

The sand was cold against the soles of her feet; hard and solid, more like a rock than anything else. She stared out at the horizon, where the inky-blue of the water met lilac sky. The wind had caused some strands of hair to escape from her loose ponytail and blow into her face. She hadn't dared to enter the water, but she could taste a hint of salt on her lips.

*Here I am.*

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, the ice-cold air filling her lungs. For the first time in a long time, she almost felt alive. Or at least, she could remember what it was like to feel that way. Almost.

*Where are you?*

Breathe in.

*Where did you go?*

Breathe out.

She turned away from the ocean, pulling her coat closer around her body. It was an old coat and several sizes too big for her, but she preferred clothes that were baggier than necessary. More room to hide.

*Will I ever find you?*

She'd always been good at hiding - much to her parents' despair as they tore through the house calling her name, getting down on their hands and knees to crawl underneath the hedges in their garden as they tried to find her. She'd suddenly appear at the kitchen table, sipping juice and cuddling her Sally-Anne, her doll. Sally-Anne had been a gift from her godmother, a floppy ragdoll with a cotton dress and long red woollen hair.

She'd never loved anything as much as she'd loved Sally-Anne. She'd taken her everywhere - to the supermarket, to church, to the doctor, and to the dentist. The only place that she couldn't bring her was school. That just made the weekends and Summer holidays all the more valuable. Playing with her in the flower bed, whispering stories into her hair during the long car journeys to seaside cottages and hotels.

She'd been on this beach before. She remembered the last time that she had stood on this beach. It had been someone's wedding - a second or third cousin, someone like that. If she turned a couple of degrees to the right she'd be able to make out the roof of the hotel that they'd stayed in. It was a little run-down now, but that Summer it had seemed like a palace. The staff wore neat blue uniforms and had shiny smiles. She had pancakes every morning. Her cousins would play tag with her in the hotel garden. Sometimes they'd played hide and seek, but not often because they soon tired of how she always won in spite of being one of the youngest.

All of them except Philip.

Philip was never annoyed with her.

He was fifteen, the oldest of all the cousins. As a result he was used as an unpaid babysitter by the adults who wanted a few hours to sip cocktails and talk about a television programme that wasn't Peppa Pig. He never appeared to resent the role though. He seemed to genuinely enjoy playing with them all, whether he was kicking a football around or running around playing tag. He put up with hide and seek long after the others had started to grumble and groan.

*"How are you so good at hiding?"* he'd exclaim in amazement, when she finally emerged from her chosen spot - only after everyone had admitted defeat. She'd giggle mischievously while he rolled his eyes and sighed in a pantomime of bemusement. She liked that she could make him laugh. She was an only child. He was like an older brother to her.

They spent the afternoons on the beach, the entire extended family. The memories came to her in fragments as she walked along the sand; splashing in the shallow water, running with her red bucket and spade, clutching Sally-Anne to her as she peered into rockpools, delightedly frightened by the strange sideways movements of the crabs. The sun beating down on her back as she and her mother buried her snoozing father in the sand, trying not to laugh in case they woke him up. The vanilla ice-cream with raspberry sauce that she'd happily slurped on.

The thought of the ice-cream drove her towards the little beach hut, that was surprisingly open for business even though it was barely April. How did little seaside towns like this survive in the off-season? She licked her ice-cream thoughtfully; it tasted more artificial than it had on that long-ago day of sandcastles, sea-shells, and sausages and chips drenched in bright red ketchup.

The sky had turned from blue to purple to pink to red. The sun began to slide under the horizon. Her mother caught her rubbing her eyes at one point and turned to her husband, eyebrows raised, and pointedly mentioned B-E-D-T-I-M-E.

*"Do you want me to bring her to your room?" Phillip had asked, ever the helpful, capable cousin, mature beyond his years. "I can watch her for a while."*

*"That would be great! I'll get you the key now, hold on - "* her parents had been delighted, happy to spend another hour on the beach.

He'd taken her hand in his and led her towards the hotel. She remembered how she'd dragged her feet, sticking her bottom lip out in an exaggerated pout. She hadn't wanted to go to bed yet. There'd been so much to explore, so much to do ...

Philip seemed to understand. He wasn't like the others, always bossing her around and telling her what to do.

*"You don't have to go to bed just yet. We can play for a while if you want."*

*"Yeah!"*

*"It has to be a secret though. I don't want to get in trouble with your parents for keeping you up past your bedtime. Okay?"*

*"Okay!"*

*"Awesome. I found a really cool spot where we can go. Come on, I'll show you."* he said. He steered her towards the mass of rock that bordered the beach. She skipped happily beside him, almost dropping her doll in her excitement. It was like going on an adventure.

