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THIS SUMMER'S SECRETS

Books by Emily Barr

THE ONE MEMORY OF FLORA BANKS

THE TRUTH AND LIES OF ELLA BLACK

THE GIRL WHO CAME OUT OF THE WOODS

THINGS TO DO BEFORE THE END OF THE WORLD

GHOSTED

THIS SUMMER'S SECRETS

EMILY BARR



PENGUIN BOOKS

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For Gabe

Prologue

2008

The toddlers were playing on the grass, in the sun. Felicity sat back on the picnic blanket and watched. It had been a drizzly summer so far, and they were taking advantage of a rare day of sunshine.

'Can you believe we've got children?' she said to Jenna, leaning back on her hands. 'I mean, who decided it was OK for me to keep an actual kid alive?'

'Would you have done it,' said Jenna, 'if you'd known what it was like?'

They watched the two-year-olds, dressed only in nappies, both smothered in suncream. Little Senara was wearing a hat, but Clementine had ripped hers off so many times that Felicity had given up trying to put it back on. You had to choose your battles with Clem.

Felicity tried to work out how to answer. That was the thing with Jenna: she just came out and said things.

Clem yelled, 'Mummy! I want dink!' and Felicity ran into the house to fetch more juice for the girls, and another cup of tea for herself and Jenna. Or wine? Should they have wine? The mums in London had afternoon wine.

Here in Cornwall they probably didn't. She put the kettle on and tried not to show how shaken she was by Jenna's question.

Would she have had Clem if she'd known what it was going to be like?

No.

Having Clem had been a mistake, even though she'd been planned.

She put four drinks on a tray, added a pack of biscuits (she couldn't be bothered to bake these days) and carried it all outside.

Clementine was eight months older than Senara and was trying to start a game that involved running round in circles, laughing, but Senara wanted to walk along the edge of the grass. Every now and then, she stopped and picked something up, looking at it hard. Clementine was blonde and chubby, a smiling, strong-willed toddler with a bright orange aura. Senara was half her size and watchful, and the colours around her were blue and yellow. Their girls had pulled Felicity and Jenna back together, tentatively rekindling their shattered friendship.

Felicity had never managed to tell anyone about the way motherhood had ripped her life into pieces and thrown them up in the air. She'd felt obliged to pretend to her parents, her husband, her brother that everything was wonderful, that Clementine was the perfect baby, and that Felicity had *found herself*, in that way you were supposed to do. The reality, though, was chaotic. She'd lost the thread of herself, had seen it snap.

Having Clem had been a huge mistake because now Felicity had too much to lose. She loved Clementine too much. She wondered whether Jenna felt the same. It must be even worse for her.

She put the tray down on the blanket.

'There we go,' she said. She looked round. 'Where's Senara?'

When she saw her, the world turned black and white. Felicity jumped up and ran. She ran faster than the speed of light, to the camellia bed at the edge of the garden. Senara had picked up a little trowel from somewhere and was digging right there, in exactly the wrong place.

'No!' She heard the harshness of her voice and even as she was shouting she knew Jenna would never forgive her, but this couldn't happen. 'No! Senara! Naughty! Stop!'

Felicity never shouted. Senara turned, her face full of concern. Felicity wanted to be nice, she did, but she couldn't help herself. She couldn't do it. Her voice became a monstrous thing. She was scared of what Senara would find down there.

'No!' she bellowed.

The toddler's face crumpled, and her lip turned over. She took a deep breath and burst into sobs.

Jenna ran over and snatched her daughter up. She turned on Felicity.

'She's a *baby*,' she said, stroking Senara's hair. 'It's OK, darling,' she said. 'Don't worry. We're going home. We won't come here again.'

Then they were gone. Clem hadn't noticed. Felicity knew that she had exploded the friendship, again, and that Jenna would never speak to her after this.

In fact, they would speak again, but not until fourteen years had passed, when the girls were sixteen.

