plunge into un-chartered waters. And to find a home in a place where the landscape stirred a vitality from within her.

It was the first waves of guilt that brought about her crash-landing in London after her father's death. Securing a loft-apartment with some of her inheritance and taking a marketing job in a pharmaceuticals firm, she squashed her long, flat feet into a designer-lifestyle and let her dreams ebb away. Now she was escaping from the confines this dull city life, from another man who anchored her to a material existence and tore her stray of the woman she set out to be. Whatever happiness she was looking for, it always seemed just out of reach. Now she was no longer sure she would ever find what she really wanted.

She looked up as a man with dreadlocks and pitted skin entered the café, a scrawny border collie in tow. Distracted from her thoughts she shrank from the pungent aroma of wet pants he brought with him. Without even a glance at the menu he sat down and pulled out a can of Tennents Extra.

"Scuse me. You can't drink that in 'ere," the girl said politely.

The man looked up, eyeing Lena, then the girl, and took another sip from the can.
"Oh, yeah?"

Lena felt sorry for the waitress. Protective. A decade ago she might have been that girl, working a string of casual jobs to fund the hedonism of student-hood. She turned to offer a glance of empathy but the girl simply shrugged.

“Martha!” she yelled up a staircase behind her.

Within seconds a large lady, with a mouth to match, burst onto the scene, cursing and ranting in a thick West Country accent that chased the man and his dog back outside. His odour lingered.

“Sorry pet.” Martha said, half to Lena and half to the waitress. “Wretched pains, these homeless sorts. Dodge their fares from London and think they’ll find a better life ‘ere on sea. All they do is bring their problems to Cornwall.”

Lena wasn’t homeless but she was no less of a misfit, all dressed up in her blazer and heels, a messed up city girl bringing her problems to the coast as if it would solve them. What was she expecting to find here? Cornwall had changed and so had she.

Her cup sat empty on the table. Tears stinging her eyes, threatening to fill it. She scabbled in her handbag for her phone and punched in Lucy’s number. Listening to the ringtone Lena remembered the long, late-night conversation she’d had with surfer-Tom, persuading him that at just twenty-four he could cope with being a father. So, him and Luce had been young, but what did that matter? They were in love, and Lena couldn’t bear to see her best friend lose that. And now it seemed the couple had their happily-ever-after. They had little Leo and a life by the sea. A life Lena secretly envied, wishing it was hers each time she came down to visit.

Back at the entrance to the station Lucy greeted her with a motherly hug, squeezing out yet more tears that smeared Lena’s fresh mascara. Quickly dabbing her

cheeks and deflecting the attention from her puffy eyes she bent down and ruffled Leo's pumpkin-red crown. "My, haven't you grown, young man?"

"I'm one of the tallest boys in my year at school," he looked up at her with a toothy grin.

"I can't believe how much he looks like you," she gasped to Lucy.

"The red head and the fair skin maybe, but those lanky limbs and his sporting prowess come from his Dad I dare say." Lucy took Lena's arm, leading her out to the old blue van her and Tom bought for their honeymoon adventure. "You look great," her friend lied. "I love the new hair," she nodded approvingly at the silky blonde tips that had recently been cropped to chase Lena's jaw line.

In the comfort of Lucy's salmon-pink cottage, kicking off her shoes and sitting at the long wooden table, Lena imagined this was what coming home should feel like. She hated the pristine minimalism of Dan's place. Here, slate floors were sprinkled in sand, and kitchen worktops were littered with utensils, bills and stray ingredients. The tin kettle whistled, misting the windowpane. Lucy filled the teapot and calmly sat down, a look of consternation fixed gently on Lena. "So, do you want to talk about it yet?"

Lena cradled her head in her hands and sighed deeply, the sleeves of her loose-knit cardigan riding up her thin wrists. Abandoning her Zen-calm demeanour Lucy suddenly grabbed hold of Lena's hand, shocked to see yellow and black smudges colouring her fair skin. "Lena, what on earth has been going on?"

