

# ONE

I'm hiding in my bedroom wardrobe with my sister's ex-boyfriend. This might be the worst decision I've ever made in my life.

Downstairs, my family 'is' crashing around. Dad's banging pans and saying "spaghetti Bolognese" in a shocking Italian accent, Britta's practicing her piano scales, and Mum's slamming doors and yelling, "Kat, Kat!"

"Why are we hiding?" whispers Joel.

"Shhh!" I say. Then I listen as Mum comes up the stairs and starts looking for me. Through the slats in the wardrobe door, I see her glance into my room. Then she calls out, "I can't find her anywhere."

"Spaghetti Bolognese!" replies Dad, and I hear his heavy footsteps on the stairs. Oh no. I've got a terrible feeling about this.

Next to me, Joel starts to wriggle. "Keep still," I hiss.

“Dad gets scary when he loses his temper.” Joel freezes just as Dad strides into my room. He stands on my rug with his hands in the pockets of his hideous running shorts—the ones cut high at the sides to show a lot of hairy thigh. He’s just worn them to Britta’s parents’ evening. How could he?

I hold my breath and try to make myself as small as possible. Dad turns in a circle, his eyes narrowed, and for a moment he seems to stare straight at me. Then I see Pinky step into my room. Dad looks at her and frowns as she rubs against his leg. He doesn’t stroke her. Pinky happens to be hairless after a fight with a fox and no one really enjoys touching her. She steps lightly away from Dad, walks toward the wardrobe door, and starts sniffing the slats. *Go away, Pinky!* Just when I think Dad’s going to stomp over and pull open the door, Mum shouts, “Check the yard,” and he walks out of my room.

I let out my breath. I’m such an idiot! Why didn’t I just put Joel in the wardrobe? I didn’t need to get in with him: I’m supposed to be in my bedroom! Next to me, Joel shifts around and whispers, “Maybe we should—”

“Shh!” I say. “He might come back.” We sit in silence for a few moments. “Okay. He’s gone, so I’m going to go downstairs and I’ll come and get you when it’s safe for you to leave. You’ll have to wait until everyone goes to bed.”

“But I told my mum I’d walk the dog.” I stare at Joel’s shadowy face. I don’t remember his voice being so whiny when he was going out with Britta. I must have zoned it out

and focused on his superb grooming. Problem is, in the dark I can't see his gorgeous hair, but I can hear his voice.

"Can't you walk him later?"

"He's got irritable bowel syndrome. It's not good if he doesn't get regular walks. . . ." Joel's breath is warm on my cheek and smells like chocolate cupcakes. When he turned up this evening asking for Britta—looking like a model in his tight Levi's shirt—I told him to come in and wait for her. Then I gave him a cupcake, and then I asked him if he wanted to listen to some music up in my room, and that's how we ended up in the wardrobe. Right now, he's panting sugar on my face and I'm finding it hard to breathe.

"Joel," I say, leaning away from him, "you do understand that if Mum and Dad catch you in here I am *dead*?"

"Because I'm a boy?"

"Yes, because you're a boy . . . who went out with my sister. Plus, you're eighteen and I'm fifteen. Also, I've done some things recently that they aren't too happy about."

"Like what?"

"A couple of times I skipped school during PE. Which was fine, until our neighbor saw me sunbathing on the grass outside Tesco's and told Mum. I said I'd rather get a tan than be stuck indoors playing Ping-Pong, which Mum kind of understood, but then there was the shoplifting incident."

"You shoplifted?" Joel's squeaky voice goes up a notch.

"Only a smoothie, and I lost Mum's handbag."

"Wow! Britta always said you were—"

“What?”

“Well, doing stupid stuff.”

My sister is such a cow. “It wasn’t as bad as it sounds,” I say, pulling a stiletto out from under my butt. “Stealing the smoothie was an accident. I ran out of Marks and Spencer’s when I realized I’d left Mum’s Prada bag in a changing room, and I forgot to pay for the smoothie.”

“Prada sounds expensive.”

“It was, hundreds of pounds expensive. It was her fortieth birthday present from my dad.” I remember Mum’s face when she collected me from Marks & Spencer’s and how she cried in the car on the way home. Not about the handbag. She said it was seeing me sitting in the manager’s office “like a criminal.” When I asked if we could stop at the drive-through McDonald’s to get a milkshake—they wouldn’t let me keep the smoothie—she *freaked*.