1

'Above us stands Cornwall's most haunted house.' Josie was using a gravelly voice, leaning into the camera. 'It is poised, empty and cursed, on the cliff.' She paused. 'Should I say on the *edge* of the cliff? It is poised, empty and cursed, on the cliff edge. No – the first one.' The wind blew her hair across her face, and she took an elastic off her wrist and tied it back. 'No one knows what lurks in its grounds . . . No one living, that is.'

Gareth joined in. I turned towards him, holding up the old camera. 'Even the people who own it – and remember these are people who literally call locals "peasanty scum" – stay away. Such is their fear of the evil that lurks within, no one has set foot in the grounds of this house for over three hundred years. And today, my friends, we are going to find out why.'

'Gareth!' Josie was exasperated. 'Why did you say three hundred? It's *three* years. And that's only a guess. It's probably less. Plus, you can't include any of this.'

He pulled her close to him and kissed her. 'Sorry, babe. I got carried away. Three hundred sounds better. We'll do a

sensible one afterwards. This is the director's cut. The rogue version.'

'Go again,' I said. 'Just from where you come in, Gaz. Remember: *three*. And if you can keep it submittable, that would be great.'

This was Gareth's digital-media project, but it was turning out to be more than that. I wasn't appearing on camera; holding it was fine by me. That was how I was comfortable. I was never the star, and I didn't want to be. I wasn't even the star of my own life. My friends, my mother, even the dogs I walked had more presence than I had. Definitely, in fact, the dogs. I was the eternal sidekick, the one who stood back and watched.

The video camera was an old one that had belonged to Gareth's mum; he'd found it at home and added it to his box of tech when he discovered that it used a memory card that also fitted the drone. 'We can combine aerial footage with talking heads. We'll probably win a BAFTA,' he had said at the time, though we were still waiting. Meanwhile his GCSE coursework was overdue.

When we'd finished the intro, Gareth and Josie got to work setting up the drone, and I walked down the beach to keep warm. The bay was deserted because it was the middle of winter and freezing. Everyone who wasn't at work was at home watching TV. I stomped across the stony shore and looked out at the water, which was a sheet of corrugated metal. The sky was grey, and the water was grey, and I was pretty sure that if I stopped moving I would die of cold and turn grey too.

I turned back and looked up at the house on the cliff. You couldn't see much of it from here: just a row of upstairs windows in what was, clearly, a huge building. There was a girl of about our age who was part of the family who owned it and used to come down for the summer, though as Gareth had said they hadn't been for years. She was the one who, wanting to get past us on the path down to the beach a few years ago, had said, '*Jesus! Excuse me? Peasants*.' Gareth had added the 'scum' part for effect.

We would all have been about thirteen at that point. Children. And she had called us 'peasants'. None of us had ever forgotten it.

'Senara!' They were both calling to me.

The drone had been a cheap purchase off eBay, and we had no idea whether it was going to work, but Gareth, at least, was optimistic. His actual project was to make a film of the Cornish coastline, using aerial media, and that had led us to the local big house and all its mysteries. We were going to fly the drone up and over the gardens of Cliff House, filming whatever was in there, bring it straight back to us on the beach, and then we'd see what the garden was like and use the unobtrusive bits for Gareth's coursework. I was picturing overgrown lawns, and flower beds that would be ideal hiding places for imaginary monsters. The test flights had gone well.

I ran back up the stony beach.

Now Gareth was holding up the camera. When I was close enough, he said, 'Before we send her off on her mission, what's she going to find? Senara?'

‘Zombies!’ I shouted.

‘I think it’s ghosts,’ called Josie. ‘But hopefully ghosts that are visible to the camera.’

Gareth turned the lens on himself and said, ‘Senara says zombies. Josie says ghosts. I say bodies. The family who live there murdered each other, and that lawn will be strewn with old corpses. The old lady did it. Last one standing.’

‘The girl who hates us was the first to die,’ said Josie.

‘The vultures have taken the flesh,’ I said, ‘and all that remains is bones. The lawn is littered with the bones of the Roberts family. And that girl who went missing. Lucy’s sister. You’re not putting this bit in, are you?’

