



THE ROSE GARDEN
SUSANNA KEARSLEY

CHAPTER ONE

I lost my only sister in the last days of November.

It's a rotten time to lose someone, when all the world is dying too and darkness comes on earlier, and when the chill rains fall it seems the very sky is weeping. Not that there's ever a good time to lose your best friend, but it seemed somehow harder to sit there and watch in that hospital room with the white-coated specialists coming and going and see only grey clouds beyond the hard windows that offered no warmth, and no hope.

When my sister had first fallen ill, we would sometimes go out to the garden and sit side by side on the bench by the butterfly bush. We would sit a long time, saying nothing, just feeling the sun on our faces and watching the butterflies dance.

And the illness had seemed very small, then – a thing she could conquer, the way she had overcome everything

else fate had flung in her path. She was famous for that, for her spirit. Directors would cast her in roles that were more often given to men than to women, the rogue hero roles, and she'd carry them off with her usual flair and the audience loved it. They loved *her*. The tabloids were camped round the house through the summer, and when she went into the hospital they came there too, standing vigil around the main entrance.

But just at the end there were only the three of us there in the room: me, my sister Katrina, and her husband, Bill.

We were holding her hands, Bill and I, with our eyes on her face because neither of us could have looked at the other. And after a time there were only the two of us left, but I couldn't let go of her hand because part of me couldn't believe she was actually gone, so I sat there in dull, hollow silence until Bill stood slowly and took the hand he was still holding and laid it with care on Katrina's heart. Gently he pressed his own hand on hers one final time, then he slipped something small off her finger and passed it to me: a gold ring, a Claddagh ring, that had belonged to our mother.

Wordlessly he held it out and wordlessly I took it, and still we couldn't meet each other's eyes. And then I saw him feel his pocket for his cigarettes and turning, he went out, and I was left alone. Entirely alone.

And at the window of the room the cold November rains slid down the glass and cast their shifting shadows in a room that could no longer hold the light.

I didn't go to her memorial service. I helped arrange it, and made sure her favourite songs were sung, her favourite verses read, but when the crowds of fans and friends turned up to pay their last respects, I wasn't there to shake their

hands and listen to their well-meant words of sympathy. I know there were people who thought me a coward for that, but I couldn't. My grief was a private one, too deep for sharing. And anyway, I knew it didn't matter whether I was at the church, because Katrina wasn't there.

She wasn't anywhere.

It seemed to me incredible a light as strong as hers could be extinguished so completely without leaving some small glow behind, the way a lamp that's been switched off will sometimes dimly shine against the darkness. I'd felt certain I would feel her presence somewhere . . . but I hadn't.

There were only dead leaves round the butterfly bush in the garden, and flowerless shrubs round the porch with its empty swing, and when I started to pack up her closets there wasn't so much as a movement of air in the hallway behind me to let me believe that my sister, in some way, was there with me still.

So I went through the motions. I dealt with the small things that needed attention, and tried to get on with my life in the way everybody was saying I should, while a great hollow loneliness grew deep inside me. Then spring came, and Bill came – turned up on my doorstep one Saturday morning without calling first, looking awkward. And holding her ashes.

I hadn't seen him since November, not in person, though because he had a film just out I'd seen him fairly often on the entertainment news.

He didn't want to come inside. He cleared his throat, a bit uncomfortably. 'I thought . . .' He paused, and held more tightly to the plain oak box that held Katrina's ashes. 'She wanted me to scatter these.'

‘I know.’ My sister’s wishes hadn’t been a secret.

‘I don’t know where to do it. Don’t know where to take them. I thought maybe you . . .’ His pause this time was more a moment of decision, and he held the box toward me. ‘I thought you could do a better job.’

I looked at him, and for the first time since her death our eyes met and I saw the pain in his. He coughed. ‘I don’t need to be there when you do it, I’ve said my goodbyes. I just thought you’d know better than I would where she was the happiest. Where she belongs.’

And then he pushed the box into my hands and bent to kiss my forehead before quickly turning from my door and walking off. I wouldn’t see him after that, I knew. We moved in different circles, and the bond we’d had between us was reduced now to the simple box he’d handed me.