After a moment’s silence, Joel says, “I don’t think you’re stupid, Kat. Actually, I really like you.”

“What?” I whisper.

“I like you. I even liked you when I was going out with Britta.”

I sit in stunned silence. Wow. There is just so much wrong with that. Now I’m really worried about Mum and Dad finding him in here! Joel shuffles around so our faces are centimeters apart. I try to back away, but there’s nowhere to go.

This is all Britta’s fault. When they left for her parents’ evening, Mum said, “Fingers crossed the teachers say nicer things than they did about Kat!” And they all laughed because

Britta's a genius, so obviously they'll say better stuff about her. I'm the opposite of a genius. I'm the smoothie thief. When I saw Joel standing on the doorstep, I invited him in to teach my family a lesson. I wasn't sure what the lesson was going to be, I just knew it would annoy them to find Joel in my room. But the moment I heard Britta yell, "We're back!" I knew I'd made a terrible mistake, which is how we ended up in here.

In the darkness, Joel finds my hand and squeezes it. "And I mean, I *really* like you. . . ."

"Oh," I say, and I gulp, but maybe it sounds like, "Mmm," because he puts his arm around me and starts rubbing his nose in my hair. I've got to get out of here! I fumble through dresses and sweaters, trying to get my fingers in the gap in the door, but as I lean forward, he starts *kissing* me.

Actually, he's kissing my ear.

Does this count as a kiss? If it does, it's my third-ever kiss. Joel's ear-kiss is moist and gross. Part of me wants it to stop immediately, but a bigger part of me knows this is going to be a really funny story to tell my friends because I'm fairly certain Joel thinks he's kissing my mouth.

Suddenly, Joel breathes out and it's so tickly I burst out laughing. Next, footsteps crash across my room, my wardrobe door is thrown open, and I tumble onto the carpet. Joel and some shoeboxes land on top of me.

I stare up at Dad, blinking into the bright light. "Sorry, sorry!" says Joel as he desperately tries to untangle his shirt button from my hair. Then Pinky strolls in, followed by Mum

and Britta. Pinky starts to bite my toes, Britta gasps and covers her mouth, but Mum doesn't even look surprised. She just shakes her head and says, "Oh, Kat, how could you?" which is word for word what she said at Marks and Spencer's.

And then I make my second big mistake of the evening: I start to laugh . . . and I just can't stop.



One hour later, I've stopped laughing. Joel has left—Dad chased him down the road, roaring, which can't have been a good experience—and I'm sitting in the middle of the sofa. Mum's curled up on the sheepskin beanbag biting her nails and Dad is pacing around the room. "Your mother and I have been talking, Kat, and we've come to a decision."

"*Mother?!* " I say, putting on a fancy voice. "Who's my *mother?*"

Dad stares at me and breathes deeply in and out through his nose. I stop grinning. "As you have just demonstrated, you don't seem to take anything we say seriously and you don't appear to care for your sister's feelings—"

"Dad, that is *so* unfair. Britta dumped Joel over two months ago. He's up for grabs. A singleton. Those are the rules of dating. . . ." The looks on their faces make me trail off.

"We know you're trying to be funny, Kat," says Mum, "but you really hurt Britta tonight."

*Ha, ha, ha!* I laugh. Very quietly. In my head. Britta's the one who told her boyfriend I was stupid. As Mum stares at me, I think of all the times Britta's called me Dingbat, Dummy,

or, if Pinky's sitting on my lap, Dumb and Dumber. She even insults my cat, and Mum and Dad let her get away with it because they're always laughing along with her.

"So we've come to a decision about America." Dad stops pacing and stands in front of me, his legs wide apart. Hairs are literally crawling down his legs like they're trying to escape from his shorts.

"You should get a wax, Dad. *Seriously*, loads of men have them now."

"We have come to a decision," he says, ignoring me. "We can't leave you here with Britta. Not for a whole month. It's not fair to expect her to look after a wild teenager."