‘Course not,’ he said, and he put the memory card into the drone, laughed and flew it up and up and up, and then it was gone.

2

The next morning, we leaned our bikes against the fence and tried to work out how to sneak into the garden to retrieve the crashed drone before anyone else spotted it. We'd given up last night because it was getting dark, and today it was essential that we got it out of there. Specifically, we needed to find it before Mrs Roberts, the old lady Gareth had called a serial killer, did; not only would we be in all kinds of trouble if she caught us, but she'd probably kill us next. She had to be a hundred years old; she lived in a little cottage at the bottom of the Cliff House drive, and was famously salty.

We had no idea whether the place was full of zombies, ghosts or bodies. I didn't really think we'd find anything more than aggressive guard dogs, spiky traps that clamped your legs, and Mrs Roberts herself, who might not have been a mass murderer, but who was certainly mean.

'I didn't know the fence was this high,' said Josie. She put her cycle helmet in her bike basket and replaced it with a woolly hat, which she pulled down over her ears.

'We have to get it, though,' said Gareth. 'Can you imagine the shit if we don't? The family will come back at

some point, and they'll find it. And watch it. And see the things we said about them.'

I felt Josie shudder. 'That must never happen.'

I looked up. 'There's barbed wire on top.'

'They really don't want visitors.' Gareth stepped back to inspect the top of the fence. He looked at me. 'You could do it, Senara. You should go first. Climb over, go and find it, come back.'

'Excuse me?' I was outraged. 'You were the one who called an old lady a murderer and then crashed the record of our suspicions into her garden.'

'But you're small. Agile.'

'I'm not *agile*,' I said. 'You're tallest. Longest legs. You should do it. You could practically step over in one stride.'

'All right. We'll all go,' he said. 'Yeah? All for one, one for all.'

'How, though? We can't tunnel in.' I looked at the ground. 'Can we?'

The wind was coming straight off the sea, chilling my face. Mum would go mad if I was caught doing this. She hated this house and always told me to stay away.

Josie opened her rucksack. As well as a water bottle and a sandwich, she had a long rope, coiled and ready to pounce, a harness, and some metal clip things.

'Borrowed these from Treve,' she said. 'I thought it might be tricky. I mean, if it was meant to be easy, it wouldn't be called trespassing.'

Our friend Treve worked as a climbing instructor, and Josie was a genius.

Some people said Mrs Roberts sat in her cottage over the other side of this fence like Miss Havisham, staring at herself in a mirror. Others said she was a witch, though Josie would have none of that. 'Witches are just everything the patriarchy fears in women, packaged up and othered,' she would say. 'She's not a witch. She's just a human being. But that doesn't mean she's nice.'

Whatever she was actually like up close, the only thing everyone agreed on was the fact that she would be furious to catch us in her garden, and that if she found the drone and worked out how to watch the footage we'd be in trouble. More than that, though, I'd feel terrible. She was a very old lady, living on her own, and we'd called her a serial killer on camera and then thrown it into her garden. She had people who came to look after her. All she had to do was spot the drone and ask one of them to go and pick it up, and we were buggered.

Josie started unpacking the climbing stuff. 'So we have one harness, but apparently it'll more or less fit us all.'

Josie had learned basic climbing from Treve over the years, and she gave us a quick tutorial. The two of them agreed that I was going first, and I didn't have much of a choice. Gareth claimed that the only CCTV in there was focused on the house and the gates, though he was probably bullshitting to make us feel better.

It was raining now, heavy drops soaking through my fleece as I climbed into the harness.

'This is worse than crashing a cheap drone. I mean, that was just stupid, but this is illegal.' I was scared. It was, as

Josie had said, trespassing. 'And even if she sends someone out to pick it up, she'll never work out how to get the memory card out and watch it. We should leave it in there.'

