

PART ONE

1986

Thirty-one years earlier

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Catrin

Catrin's father was doing his Sensible Face. This was the face that forty-eight-year-old, half-Welsh, half-Irish Huw Kelly adopted whenever Catrin or her brother were about to embark on any kind of trip without their parents.

Catrin had first encountered Sensible Face aged five, before her school visit to Coed Celyn museum in Mrs John's class. After that, the Face appeared before all hockey, netball and swimming tournaments, guide camps or youth-club jaunts to Belgium, church pilgrimages to Lourdes, and sixth-form skiing trips to Austria. Sensible Face was also known as Here-Are-the-Practicalities Face and What-To-Do-in-an-Emergency Face. But underneath it lurked the precariously hidden face of Terrified Dad, looking down at this precious cargo, which grew more valuable with every day that passed, and who was currently thinking, *If anything happens to you, my life will be over.*

Huw had reason to worry, because Catrin was about to embark on the Big Trip – island-hopping for a month in

Greece, accompanied by Judith Harris and Lana Lloyd, her best friends since she was five. The three girls were as different as chalk, cheese and chocolate. But they knew and loved each other inside out and were as close today as they'd been in their first week of infant school. During their thirteen-year friendship they'd barely spent a single day without seeing each other and all three knew that when they returned from the Big Trip, they'd be heading off in very separate directions – Catrin to study medicine at Cardiff, Judith to read economics in London, and Lana to train as a musical theatre actress. So what lay ahead was more than just a holiday. It was their final hurrah, their last chance to stock up on each other's company before beginning the next chapter of their young lives. Deciding where to go on the Big Trip had been far from easy: backpacking in Australia? Campervanning in New Zealand? Fruit picking in France? Judith had suggested interrailing – drawn to the history and might of great European cities like Hamburg and Nice – whereas Catrin longed to see Paris and Rome. 'It's so romantic,' she said wistfully.

'It is if you're loaded!' Lana had warned, instantly dampening her friends' enthusiasm. 'But us three are on a budget of ten quid a day. And I'd rather wash in the sea and sleep on a beach than spend a month in a manky train full of horny stoners.'

'Classy,' Judith had said sarcastically and Catrin sighed.

'Look,' said Lana, softening. 'What about island-hopping? There's shed-loads of history and stuff in Greece, so that's *that* box ticked for you, Jude. And Cat, if you want all the romantic bollocks, then what's more idyllic

than a sunset on Skiathos? *I'll* be sorted with a beach and a bar, so Bob's your uncle. What d'you reckon?'

They had begrudgingly agreed. Both of them were used to Lana getting her own way, but frustratingly she was usually right.

'Excellent!' Lana had said with a smile. 'Island-hopping it is.'

'Now you're to keep it on you at *all* times, d'you hear? Even when you sleep!' said Huw as he held out a highly unattractive khaki-coloured money belt.

'But I can't wear it swimming, Dad, or in the shower. All the travellers cheques and cash will go soggy,' Catrin replied.

'She've got a point mind, Huw,' said Liz, Catrin's mother, who was peeling a price tag off the sole of a new flip-flop.

'We've discussed this, Elizabeth.' Huw always used his wife's full name whenever he was trying to be serious. 'Catrin is to locate the nearest safety deposit box at every location – be it an Athenian youth hostel, or a taverna in Kos, whatever . . .'

'I don't think they have safety deposit boxes in crack dens mind, Dad,' said Catrin's twenty-one-year-old brother Tom as he sloped sleepily into the kitchen in search of Shredded Wheat.

'Not helpful, Tom,' sighed Huw.

'Weren't you meant to be in work at nine?' asked Liz. She loved the fact that her student son had a summer job at the bakery – he brought home all sorts of lovely treats.

‘Taken the day off, haven’t I? To say goodbye to Frog Head.’

‘Oi!’ Catrin laughed and threw a toast crust at him. Tom had called her Frog Head ever since she was brought home from hospital at one day old. Aged three, he’d stared at her in silence for ten seconds, then announced to the world that she looked like a frog.

Catrin Kelly couldn’t look less like a frog if she tried. She’d inherited her grandmother’s pale Irish complexion, ‘which *must* be protected with Factor Fifty when you’re out in that sun,’ Liz had warned her, over and over again. She’d also inherited Nana Kelly’s laughing green eyes – which she liked – and her strawberry-blond hair – which she didn’t. Mainly because it stubbornly grew in an unruly abundance of corkscrew curls. They’d appeared when she was two and had never left her since, defying gravity and copious amounts of hair-straightening products. ‘I wish I had your hair!’ people would say. And Catrin would smile politely, thinking, ‘No you bloody don’t – it’s like walking round with a Highland cow on my head.’ Catrin had a catalogue of complaints when it came to her physical attributes: she thought her nose was ‘pixie-ish’, her legs were too short and her knees turned inwards – none of which anyone else could see, of course. She was also blind to her other endearing features – such as her open-heartedness, her massive capacity for compassion and her staunch loyalty to those she loved. But Catrin’s parents thought she was the most beautiful girl in the world, both inside and out.

