

The Pier

Chapter 1

I'm standing on the pier again. Not the Palace Pier, but the West Pier in Brighton, and I don't know how I got out there. A row boat? It's the middle of winter and the middle of the night and no-one's around. I feel the cold wind bite through my pink wool coat. Taste the salt on my lips. The whoosh of the waves roars in my ears, carrying with it the rotting scent of seaweed. I look down at my feet at my new shoes. Purple plimsoles, barely balancing on the crumbling planks of wood, ready to give way under my weight at any minute. I remember the time when those kids grabbed me when I was five, a girl on either side of me, yanking on my arms until they almost came out of their sockets. How they lifted my tiny body and plunged my feet into the paddling pool in their back garden and soaked my little plimsoles. Pink, they were. How they laughed and I couldn't fight back and how cold and gross my feet felt in my damp socks and shoes. How I had to just wait until it was over. Swallow my screams.

The seagulls are squabbling over some abandoned chips. I feel the clammy railing under my icy hands. Look down at the swirly Victorian design. Think how glorious and ornate it must have looked in the age of innocence, but now it's just a relic. My fingers run over the black chipped paint – how many layers must there have been over the years? I feel the crumbly rust underneath, the skeleton of the frame, ready to turn to dust in my hands like the osteoporotic bones of a granny. I think of when the pier was built, how the history is in my bones, like the generations of my ancestors, some of whom may have built the pier. I should feel deeply connected, proud, like I belong here, but I don't. I feel numb. The wind whips through my hair, and blows my tears across my temples, leaving icy tracks. I don't have tissues to wipe my

snot. Snot that used to be wiped by my doting aunts when I was a little girl, running on the beach or on the Palace Pier. But now I just let it run, thinking my salty tears and salty snot will blend into the salty ocean, until it all dilutes into nothingness. And I think of my body. How heavy will it be when it hits?

I remember that line from Paul's Case, by Willa Sibert Cather that I read at school: "As he fell, the folly of his haste occurred to him with merciless clearness, the vastness of what he had left undone." I think of the story about my uncle who hung himself after his fiancé left and the wake of devastation it left behind. My dad saying, "If only he gave it some time. He would have gotten over it. He would have found love again."

I think of my last conversation with my best friend, Wren. How I told her I was thinking of doing it. She said, "I will be sad if you go." I tried to explain to her that I'm sorry, but I don't care. How selfish of me, I know. But it hurts too much.

All my life I waited for him. Not knowing I was waiting. It was a fantasy in the back of my head. Just below my consciousness. But even while still in those other relationships, when I was supposedly in love, I was waiting. I know it wasn't real until now. *How lucky I am*, I thought, *to find love so young. I'm only twenty-seven. I'm the luckiest girl in the world.* All I ever wanted was to feel that kind of connection with someone. To feel it just once before I die. That one unique pebble out of the millions I found on the beach. I forgot to wish that it would last longer than a month. And I lost him. Because of one stupid mistake. One thoughtless utterance. How, like a child, distractedly tossing a pebble into the ocean, not knowing what I had in my hands, I threw him away. And now he's gone for good.

Everyone rallied around me. “It was *him*,” they said. “It wasn’t *you*. He was no good. He would have decimated a gentle soul like yours.” Deep down, I knew it, but it didn’t matter. I would have let myself be destroyed, just to feel that high. He destroyed me anyway in the end with his callous goodbye. Forgetting me the instant I walked out the door, even before I was gone. I knew.

I don’t feel cold any more. I look down at the vicious, swirling ocean, with its magnetic pull, and feel relief, knowing that the pain will never reach me again. I climb over the crumbling railings. My hands grip the cold metal. My grip loosens. And then I let go.

* * *

My heart is hammering in my head as I jolt awake in bed. There’s Pippin, beside me. His sequined dress is draped on the chair and a beam of morning light slices through the thin blue curtains illuminating the glitter that sparkles in his hair. Behind me is Wren, her arm draped over my naked hip. The fairy lights are still on above the bed, and the tiny flat is littered with last nights’ empty wine bottles, a white feather boa, and a handful of my half-finished art pieces. The air is still heavy with cigarette smoke.

I should be happy, sandwiched between this little family of mine who won’t let me go. Who want me to stay. They hold me throughout the nights, and I think, *how sweet of them. How lucky am I*. But I just want to go back to that dream. I want to know how it ends. How cold is the water going to be? Will the tide pull me out? And if I was really serious, wouldn’t I have just jumped off Embassy Court?

I turn on my back, and feel Wren's soft, tiny hand take mine. I look over at her. Her long, thick dark hippy hair is draped over her neck and the pillow. Her green eyes gaze at me with concern. She leans over and kisses my forehead.

"Morning, sleeping beauty," she says, and smiles. "You had another nightmare, didn't you."

I nod. My throat closes up. The tears well.

"The pier again?" she says.

"Yep," I say.

She squeezes my hand. "Why the pier, beautiful girl?"

"I don't know. In the dream, it makes sense."

Pippin stirs. He turns onto his back and drapes an arm over his head. I smell stale BO. He looks at me and blinks. One eye still has a false eyelash attached, and it flutters like a weightless caterpillar. He blows an air kiss. I look down at his flaccid cock, which is covered in glitter. I nudge Wren, and point. She looks over and snorts.