"It's nothing." Lena snatched her hand away. "It looks worse than it is." Her head bowed. "It's my fault really." She was surprised to hear herself defending Dan, when in

his presence she was so ready to lay the blame on him. “I started so many of the fights Luce.” She looked up, gasping back a sob.

Lucy poured the tea and passed Lena a mug, an octopus painted on it in a child’s hand. “What went on between you?”

“I was just so angry he hadn’t told me...” she raked her trembling fingers through the fur of a ginger cat that had curled up in her lap. “I mean, I know I’m not exactly mother material, but the thought of never having kids, I mean...” The cat stopped purring and leapt onto the windowsill. She rubbed her chapped fingertips together nervously, looking out the window to watch Leo bringing in some logs for the fire. Serious about his task he looked every bit a young man at just eight. “What’s the point anyway? If he can’t have kids there was just no way we had a future together”

“I thought you two were happy.” Lucy fingers played with the handle of her mug, she followed Lena’s gaze.

“I knew deep down he was all wrong for me. But part of me wanted to hold on. To work it out.” She looked away. “I’m not getting any younger and I just couldn’t face starting all over again. I was frustrated. And angry. So I guess I began to push him away...” She covered her wrists. “Then this started to happen.”

Later they sat on the same chocolate brown sofa they’d shared as students. With Leo all tucked up in bed, Lucy popped the cork from a bottle of wine.

“Where is Tom by the way?” Lena asked.

“Oh, working late. He’s been helping Sheila and Jon up the road with their bathroom.” Lucy looked out the window and fell silent. For the first time Lena realised how tired her friend looked, her face rounder, older than she remembered.

“What about you Luce, are you and Tom happy?”

“We have our ups and downs, but Leo’s growing up to be a wonderful boy. Tom’s still doing okay from his surf coaching and a bit of decorating. And me. I’m, well, I’m alright.”

Lena detected an edge of hesitancy in Lucy’s voice, but let it go for now.

“Life’s never easy, Lena.” It was Lucy’s turn to sigh. “We’re all learning that. But I honestly thought you had it sorted. All shackled up with Mr Right, swanning off to your high-flying job as a marketing exec. I thought you were really taken by it all – weekends in boutique hotels, fancy restaurants and Dan’s bloody Porsche that you raved about.”

Lena grimaced. How many of her friends had been fooled by the façade? “Do you remember when I brought him down here and we all had to endure his endless jokes about in-breeding, cow shit and West Country accents? I thought Tom was going to lamp him.” A hint of a smile sparkled in her glassy brown eyes. They had often laughed about the disastrous weekend when they’d tried bringing Dan and Tom together.

“How long has it been going on, Lena?” Lucy’s tone was serious again.

Lena hesitated. “It happens. Then it stops. Then it happens again.” Redness flared across her cheeks and there was a tremor in her voice.

“You can’t go back. You know that.”

Lena said nothing.

“I still can’t believe you ended up in London. You spent lifetime running from the shackles of a city career to spite your Dad, then you went and did exactly what he wanted of you.”

“It sounds silly, but after his death I felt like I owed him something. I thought moving back would make things right. And then Dan came along.” Lena shook her head. And that’s when I let the young girl dance out of my grip, she thought, letting the woman I never intended to be take her place.

“You always talked about moving back to Cornwall one day. What happened?”

Lena stirred from her contemplation to face her friend. “I guess I thought it was time to stop drifting. To put down some roots. I just wanted to prove I could make something of myself. But I realise now that London was probably just another false start.”

“Look, I’ve got a friend who owns a cottage on the Isles of Scilly. Why don’t you go and stay there for a few days – take a break?” Studying Lena over the rim of her glass, Lucy eyed her like a mother eyeing her maverick child. “You can batten down the hatches, watch the Atlantic storms roll in and feel the sand between your toes. I only wish I could drop things here and come with you.”

“Are you nuts?” Lena laughed off the suggestion and slugged her wine. “It’s mid-winter. It’ll be dead over there. I’ll die of loneliness.”

- End Chapter 1 -