"What are you going to do with me, then?" Over the summer holidays, Dad's taking Mum with him on a business trip to the States. Apparently, this is their "second honeymoon," but if I've added them all up right, it will be their "seventh honeymoon." Britta's supposed to be in charge, which basically means I get to do whatever I want for a month. But if they're not leaving me behind, then that must mean . . . "Are you taking me with you?" I ask. "Summer in Los Angeles . . . That would be awesome!"

"What?" says Dad, confused. "No, of course we're not taking you with us. We've decided to send you to stay with Auntie—" I swear he pauses here, giving me a chance to run through all the terrible auntie options: Auntie Christie in Portsmouth, who wears leggings and crop tops, Auntie Joanna on the Isle of Wight, who's a witch (literally, it's her *job*), or Auntie . . .

“Frida,” says Mum, finishing his sentence. Frida, my Swedish auntie, who lives in Stockholm, and who loves nakedness.

“But,” I say, trying to work out what this will mean, “I won’t see my friends for the *whole* summer.”

“Well,” says Dad, arms folded, looking smug, “you should have thought of that before you decided to get *intimate* with your sister’s boyfriend.”

“He’s her *ex*-boyfriend,” I mutter, but finally I decide to shut up. This is one serious punishment and unless I want to literally die of boredom, ABBA, and pickled herring this summer, I need to get out of it *fast*.



# TWO

“Look!” says Bea. “A plane!”

Betty leans across my seat and the two of them peer out of the car window, watching as the plane flies low over the highway. “Betty, you’re squashing me,” I say.

“Sorry.” She settles back into her seat. “But did you see its little wheels come down? I’ve never been on a plane. This is so exciting!”

“Anyone want a yogurt raisin?” asks Bea, leaning forward and offering the packet to Mum and Dad. “Or I’ve got Mini Cheddars.”

When my friends said they’d come to the airport to see me off, I didn’t expect it to turn into such a fun day out for them. Mum takes a handful of raisins and starts feeding them to Dad. “That was a Scandinavian Airlines plane, Kat. It could be the one you’re going on.”

“Don’t depress me, Mum.”

“Hey, girls,” Dad says, interrupting me. “Don’t you love this song?” Without waiting for a reply, he turns the radio up and starts to croon along to Adele singing “Someone Like You.” Annoyingly, Bea and Betty join in, making Dad turn the music up even louder.

I sit back in my seat and try to control the sick feeling that is building up in my stomach. I can’t believe Mum and Dad are actually doing this to me! I find flying scary, especially takeoff, but knowing I’m not going to see my friends for a whole month is even worse than the thought of being thirty thousand feet in the air. Mum and Dad don’t understand. They keep telling me I can speak to Bea and Betty on the phone and text, but I’ll miss them so much.

A truck overtakes us, spraying the window with gray water and making the car shake. It’s been raining since we left our house, and now the car is steamed up. Betty’s drawing a cartoon ghost on her window. She adds a speech bubble. Now the ghost is saying, “Bye-bye!”

I must look sad because Bea nudges me. “It’s going to be all right, Kat.”

I’m not sure it is. In the front, I watch Dad rest his hand on Mum’s thigh. “Dad,” I say, “*please* don’t perv on Mum in front of my friends!”

“Can’t keep my hands off her.” He gives her leg a squeeze.

“I think your mum and dad are cute together,” whispers Bea. We watch as Mum puts her hand on top of Dad’s and mashes it down into her leg. “Oh,” says Bea. “Less cute.”

“Seriously, you two, stop it. It’s bad enough that I’m going

to Sweden, without having to watch you two *make out* on the way to the airport.”

“If you hadn’t been *making out* with your sister’s boyfriend, you wouldn’t be going to Sweden,” says Dad, glaring at me in the mirror.

“*Ex-boyfriend*,” I say wearily, “and we weren’t making out . . . at least, I wasn’t.”

“Joel snogged Kat’s ear,” says Betty. “She didn’t even like it. She said it felt like he was washing her ear out *with his tongue*!” Suddenly the car swerves as Dad lets go of Mum’s leg and grips the steering wheel.

“Not really helping, Betty,” I say.

But she’s not listening. “Plane!” she shouts. “I think I saw the pilot!”



“So,” says Dad, “time to say our good-byes?” I’ve checked in and we’re standing by the electronic barriers that lead to security. Until now, Bea and Betty have been working hard to distract me. Betty even pushed me on a luggage cart all the way from the parking lot, pretending I was a giant baby. “Your plane goes in just over an hour,” he adds, glancing at his phone.