Inside, I set it on the narrow table by my window, thinking.

Where she’d been the happiest, he’d said. There were so many places, really. I tried narrowing the choices in my mind, recalling images: The morning we had stood and watched the sun rise from the brink of the Grand Canyon, and Katrina’s face had radiated wonderment as she had pointed out a small white aeroplane flying far below us, and she’d said she’d never seen a place so beautiful; the time she’d made a movie in Mumbai and the director had rewarded her for days of gruelling action with a weekend in Kerala on the southern coast of India, and I had flown over to join her and we’d spent our evenings walking on the black sand beach while gorgeous sunsets flamed the sky above the blue Arabian sea, and Katrina had splashed through the waves like a child, and been happy.

But then, she'd been happy wherever she went. She had danced through her life with an air of adventure and carried that happiness with her, so trying to imagine where she might have felt it the most was a difficult task, far beyond my abilities. Finally I gave up and turned my focus to the last thing Bill had said: *Where she belongs.*

That should be easier, I knew. There should be one place that would rise above the others in my memory, so I closed my eyes and waited.

It was coming on to evening when I thought of it, and once I'd had the thought it seemed so obvious to me where that place was, where I should take her.

Where both of us, once, had belonged.

CHAPTER TWO

Crossing the Tamar for some reason made me feel different inside. It was only a river, yet each time I crossed it I felt I had stepped through some mystical veil that divided the world that I only existed in from the one where I was meant to be living. It was, my mother always used to say, a kind of homecoming that only those with Cornish blood could feel, and since my blood was Cornish on both sides for several generations back, I felt it strongly.

I'd been born in Cornwall, in the north beyond the sweep of Bodmin Moor, where my film-directing father had been working on a darkly Gothic thriller, but both my parents themselves had been raised on this gentler south coast – du Maurier country – and after my father had settled into lecturing in Screen Studies at the University of Bristol, his more regulated schedule made it possible for us to cross the Tamar every summer and come back to

spend our holidays with his old childhood friend George Hallett, who lived with his young and lively family in a marvellously draughty manor house set on a hill above the sea.

We'd come back every year, in fact, until I'd turned ten and my father's work had taken us away from England altogether, setting us down on a different shoreline in Vancouver on the western coast of Canada, where he'd become a fixture at the University of British Columbia's Centre for Cinema Studies.

I had loved it in Canada, too. And of course it had been in Vancouver that my sister, newly turned eighteen, had first begun to get her acting roles – small parts at first, then larger ones that brought enough attention from the Hollywood directors who came up to film their movies in Vancouver that they'd wanted her to come down to LA, and so she had.

I'd followed her in my own turn years later, more by accident than anything. My own career path took me into marketing, and sideways through an unexpected string of opportunities to corporate public relations, and from there, again by chance, to a PR firm that worked mainly in the entertainment industry, and so I found myself at twenty-five being transferred down from Vancouver to the office in Los Angeles.

It never was my favourite place, LA, but shortly after I'd moved down, my parents had crossed paths with a drunk driver on a rain-drenched road back home, so after that Katrina was the only family I had left, and I was loathe to leave her.

We were close. When she was shooting somewhere, I

would always find the time to visit. I was there when Bill proposed to her, and there when they were married in a private ceremony to avoid the paparazzi. And she'd hired me, of course, to represent her. Just to keep it in the family, she had said. These past two years, with her success, she had become my main account.

But I had never really settled in LA, not with apartments – I had gone through four – nor with the men I'd met and dated. I had gone through even more of those, and none had stuck, the last one fading from the picture with convenience when Katrina had grown ill.

I'd barely noticed his departure, then. I didn't miss him now. I had been all but dead myself these past six months, a walking shadow, but this morning as my First Great Western train ran rattling on its rails across the Tamar I felt something deep inside me stir to life.

I was in Cornwall. And it *was* a kind of homecoming – the swiftly passing landscape with its old stone farms and hills and hedges held a warm familiarity, and when I'd changed the big train for a smaller one that ran along the wooded valley branch line leading down towards the coast, I felt an echo of the childish sense of thrilled anticipation that had signalled each beginning of those long-lost summer holidays.