Mrs Roberts had once seen our friend Dan throwing fir cones over the electric gates to see if he could trigger the beam on the other side to make them open, and she told him to '*Fuck right off*' and then lots more in the same vein. He obeyed her: he said afterwards that he'd never run so fast.

'It'll be fine,' said Gareth. 'Seriously – we can't leave that thing in there. Remember, the family have kids. If they come back, they'll find it for sure, and they already think we're scum.' He paused. 'Also, I really need my drone back. Cheap, yeah, but also the most valuable thing I own.'

I climbed a metre or so, then attached a clip to the fence, and fixed myself to it, and carried on. It was easy. This road didn't really go anywhere and no one came along it, so there was hardly any danger of being spotted. All the same, I was trembling, looking back along the road constantly.

'That's it!' said Josie. 'Now climb a bit higher and put in another one.'

The fence was wire, with diamond-shaped holes, and it seemed strong enough to support my weight right next to the pole. It was easy enough once I got going, and soon I was stepping carefully over the barbed wire at the top, pulling my trousers away when they got caught, and letting the rope out to abseil down the other side.

I stood against a tree and looked around in case the drone was right here. It wasn't, so I closed my eyes and

breathed the place in. Damp leaves, mulchy things, rain from the ocean. A different world. It was silent, the dark clouds and the shade of the trees making everything monochrome and strange.

I couldn't see the house because of the trees. Even from here, though, I could tell that we'd been wrong and the garden hadn't been deserted for years. I'd pictured a wilderness, nature reclaiming everything. I'd wondered how we would spot one drone in the tall grass, the nettles, bushes, creepers. In fact, I could see that every blade of grass on the lawn was the same length, and the trees were all neatly pruned. It was a perfectly manicured garden, and it was massive.

That meant gardeners came in. I hoped they weren't here now; hoped they hadn't been here early this morning, found a crashed drone and taken it away.

'Careful!' I called. 'It's . . . different.'

I wondered why the family did this when no one except the gardeners (and random intruders) would ever see it, when it would grow and be cut back, grow and be cut back, again and again and again, unseen. Why do that when you never came anywhere near the place? And why stay away for the past few years when everyone else had dashed down to Cornwall to hide out from the pandemic?

Or was that all wrong? Were they actually living here quietly? Were they in the house, watching us right now?

Gareth landed beside me, and then Josie, bringing the clips with her. We stood among the trees and looked at each other, eyes wide.

Gareth held up his phone and started filming. 'Here we have our brave gang of trespassers,' he said in a low voice. 'Making a daring raid to retrieve military hardware. Say hello, everyone.'

I waved.

'You are not uploading this,' said Josie.

'No, but I'm going to video as we walk around. Souvenir.'

'You twat. I want one photo. Not a stupid video. Smile!' Josie bunched us together for a selfie.

'Say *trespass*!' I said, my voice shaking.

'Trespass!'

Gareth promised us, again, that as long as we stayed away from the doors of the house we would be safe enough CCTV-wise.

As we set off, he started narrating in a David Attenborough voice. 'And our intrepid explorers navigate the forest,' he whispered. 'Unsure where their prey is located, they stay close together for safety.'

'Tell me you're not doing this the whole time,' I said.

'There is some discontent among the ranks,' Gareth continued. 'But the primate wielding the primitive recording device confirms that he will not, in fact, be doing this the whole time.'

Birds moved around out of sight, clacking the bare branches. The rotting smell stuck in my nose, and I started to think about the dead animals under the soil, decomposing into it, and my mind spiralled to all the creatures that had died here over the years, the centuries, the millennia.

'You OK?' Josie took my elbow.

I nodded. 'Yeah. This place is a bit freaky.'

Her face was glowing. 'I know! Don't worry, Senni. We'll find the drone and get out. No one's going to send us to prison, even if they did catch us, which they won't.'

I couldn't find the words to say that I hadn't been worrying about that, that I'd been thinking about things in the soil, about all the life and death that had happened on this planet since the first creatures climbed out of the ocean. I wanted to say that being up here on the cliffs above the beach was weird, that the whole place had an atmosphere that was doing something strange to me. It was so close to home, but a different universe, a wormhole into a new world.