So, it’s actually happening. It was only when Mum started speaking to me in Swedish and a suitcase appeared in my room that I realized they were definitely going ahead with the Auntie Frida plan. One suitcase . . . *one* suitcase? I told Mum I needed three: one for clothes, one for products and

accessories, and one for technology, but she just laughed and said Frida's boat was too small to take that much stuff.

"I don't want to go," I say.

Mum and Dad exchange a look. We've been through this so many times. Mum just keeps telling me how much fun I'll have with Frida. I suppose she is pretty cool. She's a jewelry designer and she lives on this awesome houseboat in Stockholm, but without my friends, Frida's boat will feel like prison. A prison with loads of IKEA furniture and a guard who walks around naked. "Come here," says Dad. "Give your old man a hug."

"But who'll make Britta's breakfast smoothie? I'm the only one who does it right. And there's no way she'll water the plants." He wraps his arms around me. "Do I have to go?" I ask, but he doesn't even answer my question.

Next, I bury my face in Mum's gray cashmere shoulder. She smells like lemons. I don't want to let go because she's so soft. God, I wish she hadn't found the cardigan in my suitcase and taken it out. All around us, people stream past, dragging carts and hyper children along with them. Except for me, everyone seems excited, like they're off on a big adventure. Over Mum's shoulder, Bea gives me a "Be brave" smile and Betty sticks her tongue out and winks. The sight of Betty in her pink knitted hat makes me cling to Mum even tighter. She knitted it herself and although she claims it's a cupcake it looks much more like a boob. She really shouldn't have knitted a red cherry on the top.

“It’s a question of trust, sweetheart,” Mum says, stroking my hair, “and knowing you’ll be sensible.”

“But, Mum, I am sensible.” She holds me at arm’s length, taking in my jumpsuit and heeled boots, my tousled braid, beads, and bangles. “They’re comfy boots, Mum. You should know. You’re always borrowing them.”

“You look lovely,” she says, laughing. “It’s just not very practical for going on a plane.” *Or what Britta would wear*, I think. Even though she’s only eighteen, she’s always allowed to go off on her own, doing triathlons or camping with Venture Scouts. When she goes on a journey, she puts on a really ugly pair of cargo pants with loads of pockets that she stuffs full of Band-Aids and baby wipes. They make her thighs look *enormous*.

“If you let me stay, I promise not to put any boys in my wardrobe.” This makes Betty grin and I nearly smile. “I won’t even put any clothes in there . . . or talk to any boys . . . or even *look* at boys. It’s not like I had any massive parties planned.” I did. I had a monstrous sleepover planned for next Thursday.

“Kat hates boys and parties,” says Betty seriously, but then she ruins it by laughing madly and Bea joins in.

“Sorry,” says Bea, “but it’s funny because you *do* love parties and, well . . .”

“Boys?” I say.

“Yep.”

“I’m sorry, girls,” says Dad, “but it’s all arranged. We’ll

have a relaxing break and Kat will have a wonderful summer in Sweden.”

“Frida’s nuts. Don’t make me live with her and her peasant clothes and her ambient music. Her boat rocks when cruise ships go past. I’ll get seasick!”

“It’s time to go,” says Dad firmly. Then he claps his hands together and says to my friends, “Who’s hungry? Anyone want sushi?”

“I’ve never eaten sushi,” says Betty.

“You’ll love it,” says Dad, “and I want some chicken katsu.”

I throw my arms around Bea and Betty for one last hug. “You’re not allowed to have any chicken katsu. It’s my favorite. I’ll be too jealous.”

“Definitely no chicken katsu,” says Bea.

“I’d like vegetable tempura,” says my mum, who’s already looking around for a YO! Sushi, “and maybe a glass of plum wine.”

“Mum, I haven’t left yet. Don’t start celebrating.”

“Don’t worry,” says Bea. “Nothing happens in our town. You won’t miss a thing.”

“You’re not allowed to have any fun when I’m away. All you can do is hang out with your boring boyfriends and be boring.” For a moment, I’m struck by the total unfairness of Bea and Betty having boyfriends, while I—someone who has put a huge amount of effort into studying the opposite sex and looking awesome—have *never* been out with anyone. Not even for a day. Betty’s wearing a knitted boob hat and she has a nice, normal boyfriend . . . and he’s hot. *Really* unfair.