The station at the line's end was a small one, plain with whitewashed walls, a blue bench set beside it, a narrow platform with a white stripe painted at its edge, and a handful of houses stacked up the green hillside behind.

Three people waited on the platform, but I only noticed one of them. I would have known him anywhere.

The last time I had seen Mark Hallett he'd just turned

eighteen and I'd been ten, too young to catch his eye but not too young to be completely smitten with his dark good looks and laughing eyes. I'd followed him round like a puppy, never giving him peace, and he'd taken it in the same good-natured way he took everything else, neither making me feel like a bother, nor letting it go to his head. I'd adored him.

Katrina had, too, though for her it had gone a bit deeper than that. He had been her first boyfriend, her first great romance, and when we had left at the end of the summer I'd watched both their hearts break. Hers had healed. I assumed his had, too. After all, we were twenty years on and our childhoods were over, although when I stepped from the train to the platform and Mark Hallett turned from the place he'd been standing, his eyes finding mine with that shared sense of sure recognition, his smile the same as it ever was, I couldn't help feeling ten again.

'Eva.' His hug was familiar yet different. He wasn't a tall man, despite his strong West Country build, and my chin reached his shoulder, whereas in my memories I'd barely come up to his chest. But the comfort I felt in his arms hadn't changed.

'No trouble with the trains?' he asked.

'No, they were all on time.'

'A miracle.' He took my suitcase from me, though he left me with my shoulder bag, I think because he knew from what I'd told him on the phone what I'd be carrying inside it.

The station didn't even have facilities, it was so small, and the car park wasn't much more than a levelled bit of

gravel with a payphone at one side. Mark's van was easily identifiable by the 'Trelowarth Roses' logo on its side, ringed round by painted vines and leaves. He noticed me looking and smiled an apology. 'I would have brought the car, but I had to run a late order to Bodmin and there wasn't time to stop back at the house.'

'That's all right.' I liked the van. It wasn't the same one his father had driven when I'd come down here as a child, but it had the same mingling of smells inside: damp earth and faintly crushed greenery and something elusive belonging to gardens that grew by the sea. And it came with a dog, too – a floppy-eared mongrel with shaggy brown fur and a feathered tail that seemed to never cease wagging, it only changed speed. It wagged crazily now as we got in the van, and the dog would have crawled right through onto the front seat and settled itself on my lap if Mark hadn't with one gentle hand pushed it back.

'This is Samson,' he told me. 'He's harmless.'

They'd always had dogs at Trelowarth. In fact they had usually had three or four running round through the fields with us children and traipsing with muddy feet through the old kitchen and out to the gardens. Mark's stepmother, Claire, had forever been washing the flagstone floors.

Scratching the dog's ears, I asked how Claire was doing.

'Much better. She's out of the plaster now, up walking round on the leg, and the doctor says give it a few weeks and she'll be as right as rain.'

'Remind me how she broke it in the first place?'

'Cleaning gutters.'

'Of course,' I said, sharing his smile because we both

knew how independent Claire was, and it was no surprise that, even now that she'd moved from the manor house into the cottage, she still tried to do all the upkeep herself.

'It's a good thing,' said Mark, 'it was only the gutters, not roof slates.' The dog pushed his way in between us again and Mark nudged him back, starting the van and reversing out onto the road.

Cornish roads were like none anywhere. Here by the coast they were narrow and twisting with steep sloping banks and high hedges that block any view of what might lie ahead. My father had shaved several years off my life every time he had driven down here, at high speeds, simply honking the horn as we came to a corner and trusting that if anyone were approaching unseen round the bend they'd get out of the way. When I'd asked him once what would have happened if somebody coming towards us had chosen to do the same thing he was doing, to honk without slowing down, Dad had just shrugged and assured me it never would happen.

And luckily for us, it never had.

Mark drove a little less recklessly, but I nonetheless needed some kind of distraction from watching the road, so I asked him, 'Is Susan still living at home?'

Susan being his sister, a little bit younger than me.

'She is.' Mark pulled a face, but he didn't convince me. I knew they were close. 'We got rid of her once. She was living up near Bristol, but that didn't stick and now she's back, with plans to start some sort of tea room or something to bring in the tourists. She's full of ideas, is Susan.'