‘Just think – we may never see you again, you go fallin’ in love with some Greek hippie!’ Tom continued.

‘Nobody is doin’ no fallin’ in love with no hippies,’ said Huw, without conviction. ‘And stop throwing food at your brother.’

‘Do they even *have* hippies in Greece?’ Liz wondered in all honesty.

‘Will you *please* take this seriously, the lot of you!’ Huw exploded in frustration, the Irish accent of his childhood creeping through as it always did when he was even mildly upset. He passed Catrin the money belt. ‘Now try it on so I can demonstrate adjusting the width.’

‘OK.’ Catrin did as she was told. She’d learned over the years that it was easier to just go along with her father when he was anxious like this. It would at least put his mind at rest, even though she knew she’d be hiding the belt under her bed before she left, with no intention of ever using it.

‘Thanks again for last night,’ Catrin said as she placed the belt around her waist. ‘Everyone had a crackin’ time.’

‘Ah, it was a pleasure, wasn’t it, Huw? You’ve got such lovely friends.’ Liz smiled.

‘Aye,’ mumbled Huw, whose head was still a little fuzzy from the farewell bash they’d thrown the night before.

‘Judith didn’t stay long,’ said Tom through a mouthful of breakfast. ‘We were gonna have an arm wrestle an’ everythin’.’

‘Arm wrestle!’ exclaimed Liz. ‘Dear God, is it any

wonder you've not got a girlfriend, you go arm wrestling with young women at parties!

'She had to get back early,' said Catrin. 'You know what her mum's like – Ow! Dad, calm down, mun! Don't be so rough.' Huw was tugging at the money belt with such enthusiasm, Catrin nearly lost her balance.

'I'm just testing it for strength,' Huw said, more to himself than anyone else.

'Judith will be glad of a break from that woman, you ask me,' said Liz. 'How she puts up with her I will never know.'

'Her dad's all right though – had a game with him down the club the other day,' said Tom. 'Don't say much, but he's a demon with a pool cue.'

'Yeah, well don't go saying anything to her today now, OK?' said Catrin. 'It's been enough of an ordeal getting Jude to come in the first place. Lana's worked really hard persuading her that Patricia will manage without her. Dad, that's actually digging into my flesh. I think you're drawing blood.'

'Sorry, sorry . . .'

The doorbell rang and Catrin's parents exchanged a look. 'Ah, that'll be Father O'Leary,' said Huw with forced breeziness as he made his way into the hall.

'What's *he* want?' said Tom.

Liz looked sheepish and turned to Catrin. 'Well, your father thought seeing as you didn't make it to Mass on Sunday . . .'

'Mum – seriously, how many times?' said Catrin. 'I don't go to Mass any more!'

‘She’s a fully fledged atheist now, like me,’ said Tom.

Liz flicked his arm with a tea towel, whispering through gritted teeth, ‘Hush your nonsense, Thomas Kelly! Sayin’ things like that with a priest standing just outside the door!’

And suddenly in a Jekyll and Hydeian attitude switch she became all smiles and grace, turning towards – ‘Father O’Leary!’ – as he walked into their kitchen. A short, squat, solid little man, who looked like he could handle himself in the ring, never mind the pulpit, was nodding enthusiastically at them all.

‘Alrigh’, Liz? ’ow’s it goin’, alrigh?’ Father O’Leary was from Cardiff, and his broad accent and chippy, high-pitched voice always took anyone he met by surprise. He somehow sounded too urban for a man of the cloth.

Huw stood behind him, glaring at his children and daring them to misbehave in the presence of Christ’s Representative on Earth. ‘Catrin Mary, will you make Father O’Leary a cup of tea now?’ said Huw with fake jollity – his accent becoming positively Corkonian. This often happened when he was anywhere near churches, vicars or nuns.

Catrin, still wearing the khaki money belt, stared back at Huw defiantly. ‘Sure now, dear Father, I will, to be sure!’

The priest was putting on his liturgical stole and didn’t seem to notice Catrin’s sarcasm. She headed for the kettle.

Catrin loved her parents dearly, but this cow-towing to the church did her absolute head in. She wasn’t actually

an atheist like Tom, she was *something* – she just didn't know what any more. When she was little she'd loved all the drama of going to Mass, the dressing up for her first communion, inventing sins to take to confession and repeating endless Hail Marys in quick succession like a lucky mantra. But as she'd grown older, Catrin's faith had begun to crumble. Sure, she liked the *positive* side of Jesus – he seemed like a nice man with good values: kind, compassionate, forgiving. But the rest of it? No, thanks. All that guilt and retribution. So they came to a family compromise: Catrin would continue to go to Mass until she turned eighteen, but after that it was only fair she should be allowed to make an adult decision. Seeing as she was now, well, an adult.