“Can we go to Brighton?” asks Bea.

“No.”

“The seaside? The fair? Lush?” she says.

“No, no, and no!”

“What about KFC?” says Betty.

“Okay. Just KFC.”

And then Dad holds my boarding pass up to the barrier, the doors slide open and, without realizing what I’m doing, I step forward and the doors shut behind me. I can’t stop and wave because immediately I’m moved on by a security officer.

“Place your belongings in here, please,” she says, passing me a plastic tray. I glance back; they’re all walking away. “Any liquids over one hundred milliliters?”

“How much is that?” I ask. She sighs and holds up a plastic bottle half filled with water. She swishes it from side to side. “Um, maybe a couple of things,” I say. “Perfume, moisturizer . . . Does face-cooling mist count?” She narrows her eyes and nods. “Coke?” I hold up my half-drunk bottle.

“I think you’d better open up your case.”

While the scary security lady rummages through my bag, I try to catch a last glimpse of Mum and Dad. They’re disappearing around a corner, but Bea and Betty have hung back and are waving like crazy, our Ladybird wave: thumb tucked in and four fingers wiggling.

We made up this wave in nursery school. There were four of us in the awesome Ladybird gang: me, Bea, Betty, and Pearl. I didn’t ask Pearl along to the airport because Bea and Betty

basically hate her. They have pretty good reasons to hate her and I suppose I have, too, but life is never boring when Pearl is around. I wiggle my fingers back at Bea and Betty. A sharp cough makes me turn around.

“What’s this?”

“Serum,” I say. “Lots of people think you can’t use serum if you’ve got oily skin, but that’s just not true. That’s Clinique and it’s very hydrating. You should try it. It’s good on large pores.” It’s dropped in the garbage with a *clang* and a lump forms in my throat. Next she holds up my jar of peanut butter. “No way!” I say. “That’s not a *liquid*.”

“No spreads, jams, or preserves.” *Clunk*. In it goes.

When I turn back, they’ve disappeared. I search around for Betty’s pink booby hat. Nothing. They’ve left.

“Miss? Please step through the security archway.”



My plane is paused at the start of the runway, engines growling, moments away from takeoff. I stare out of the rain-smeared window and try not to think about what’s about to happen. I can’t imagine how this huge plane, packed full of yelling children and vacationers, will ever get up in the air. It’s not helping that the man next to me is holding his head in his hands.

The plane lurches forward and picks up speed. Suddenly, all I can think about is Pearl’s text. I got it just before I turned my phone off: **Hope you don’t die! Ha ha ha!!** We’re bumping along faster now, and the pressure forces me back in my seat. The



engines start to roar. I take deep breaths and grip my armrests. Faster. Faster. Then the nose of the plane tips up and, although it seems impossible, we are going up, up, up and we're in the sky!

“Oh, God,” moans the man next to me, who, incidentally, is wearing a tank top when he clearly doesn't have the physique to wear a tank top. If we crash, the last thing I'll see will be his skinny white arms. The plane banks dramatically to the left, and I look down at the sprawling airport, at the thousands of cars in the parking lot, and at the highway that curves like a river. Mum, Dad, and my friends are down there somewhere, going home together, maybe singing along to Adele.

I press my fingers against the window and try to guess which tiny car is taking them farther and farther away from me.

# THREE

“**K**at! Kat! Kat!” Through the crowd of passengers, I see Auntie Frida coming toward me. She squeezes between an old lady sitting on a suitcase and a hugging couple. Frida’s long embroidered dress and tangled hair look out of place in the modern airport. “*Hej!*” she says, pulling me to her for a hug. I’m squashed against her necklace, one of her own designs, a chain of silver acorns and twigs.

“Here you are,” she says, finally letting me go. Her face is clean and shiny and dusted with freckles. “So your mum and dad have sent you to have some crazy fun with Auntie Frida?”

“I think the idea is you make sure I don’t have any crazy fun.”