I didn't say it, even though it was Josie and I could've done. I knew zombies weren't real, but if they could have climbed out of the soil and eaten our brains, this felt like the place where they'd do it.

We all stopped when the house came into view. It looked like a castle. It stood, blocky and stone, glaring at us. There was a car parked outside it, which was alarming. It was a green one, small and battered.

I had the strangest feeling. *I know this place. I've been here before.* I hadn't, though. I'd never been here. My brain was jumping around, being freaky.

'It's OK,' said Gareth after a moment. 'I bet it's there all the time.' It took me a moment to realize he was talking about the car.

'It'll be the *runaround*,' said Josie. 'The one they keep here.'

'But it looks crap.' I was confused.

'That's what posh people do.' Gareth sounded sure of himself. 'They don't care about things like that. That's the kind of car the Queen would have driven.'

I didn't believe him, but as long as no one was here I didn't care. We stood as close to the house as we dared, and looked up. I counted: there were twelve windows facing forward. Four on each of the three floors. All of them blank.

Twelve windows, and those were just the ones that faced this way. I counted up the rooms we had at home, which didn't take long: five. How many windows facing out the front? Three.

We skirted past the house, looking for something shiny. The garden was the size of the whole of the rest of the village, and it seemed to be organized into different zones, like the best-tended municipal park, but classier and without swings. There was the perfect lawn with the white stone driveway cutting it in half, and around it there was the woody part, the vegetable garden, and the flower beds with paths between them. It was all empty. Empty of people, and empty, so far, of the thing we needed.

We grew in confidence as no dogs or old ladies ran at us with bared teeth. Behind the house we found that there was a swimming pool. It should have been surprising, but it wasn't. It was an outdoor pool, with a pale-blue-and-white-striped shed next to it that I guessed was full of sunloungers and cushions and lilos. The pool was protected by a mossy blue cover, and I watched a beetle run across it.

'Bet it's heated.' Gareth pulled back a corner of the plastic and put his hand in. 'Freezing! I mean, it's not heated

now. But there's no way they'd build an outdoor pool in Cornwall and then swim in cold water.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'If you're going to swim in cold water, you can ... you know.' I indicated the Atlantic Ocean, far below us, with a tilt of my head.

'But then you'd have to mix with regular people,' said Gareth. 'The hoi polloi.'

'It's not *the* hoi polloi,' said Josie. '*Hoi* means *the*. In Ancient Greek. So you can just say hoi polloi.'

'Yeah,' said Gareth. 'Or I can say "peasants".'

'"Scum",' I said.

'Yeah,' said Josie. 'Or that.'

I stared at the pool, imagining it in summer if the family ever came back. It would be bright blue, sparkling in the sunshine. I knew it would be, and I knew I'd never see it.

But I also knew that I *had* seen it. I'd been here.

The cottage was at the end of the drive, separate from all this but backing on to the garden, and it was too far from the house for Mrs Roberts to see us (I hoped). According to Gareth, her two living-room windows opened on to the bottom part of the lawn, and as long as we kept to the edges and the top half of the garden we'd be fine.

'There's no way the drone made it that far,' Gareth had said. He'd said it confidently, but he said everything confidently.

All the same, I hoped she wasn't at a window because, although I was no expert, I was pretty sure when I looked over towards her cottage that those windows gave a better view of the lower part of the garden than we'd thought.

We edged round the boundary, walking in single file.

Josie screamed.

Not a gasp, not a shout, but an actual terrified scream.

My heart went mad, pounding right through me, and my legs started to wobble.

'What?' I said.

'Jose?' said Gareth.

Her breathing was loud, but she started laughing through it.

'Oh shit,' she said. 'Oh God. Sorry. I just. I nearly stepped on this. Oh my God.'

We gathered round, keeping our distance until we saw what it was.