*"There's a cave just in here ..."*

She'd lain wide awake for hours afterwards, nestled between her snoring parents, staring at the ceiling, trying and failing to understand. As she stared into the darkness she felt herself slip away, floating from her body and out into the waters that surrounded her. *Come back* she thought, desperately reaching out to grasp onto it, but it simply lay there, empty. She tried to grab onto something - anything. The more she struggled, the tighter the current's pull became.

Eventually she decided to surrender, to let it drag her far away from the shore and swallow her whole.

It wasn't until she woke up screaming the next morning that anyone realised that Sally-Anne was gone.

Her parents tore the bedroom apart trying to find the doll. Her uncle and aunt volunteered to search the beach, returning red-skinned and empty handed almost two hours later. She'd been inconsolable, crying so hard that she got sick. Her parents had rubbed her back and kissed her forehead (*don't touch me don't touch me* she'd wanted to scream), promising new toys and sweets and books. Her father even left a note with their phone number at the reception desk before they went home, a last-ditch attempt, in the desperate hope that someone would find her out on the sand and bring her to the hotel.

No-one ever called.

It didn't matter.

She knew where Sally-Anne was.

Philip did too.

She was standing there now, in the open jaws of the cave. It seemed to leer at her, reveling in knowing her secret. She remembered how afraid she'd been to step inside, but Phillip had insisted-

*"There's something really cool I want to show you, because you're my favourite cousin."*

There was nowhere to hide.

*"You have to be quiet."*

She took a step forward.

*"This is going to be our secret."*

She fell to her knees, collapsing onto the damp sand. The cave wasn't that deep - she could see the back wall from where she was, but it seemed to stretch eternally out in front of her.

She'd been so scared.

The roar of the waves outside sent an icy chill through her, raking through her bones down to her very core. The sound drowned out everything else, every thought, every sound - she still remembered how it felt, the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach when she realised that her parents couldn't hear her, that nobody was coming to her rescue.

This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

This wasn't how it happened in all of the stories she'd been told.

Wrapped up under the covers, Sally-Anne tucked in beside her.

*Sally-Anne.*

She'd dropped the doll when he grabbed her, when he pushed her to the ground. The shock, not just of the fall but of the action itself, it had caused Sally-Anne to fall from her pudgy, clumsy hands.

She'd dropped her and forgotten about her until it was too late. Until she was too afraid to ever come back for her.

How had Sally-Anne felt, alone all these years?

Abandoned. Betrayed. Confused.

A little red-haired doll, lying on the sand. A little red-haired girl sobbing next to her. A red haired young-woman here now, on her knees, gasping as it appeared before her, the realisation just within her reach -

She grabbed onto it.

*He's not here.*

She held onto it.

He wasn't here, except for in her mind. He couldn't hurt her anymore.

Her face split into a strange, twisted smile and she burst open, laughing loudly, uncontrollably, as if she'd never stop. Everything was coming out all at once, tears rolling down her cheeks as she thought of what she'd lost. What she thought she'd never get back.

The sheer force of her emotion drove her forward, stumbling deeper into the cave. She clawed at the ground, digging furiously, flinging sand all around her. Her fingers scraped against rock and jagged pink shells, but she barely even flinched, just half-sobbed, half-laughed as she finally unearthed the sodden material -

*Sally-Anne.*

"It's you!" she cried. She clasped the sand-crusting bundle of rags to her chest, rocking backwards and forwards, ignoring the fact that her fingernails were torn, stained with blood and sand, and numb from the cold.

"I can't believe that I found you."

Her face crumpled as she stared at the doll, her Sally-Anne. Her pink paisley dress was faded, most of the hair gone from her head, but her crescent-moon smile was still fixed in place. *There you are!* It seemed to say. *You found me!*

She closed her eyes and wept, her tears washing over her, washing away the years - so so many years stolen from her, from her body. Years spent in a ghost-like existence, a half life, split between her body and her soul. Now they were finally colliding again, and it was too much. Every sensation - her stinging fingers, the hard rock beneath her knees, the dampness of her jeans - was overwhelming. Other feelings too, the phantom of an ache between her legs, of an iron-like grip digging into her arm. Things she'd forgotten, things that she'd had to forget in order to survive until she was ready.

Or not.

*Here I come.*