“Ha!” she cackles. “We’ll show them.” She takes my suitcase off me and heads for the exit. “Come on, let’s get out of here.” Stockholm airport is filled with light; sun streams in

through the wall-to-ceiling windows and I can smell coffee and cakes—you can always smell coffee and cakes in Sweden. Frida darts ahead of me, almost at a skip, and that's when I notice she's not wearing any shoes.

I try to catch up with her. "What's with the bare feet, Frida?"

"It connects me with the earth, you know?" She glances over her shoulder and smiles. "When I go barefoot, I feel like a goddess. You should try it!"

"No way."

"Worried about stepping in something?"

"No. I just love shoes," I say.

This makes her laugh. "Maybe a summer spent with me will change all that."

"I don't know," I say, struggling to keep up in my three-inch heels, "I *really* love shoes."



A few hours later, I'm sunbathing on the deck of Frida's boat, a coconut water in one hand and *Cosmo* in the other. The sky is turquoise, dotted with clouds, and waves lap against the side of the boat, making my ice cubes clink. Stockholm's old town stretches in front of us, the houses painted a rainbow of colors. There's a blue-gray one I really like. I've been looking for a vest in that color for ages.

Frida's sitting next to me, legs twisted into the lotus position, staring into space. "I'm really into clouds at the

moment, Kat. I've become a *cloud-spotter*." She takes a sip of her drink. "Look at that one." She points up at the sky. "It looks like—"

"Cotton balls?" I suggest. "A sheep?"

"I was thinking, two sea horses kissing?"

"Yeah, maybe." While Frida cloud-spots, I fashion-spot. "Don't you love these earrings?" I turn around my magazine and hold it up for her. "Hey, when can we go shopping? When I visited with Mum last year, we went to this shop where *all* the clothes were white."

"Well, I guess we'll need to go soon, before the shops shut."

"I can wait until tomorrow," I say, suppressing the urge to jump up and start getting my stuff together.

"We're catching the early boat tomorrow. I want us to be on the first one that leaves for Stråla."

"What?" I sit up and the Stockholm skyline wobbles. All this cloud-spotting and sun must have gone to my head. "Where are we going tomorrow?"

"To Stråla, the island. I want to get the boat that leaves at eight."

"We're going to an island tomorrow?"

"Didn't you know?" Frida puts down her drink. "Kat, are you telling me your mum didn't mention Stråla?"

"Frida, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Your mum is hopeless," she says, laughing. "Stråla is the most beautiful island in the world." Her eyes widen. "It's so peaceful. Totally isolated."

"Isolated? How isolated?"

“It will take us over three hours to get there. It’s miles out in the archipelago. One of the most distant islands.”

“Are there any shops?” I ask. If I’m honest, this is sounding like a pretty boring day trip.

“Sure! A wonderful village shop that sells *the best* cinnamon rolls.”

“Any cafés . . . restaurants . . . people?”

“One café and a few people,” says Frida, laughing, “but you’re going to love it, Kat. It’s so relaxing. I went to stay there last year, and it *transformed* me. When I got back to Stockholm, I immediately booked the cabin for the whole summer.”

I drop my magazine on the deck and pull off my sunglasses. “The *whole* summer?”

“That’s right. The isolation fills me with creative energy. I’m going to keep making jewelry while I’m there.”

“But what about me, Frida? You do know I’m supposed to be staying with you for, like, *weeks*.”

“You will be staying with me . . . on Stråla.”

“For a whole month?” I ask. I feel sweat breaking out on the back on my neck.

“That’s right.” Her smile fades. “I’m really surprised your mum and dad didn’t tell you, Kat. They should have.”

“Yes,” I say. “They should.” She reaches out for my hand. I feel sick. “But what will I do all day?” I think back to family holidays we spent in the countryside in Sweden. “Swim? Go for walks?”

“Exactly! Here.” She reaches into her bag and pulls out a creased brochure. “I picked this up when I was there. You

can read all about Stråla and get excited. It's going to be an adventure!"

On the front of the brochure is a photo showing the silhouette of a person standing on a rock, staring out to sea, the sun setting on the horizon. *Stråla: The Serene Isle*, I read. I flick through the pages. Mum and Dad knew Frida was spending her summer on Stråla and they tricked me into coming to Sweden just to get rid of me. I guess they thought they were being really clever sending me to a tiny, and presumably boy-free, island . . . or maybe they didn't even give it a second thought.