A dead fox was staring up at us with a glassy eye. It hadn't been dead for long. It almost seemed to be alive. Its eye wasn't blank; it still looked as if it was thinking. There was a shiny gash in its side, with a couple of flies buzzing round it. I turned away.

'Gross,' said Gareth.

'Right?' said Josie, still breathing fast.

I looked back at it. I thought its face moved, thought its mouth was trying to tell me something. But it wasn't. Of course it wasn't.

I knew it was going to take me a long time to calm down. There wasn't much we could do about the fox; we were hardly going to bury it, or do anything other than step over it. We carried on skirting the flower beds, but my heart didn't settle. I was jumpy, on edge, waiting for the bad thing to happen.

At the furthest point from the place where we'd come in, tucked out of sight of everywhere else, there was a strange patch of messy garden with two camellia bushes that were clearly never cut back, shielded by a crumbling wall on two sides. We sat down. I pushed aside the feeling of déjà vu, but it was there again. *You know this place*.

'Where's your drone, babe?' said Josie to Gareth. He kissed the top of her head and didn't answer.

'If *we* can't see it,' I said, 'does that mean they won't?'

I looked up at the camellias with their tissue-papery flowers. One bush had red flowers, the other pink. The leaves were shiny and could have been made from wax, and there were petals all over the soil, which was full of weeds. Unlike the rest of the garden, this corner had been left wild. The bushes had used the winter sun and constant rain to grow as tall and as ragged as they could. They were gorgeous.

'I love these.' I knelt down and pulled out a few weeds. 'If I had a garden, I'd fill it with stuff like this.'

'Yeah. Look at them, flowering to themselves.' Josie joined me in pulling up weeds. 'Isn't that weird? That these flowers bloom and die, and no one looks at them. I mean, these people have plants that flower in winter, and they're never here, so they must *never* see them.'

'Don't do that, you twats,' said Gareth, nodding to the pile of weeds we were making. 'They'll know someone's been here.'

'Phantom gardeners,' said Josie. 'Emergency! Call the police. Gaz, this is obviously the least of our problems.' She stood up and grabbed a handful of the uprooted plants,

setting off to scatter them in the undergrowth. I stayed where I was.

There was something poking out from among the tangle of weeds. It was smooth and light-coloured. A shiny stone? I reached out for it. Even though it wasn't the drone, I touched it, tried to pick it up.

My fingers couldn't close round it because it was bigger than the part I could see. It wasn't cold like a stone. Its texture was different.

I leaned forward, dug the earth out around it. I reached in with my fingers. It went down and down. I pulled at the top, realizing what it was the moment I yanked it out of the earth.

'Ugh!' I dropped it and jumped up.

Josie looked round. 'What?'

I took a step back, and then another. 'A bone! I thought it was a stone. But it's a bone.'

Gareth knelt beside it. 'Remember that fox, Sen? It'll be something like that. An animal that's died here years ago. Just nature doing its thing. Cool.'

He picked it up. It was a smallish bone, thin. When I saw that it wasn't a human hand or a skull, my heart started to calm. Most of it was a brownish colour, stained by all the earth that had been round it.

'I hate it,' I said. 'Put it back.'

'Fuck that,' said Gareth. 'Josie, can you film me?'

I left them to it: I was getting out of here.

I knew, now, that we weren't going to retrieve the drone.

I hardly cared. There would always be the danger that the family would find it and discover the memory card and watch us speculating about them, but no one was going to send us to prison for that. Gareth couldn't finish his coursework, and we'd never be able to make that secret film about Cliff House, though Gareth seemed to be making a new one now anyway.

Josie was filming him on his phone, twatting about with the bone, but I wanted to go home. If I ran fast, I'd be back at the fence in a minute or so. I could cut across the grass. I set off, running as fast as I could across the squelchy lawn.

It was colder than ever and starting to rain again. The trees ahead of me stretched spiky fingers into the air. Seagulls were gliding across the sky. I slowed a bit, in spite of myself, to take it all in.