'You don't want a tea room?' I guessed from his tone.

'Let's just say I don't think there'll be too many tourists

who want tea that badly they'd brave the hike up from the village to get it.'

He did have a point. We were entering the village now – Polgelly, with its huddled whitewashed houses and its twisting streets so narrow they were closed to all but local traffic and the taxis that each summer ferried tourists to and from the trains. Mark's van, as compact as it was, could barely squeeze between the buildings.

Polgelly had once been a fishing port of some renown, but with the tourist influx into Cornwall it had changed its face from practical to picturesque, an artist's haven full of shops that sold antiques and Celtic crafts, and Bed & Breakfast cottages with names like 'Smuggler's Rest'. The old shop near the harbour where we'd always bought our fish and chips still looked the same, as did the little fudge shop on the corner. And The Hill, of course, remained the same as ever.

From the first time I'd walked up it I had thought of it like that – *The Hill*, for surely there could be no other hill on earth that could with more perfection test the limits of endurance. It was not its height alone, nor just the angle of its slope, though both were challenging. It was that, once you started up it, there seemed not to be an end to it – the road kept rising steadily through overhanging trees on stone and earthen banks, a punishing ascent that made the muscles of your thighs begin to burn and left them shaking for some minutes when you'd finally reached the top.

Yet being children, and not knowing any better, we'd gone down it every day to play with Mark and Susan's school friends in Polgelly and to sit along the harbour

wall to watch the fishermen at work, and in the cheerfully forgetful way that children have we'd pushed aside all thoughts about The Hill until the time came round again for us to climb it. Mark had actually carried me the final few steps, once, which was no doubt why I'd developed such a crush on him.

This time, we had the van, but even it seemed to approach The Hill with something like reluctance, and I could have sworn I heard the engine wheezing as we climbed.

From either side the trees, still bright with new spring green, closed over us and cast a dancing play of light and shadow on the windscreen, and I caught the swift familiar blur of periwinkle tangled with the darker green of ivy winding up along the verge. And then I looked ahead, expectantly, as I had always done, for my first glimpse of the brick chimneys of Trelowarth House.

The chimneys were the first things to be seen, between the trees and the steep bank of green that ran along the road – a Cornish hedge, they called it, built of stones stacked dry in the old fashion, herringbone, with vines and varied wildflowers binding them together and the trees arched close above. Then came a break in both the trees and hedge, and there, framed as impressively as ever by the view of rising fields and distant forests, was the house.

Trelowarth House had weathered centuries upon this hill, its solid grey stone walls an equal match to any storm the sea might throw at it. For all its size it had been plainly built, a two-storey 'L' set with its front squarely facing the line of the cliffs and the sea, while its longer side ran fairly close beside the road. In what might be viewed as a

testament to the skills of its original builders, none of its long line of owners appeared to have felt the need to do a major renovation. The chimneys, dutifully repointed, were in the original style, and a few of the casement windows still had the odd pane of Elizabethan glass, through which the people who had lived here then might well have watched the sails of the Armada pass.

The house itself did not encourage such romantic fancies. It looked stern and grey, unyielding, and the only softness to it was the stubborn vine of roses that had wound their way around and over the stone frame of the front door and waited there to bloom as they had done in all the summers of my childhood.

Three-quarters of the way up The Hill, Mark took the sharp left turn into the gravelled drive that angled right again along the fifty feet or so of turf that separated house and road. The garages themselves were in the back, in the old stables at the far edge of the levelled yard, but Mark stopped where we were, beside the house, and parked the van, and in an instant we were overrun by what appeared to be a pack of wild dogs, all leaping up and barking for attention.

‘Down, you beasts,’ Mark told them, getting out and going round to take my suitcase from the back.

I got out carefully myself, not because I was afraid of the dogs, but because I didn’t want to step on them by accident. There were only three of them, as it turned out – a black cocker spaniel, a Labrador, and something that underneath all the dirt looked a bit like a setter – and with the little brown mongrel dog, Samson, who’d jumped out behind me, the pack was quite manageable.

Once I'd patted all the heads and ruffled a few ears and scratched a side or two the leaping changed to energetic wagging, with the four dogs weaving round Mark's legs and mine as we followed the curve of the path round the corner.