"I don't remember him doing that!" I say.

"It was me," she says, and starts with her infectious giggle. I start giggling too.

"He was jealous of you, Evie. That your face was all glittery and getting all the attention at the party last night. He wanted everyone to see how beautiful his cock is. So, when he pulled it out to show everyone, I decorated it for him!"

"But his cock *is* beautiful. It doesn't need glitter," I say.

"True. But you know how competitive he is. He had to make it even more beautiful."

I look down at his cock again, and say, "I am never going to use that glitter roller again."

Evie laughs. "I'll make us a cup of tea."

She gets up and I feel the heaviness of returning to myself again. I roll on my side and shove Pippin onto his side so I can spoon him. He groans.

"Stop gossiping about me behind my back," he says.

I kiss him between the shoulder blades.

"At least now you can say you've had a threesome," I tell him.

"Never," he says. "You're not my type."

I stroke his lean back, but it only reminds me of *his* back. His beautiful smooth, dark skin and large, hulking frame. How different it is from Pippin's bony alabaster body.

I try to imagine him in his bed now. Damian. I feel how full my chest is, my heart, my whole body and how, surely, he must feel the fullness of my heart, how connected we are, how he must feel that invisible chord, tying us together. But I know that's not how it works. I can love him all I want, but it won't reach him. Not psychically or otherwise. If it's not in his heart anymore, it won't ever be again. Maybe it never was.

I don't want to check my messages. To wake up on a thousand more mornings to find no word from him. To know he doesn't miss me, like I miss him. To know he's fucking who knows who by now. A teenager probably. A million other girls, like they warned me he would. Isn't that what players do? If I'd known beforehand, I'd have run a mile before it even started.

I kiss Pippin's back again and bury my head in the pillows. I will myself to fall back to sleep, to go back to the dream. I want to see it right through to the end. I want to know what it feels like when I jump.

* * *

The phone jolts me awake again in what seems like minutes later. The seagulls are squawking outside the window. The smell of bacon fills the air and my mouth waters.

"Hello? Beryl! Hi, it's Wren. I think Pippin's gone back to sleep. Hold on." She cups the phone. "Pips! Your mum's on the phone!"

"Tell her I'll ring back," he mumbles. "Doesn't she know what time it is?"

"He says he'll ring you back. Um, he only went to bed a few hours ago. I know. Late one. Oh. Is she alright? Right, I'll let him know." She hangs up the phone.

She comes back into the bedroom. "Pippin, no need to worry, but Nanna Ruby's been taken up to Sussex County. Her bronchitis again."

"Oh God," mumbles Pippin.

"She's asked you to do the jumble today."

"Oh, for fuck's sake. Why is it always me?"

"Because you're her favourite grandson. And you have impeccable taste. She can trust you'll get the best stuff for the shop."

"But my head is going to explode!" Pippin lurches up in bed and his eyelash dangles. I reach up and yank it off. He smacks my hand. I notice the white powder dusting his left nostril, but I don't say anything.

"You're *both* coming with me," he says.

"No! I've got my piece to finish for the gallery," I say.

"Bitch, that can wait. I'm not pushing that pram around with all the freaks by myself."

"Wait, aren't you one of them?" I say.

He rolls me over and smacks my naked ass. "Get your depressed-as-fuck ass out of bed and get dressed. Come on, this will take your mind off feeling so bloody sorry for yourself."

Wren plonks the breakfast down on the table. A huge skillet of fried eggs, potatoes, bacon and mushrooms, Jaimie Oliver style.

"Oh, mama. You should marry me one day. I need someone like you to take care of me," says Pippin, as he strides out to the kitchen draping his satin pink dressing gown around him.

"Yeah, and fatten up that skinny ass of yours," says Wren. She laughs and kisses his forehead. "But I'm already married, remember?"

"Oh yeah? Then what was that all about then, last night?" says Pippin pointing to the couch. Pippin's twenty-year-old student lodger, Alonzo, is still snoring from the couch. He's wearing only black boxer briefs.

"Oh my God," I say. "I forgot about that. What the hell, Wren? Jesus!"

Wren starts giggling. Then she looks worried.

"You say one word, and I'll freakin' kill you. What happened last night doesn't leave this flat, OK?" says Wren.

Pippin makes a gesture of zipping his lips. "What happens in Brighton, stays in Brighton," he says.

"I'm not joking. This wasn't a dirty weekend." Her face starts looking pale. "If Simon ever found out."

I take her hand. "No one's going to say anything, Wren. But come on. Seriously. It was an accident waiting to happen, don't you think? You've been crawling out of your skin."

“Get your slow asses finished already with breakfast!” interrupts Pippin. “Come on, we gotta get going if we’re gonna get the best stuff.” Pippin grabs Wren’s tiny body and aggressively hugs her. “And I want to know *all* the juicy details,” he says.

“You wanna know how big his cock is,” I say.

He snorts. “It’s never going to compete with mine, girl.”

“Ha!” I say.

Wren looks at me, worried. I stand up and hug her aswell. “It’s OK. We all know how to keep secrets, remember?” I tell her. “God knows we’ve all got enough of them.”

#