It was only because I slowed down that I saw it. A shiny white thing poking out of one of the bushes by the driveway. The drone. It was close to Mrs Roberts's cottage, but there was nothing I could do about that. I ran over as fast as I could and yanked it out. It had flown into a rhododendron bush, and it would definitely have been found the moment anyone came up the drive. I was about to set off with it under my arm, back to the fence and freedom, when I heard something.

A tapping sound, quiet, insistent. Like our boiler when it malfunctioned.

I looked round, drenched in dread, and saw a face at the window, a hand tapping on glass. The face was deathly pale, its hollow eyes fixed on me.

I stared. She stared back.

The old lady had seen me in her garden. She was banging on her window.

I could run away.

She'd call the police because I was trespassing.

I could go up to her and try to talk my way out of it. I wouldn't know what to say.

I stood, paralysed. Run away or go over?

I heard Josie calling my name.

Mrs Roberts wouldn't know there was a camera on the drone. If I could smooth things over, apologize and leave with the footage, we'd be OK, and as soon as we got home we could delete the bit where Gareth had accused her of murdering her family.

But if I ran she definitely wouldn't know about it.

I grabbed my phone and messaged the group chat.

Go now. I've got drone.
Mrs R saw me.

I shoved my phone in my back pocket. As I got closer, the old lady opened the window. She was wearing a white shirt, and her long white hair was loose. Was she actually a ghost? I paused for a second, not sure there was anyone there at all.

'Excuse me? What the fuck do you think you're doing?'

Not a ghost.

I took a deep breath. 'Sorry!'

I might never have been this scared in my life. My knees wobbled, and I had to make an effort not to wet myself.

'I'm really sorry, Mrs Roberts. I promise we didn't damage anything. We were flying this plane from the beach, and it crashed into your garden. We just –'

She cut me off. 'Were you vandalizing my garden?' Her voice was clipped.

'No. Really. I swear. We just came over to see if we could find this.' I held up the drone to show her, hating the way my voice sounded. Like a kid in primary school trying to get out of trouble.

'How did you get in? You certainly didn't come up the drive.'

I cringed. 'I'm really sorry.' She glared at me, waiting, so I muttered, 'Over the fence.'

She nodded, and half smiled. 'Promise you haven't smashed the house up?'

'Promise. Honestly, I swear. We didn't go near the house.'

'Who are the other members of your gang?'

'Two friends. We're not a gang.'

'Well, you don't seem like a thug. Just don't use that entry route in future.' She sighed. 'It makes a change to see life around here. You can't imagine how boring it is, looking at nothing happening. But no more remote-control thingies, please. Who are you?'

Fake name.

What was the point? This was a small village, and I would never get away with using an alias.

'Senara.' I'd try to get away without a surname, at least.

She looked at me closely. 'Senara. Do you live in the village?'

'Yes . . . Are you going to tell anyone we were here?'

I felt my phone vibrating. I hoped they were getting away. There was no point in all of us being caught.

'No, but I have one condition.'

I waited, squinting at her, hoping it wasn't anything awful.

'Climb in through this window and make me a cup of tea. Weak Earl Grey with lemon, not milk. And stay and talk for at least fifteen minutes. What do you say? I'll set a timer, and you can leave as soon as it goes off. Get Siri to send a text to your friends to go home without you.' She gave a half-smile. 'My grandson Alex set up Siri for me. It's a godsend.' She held up shaking hands to demonstrate how difficult texting would be, and winced. 'Hey, Siri! Set a fifteen-minute timer.'

Siri confirmed that the timer was set. I tucked the drone into my waistband and climbed in through the window. As I turned to close it, I saw Josie and Gareth running across the back of the garden, in the distance.

Mrs Roberts, it turned out, wasn't a terrifying old battleaxe, and she didn't seem like a murderer, either: she was brilliant. That was my first visit, but after that I went back every week. I learned to make weak Earl Grey the way she liked it, and she'd tell me stories from her life. She was funny and outrageous.

By the time spring came round, in an unlikely way we were friends.