At the front of the house a small level lawn had been terraced out of the hillside, with hedges around it to block some part of the wind, and below that the steep green fields tumbled and rolled to the edge of the cliffs.

I was unprepared, as always, for my first view of the sea. From this high up the view was beautiful enough to steal my breath with such a swiftness that my ribcage almost hurt. There were the green hills folding down into their valley, with the darker smudges of the woods marked here and there with paler arcs of blackthorn blossom. There, too, was the harbour of Polgelly with its steeply stacked white houses looking small so far below us, and the headlands curving out to either side, already showing the first spreading cover of sea pink that made a softer contrast to the darkly jagged rock beneath. And past all that, as far as I could see, the endless rolling blue of water stretched away until it met the clouds.

Mark stopped when I stopped, turned to watch my face, and said, 'Not quite like California, is it?'

'No.' This ocean had a very different feel than the Pacific. It seemed somehow more alive. 'No, this is better.'

I hadn't heard anyone open the front door behind us, but suddenly someone said 'Eva!' and, turning, I saw a young woman in jeans and a red sweater, her dark hair cut even shorter than Mark's. This had to be Susan, I thought, though I wouldn't have known *her* if we'd met away from

Trelowarth. She'd only been seven or eight when I'd last been here. Now she was in her late twenties, grown taller and slender, her smile wide and welcoming. 'I thought I heard the van.' Her hug was just as warm. 'Honestly Eva, you look just the same. It's incredible. Even your hair. I always envied you your hair,' she told me. 'Mine would never grow like that.'

I didn't really think much of my hair, myself. My father had liked my hair long, so I'd left it that way. It was easy enough to take care of, no styling required, and whenever it got in the way I just tied it all back.

'Short hair suits you though,' I said to Susan.

'Yes, well, it's not by choice.' She smoothed it with a hand and grinned. 'I tried to dye it red . . .'

Mark said, 'It came out purple.'

'More maroon, I'd say,' she set him straight. 'And when I tried to fix it, it got worse, so I just cut it.'

'By herself,' said Mark.

'Well, naturally.'

'I could have done as good a job as that,' he told her drily, 'with my garden shears.'

Their banter was affectionate, and utterly familiar, and I felt myself relaxing in the way one only did when in the company of friends.

Susan let Mark score that last point and shrugged as she told him, 'Just drop that suitcase here for now, Claire said to bring you both round to the cottage when you got here. She's made sandwiches.'

Mark did as he was told and then fell in behind as Susan, with the dogs bouncing round her as though they'd caught some of her energy, led the way along the front walk of the

house and down the long green sweep of hill towards the sea, to the place where the old narrow coast path, trampled hard as rutted pavement by the feet of countless rambles who came up along the clifftops from Polgelly, disappeared into the Wild Wood.

I'd given it that name the summer Claire had read me Kenneth Graeme's timeless tales of Mole and Rat and Mr Toad. A chapter a night of *The Wind in the Willows* and never again could I enter that old, sprawling tangle of woods without cocking an ear for the scurrying footsteps of small unseen creatures and feeling a touch of the magic.

I still felt it now, as I followed Mark into the dim, sudden coolness. The air changed. The light changed. The scent of the woods, dank and earthy and rich, rose around me. The wood was an old one, and where it was deepest it stretched down the hill to the edge of the cliffs, but the trees grew so thickly I lost my whole view of the sea. I was closed round in branches and leaves – oak and elder and blackthorn and ghostly pale sycamores, set amid masses of bluebells.

The coast path, which entered the woods as a narrow track, broadened a little in here so two people could walk side by side, as though those who came into these woods felt more comfortable walking that way in this place where the shadows fell thick on the ferns and the undergrowth, and the high trees had a whispering voice of their own when the wind shook their leaves. But I'd never felt fear in these woods. They were peaceful, and filled with the joyously warbling songs of the birds tending hidden nests high overhead.

Susan, leading us through, turned to tell me, ‘We actually do have a badger. Claire’s seen it.’