She'd never told anyone, not even Judith and Lana, but the first week she didn't go to Mass, she lay on her bed and cried. Was she tempting Fate? Was something awful going to happen to her now that she'd become . . . actually, what *had* she become? A heathen? A God-less monster? The Catholic guilt with which she'd grown up was not going to be easy to shift. Her parents never once tried to persuade her to join them on Sunday mornings, and she appreciated that. But then when Christmas came, she couldn't stay away from Midnight Mass. 'I feel such a hypocrite,' she'd said to Judith, who couldn't understand why.

'I don't see what the big deal is. Can't you just go to church as and when you feel like it? You know, a bit like Aerobics?'

'Maybe,' Catrin had said. But it didn't sit comfortably with her.

The kettle clicked and Catrin made the tea. ‘So, it’s this afternoon you’s off then, is it, Kate?’ Father O’Leary had never got her name right in eighteen years.

‘That’s right, Father,’ Liz answered on her daughter’s behalf.

‘Actually, my name’s Catrin,’ she mumbled pointlessly, as Liz jumped in over her.

‘Huw’s taking them to Bristol airport at one and they’re flying straight to Athens, would you believe!’ Since Catrin had ‘abandoned the church’ her mother was presumably nervous of letting her answer the priest of her own accord, in case she began spitting blasphemy in an *Exorcist*-inspired tirade.

‘Ah, Athens. Crackin’. Well, now, here’s the thing . . .’

Catrin was bizarrely fascinated by the way Father O’Leary spoke. As if he was jabbing them all on the arm with his Cardiffian-accented utterances. Short, staccato and stilted. Like a series of dotted quavers on a music manuscript. He carried on, taking his crucifix out of his bag as he spoke and placing it delicately on the kitchen table. Liz surreptitiously removed Tom’s box of Shredded Wheat. ‘Your Mum and Dad – they wants me to say a little prayer for you, alrigh’? Just to send you on your travels, like . . .’

Tom glanced at his sister, desperate to laugh. She returned the look with mortification.

‘So, let’s all bow our heads a minute, is it?’ And his voice changed gear, sinking down an octave, becoming intense and mysterious, yet still delivering words with machine-gun-like rapidity. ‘Lord-Jesus-Christ you are

the light-an'-th'-hope. Deliver oh Lor' our servant Catherine—'

'It's Catrin, it is—'

'Ssh,' hissed Liz, her eyes firmly closed.

'... that she may stay safe-in-yer-care, as like Sain'-Chris'pher the patron saint of travels she travels herself to the far'way lands of Greece, an'-that.'

Tom couldn't control himself and exploded in a snort.

'Amen.'

Huw and Liz in unison said, 'Amen.'

'Sorry, can I ask something?' Catrin interjected.

'No. Ssh,' said Huw. The priest had turned to his bag of tricks once more and was rustling around inside.

'But how can the prayer work if he got my name wrong? I mean, did he even say my name right when I got baptized?' Catrin pleaded in hushed tones.

By now Tom was having to stifle his hysteria with his mother's Tower of London tea towel, stuffing almost half of it inside his mouth.

'Ta dah!' announced Father O'Leary, producing a small blue box. Catrin noticed the vinyl was peeling on one edge. He opened it and nestled inside on a cushion of grey plastic sponge was a gaudy-looking silver-coloured necklace.

Catrin looked closer and realized it was a tacky St Christopher charm, the kind they sold in the dusty cabinet at the back of the church.

'What d'you think of that then?' said Father O'Leary with gleaming eyes, as if he was showing her the Koh-i-Noor diamond.

‘It’s to keep you safe on yer hols!’ announced Huw.

‘Lovely!’ declared Liz. ‘Now let’s get it on you, shall we? Let it start doin’ its job!’

Catrin looked at her mother in disbelief.

Tom had tears streaming down his face. ‘It’s absolutely beautiful, Karen,’ he announced. And nobody detected his sarcasm. Except Catrin, of course. Who stood there resplendent in her khaki money belt and nickel-plated St Christopher charm that looked more like an SOS medallion, only not as subtle.

‘Hey now doesn’t that look the real deal!’ declared Father O’Leary.

The phone rang in the hall.

‘I’ll get it!’ Catrin screeched, desperate to get out of the kitchen. She leapt into the hallway and grabbed the phone. ‘5-0-6-5?’ she said.

‘Cat, it’s Lana.’

‘Oh, thank God! Look, the sooner you get here and we bugger off to Greece, the better. My family is actually deranged. My mother has only gone and—’

‘Babe, we got a problem.’

Catrin caught her breath.

‘What’s going on?’ she asked, worried.

On the other end of the phone, Lana sighed.

‘It’s Judith. She’s not fucking coming.’