If it was anything like the reclusive Mr Badger who had ruled the Wild Wood in *The Wind and the Willows*, I didn’t hold out too much hope that I’d catch a glimpse of the creature myself, but it didn’t stop me looking while we walked.

I caught the sharp scent of the coal smoke from Claire’s cottage chimney before we stepped into the clearing, a broad semi-circular space blown with green grass that chased to the edge of the cliff, where again I could have a clear view of the sea.

I knew better than to go towards that cliff – there was a wicked drop straight down from there, all unforgiving rock and jagged stone below – but the view itself, framed by the gap in the trees with the flowers and grass in between, and the glitter of sun on the water far out where the fishing boats bobbed, was beautiful.

And facing it, set tidily against the clearing’s edge, the little cottage waited for us with its walls still painted primrose-yellow underneath a roof of sagging slates.

The cottage had been rented out to tourists when I’d come here as a child, to earn a bit of extra income for Trelowarth, but apparently Claire had decided just this past year to move into it herself with all her canvases and paints, and leave the big house for her stepchildren. I couldn’t really blame her. While Trelowarth House was wonderful inside, it was an ancient house with draughts and rising damp and tricky wiring, and it took a lot of work, whereas this little cottage had been put here in the Twenties and was snugly made and comfortable.

There wasn't any need to knock. We just went in, the three of us, and all the dogs came with us, spilling through into the sitting room. Claire had been reading, but she set aside the paperback and came around to fold me into the third hug of warmth and welcome that I'd had this afternoon.

Claire Hallett was a woman who defied the rules of ageing. She looked just as fit approaching sixty as she'd looked those years ago. Her hair might be a little shorter and a paler shade of blonde now from its whitening, but she was still in jeans and giving off that same strong energy, that sense of capability. Her hug seemed to be offering to carry all my burdens. 'It's so good to have you here,' she said. 'We were so very sorry when we heard about Katrina.'

Then, because I think she knew that too much sympathy on top of my reunion with the three of them might lead to tears I wasn't ready yet to cry in front of anybody, she turned the talk to other things: the cottage and the decorating projects she had planned for it, and the next thing I knew we were all in the kitchen and sitting at the old unsteady table with its one leg shorter than the others, drinking Claire's strong tea and eating cheese and pickle sandwiches as though it had been months, not years, since we'd all been together.

Susan raised the subject of the tea room she was planning. 'Mark's against it, naturally,' she told me. 'He was never one for change.'

'It's not the change,' Mark said, with patience. 'It's the simple fact, my darling, that there's really no demand for it.'

'Well, we'd create one, wouldn't we? I've told you, if

we opened up the gardens more to tourists, we could bring them by the busload.'

'Buses can't come through Polgelly.'

'So you'd bring them in the other way, across the high road from St Non's. The tourists go there anyway, to see the well – they could come on here afterwards, for lunch.' Her tone was certain, as she turned to her stepmother. 'You're on my side, surely?'

'I'm staying out of it.' Claire leant across both of them to pour me a fresh cup of tea. 'I've given up the running of Trelowarth to the two of you, you'll have to work it out yourselves.'

Susan rolled her eyes. 'Yes, well, you say you've given up Trelowarth, but we all know you could never—'

'If you're wanting an opinion,' Claire said lightly, 'you might think of asking Eva. That's her job, you know – promoting things, and dealing with the public.'

Suddenly Susan and Mark were both looking at me, and I shook my head. 'I think I should stay out of it, too.'

Mark's amusement was obvious. 'Sorry, there's no likes of that, not with Susan about. She'll be picking your brains the whole time that you're here.'

Susan said, 'You will stay for a while, won't you? Not just the weekend?'

'We'll see.'

Claire, who'd been watching me quietly, glanced at my hand. 'That's your mother's ring, isn't it?'

'Yes.' The gold Claddagh ring that Bill had slipped from Katrina's still finger and given to me in the hospital room. It had come to my mother from her Irish grandmother who'd moved across into Cornwall and who, by tradition,

had passed down this small ring of gold with its crowned heart held lovingly by two gloved hands, a reminder that love was eternal.

Claire smiled, understanding, as though she knew just what had brought me here, why I had come. Reaching over, she covered my hand with her warm one and said, ‘Stay as long as you like.’