What they've done to me is much, much worse than hiding a boy in your wardrobe.

"Looks good, doesn't it?" Frida's frowning. Already, I'm ruining her summer.

"Yes." I look up from the images of sea, trees, cows, and more sea. "The brochure says we can 'pick mushrooms' and 'walk around the island to see sheep and cows.'"

"We can't pick mushrooms because it's not the right season, but there will be lots of sheep and cows."

"Great," I say. I actually like mushrooms.

Frida stands up. "Don't worry." She pulls me to my feet. "Let's go and get you shopped-out so you can't wait to get to Stråla tomorrow."

Usually I love shopping and I particularly like getting ready to go, imagining the clothes I will see, the colors, the fabrics, the thought of finding something that's just perfect. But as I pull my dress on over my bikini and search around

for my wallet, I feel heavy. The thought of shopping always makes me happy. Why isn't it working today? I find my wallet and check the credit card Mum gave me is in there. She said it was for "emergencies."

"Ready?" Frida's standing on the gangplank.

"Let's go," I say, dropping my wallet in my bag. *Guess what, Mum? I'm going to a tiny island for a month to look at cows.* I'd describe this as an emergency.



I can't sleep. Frida's boat is moored on a noisy quay lined with restaurants and bars. Laughter and music mix irritatingly with Frida's out-of-control wind chimes. Usually, I love falling asleep on her boat—it feels cozy—but tonight the shrieks of laughter keep making me jump. Also, it's *so* hot—apparently, it's the start of a heat wave—so I'm on top of my sheet, sweating in my pants and vest. I've opened the window as far as it'll go, but the air that's coming in is warm and smells of diesel.

Frida tried hard to give me a good evening. After some intense shopping, where I bought emergency high-waisted shorts, yellow sunglasses, lip gloss, water-resistant mascara, a straw hat, and a troll key ring (for Betty), she took me to this elegant café full of girls who looked like models and men with trendy mustaches. So sweet. It wasn't her sort of place, but I loved it. We sat on the terrace on black-leather cubes, drinking iced tea. After a meal in a Thai restaurant we came back to the boat so Frida could finish packing.

Earlier, I tried to ring Mum and Dad, but their phones

were turned off. I guess they're up in the air, flying to LA. Britta didn't answer either and I've just spent the past hour desperately messaging my friends. After I told them that Mum and Dad have sentenced me to a summer of acute boredom on Stråla, they've been trying to cheer me up. For example:

**Betty: I bet Stråla will be packed full of HOT blond Scandi Gods eating meatballs and checkin out ya bikini bod!!**

**Me: I bet it won't.**

**Bea: I've Googled Stråla. Amazeballs. It's beautiful! They have these cows with the biggest brown eyes EVER!**

**Pearl: Shut up and get a tan. At least you're not stuck in this dump.**

I've told them I'm going to ring every single day so I don't get lonely. The boat tips gently from side to side. I turn over my warm pillow and check my phone. No new messages. There's a knock at the door and Frida peeks in. "Still awake, Katrina?"

Only my Swedish relatives ever call me this. "It's so hot," I say, flopping my arms above my head.

"There will be a lovely breeze on Stråla." Mushrooms, cows, sheep . . . and a breeze! Frida squeezes past my bulging suitcase and sits on the end of my bed, arms wrapped around her knees. She's wearing a chunky fisherman's sweater and her face is a strange green color from the lights on the quay.



"I just came to say good night," she says, "and to say sorry you are feeling so sad."

"It's not your fault." I want to tell her that I'm dreading it, that I can't imagine what I'll do every day, that already I feel homesick, actually really and truly sick in my stomach. . . . But if I do that, I'll start to cry. I pull the pillow closer and we listen to a couple outside arguing in Swedish. I can't make it all out, but it's something to do with him "stroking Astrid."

"Hey," says Frida, patting my legs. "It's not what you were expecting, but sometimes that's when the best things take place. Magic happens on Stråla."

"I don't believe in magic," I mutter.

"That's because you've never been to Stråla!" Her eyes glitter. "And Leo might be there. You'll like him."

*Leo.* One word, that's all it takes. I sit up. "Who's Leo?"

"He's a boy I met last time I was there, a bit older than you, I think. His family stays on Stråla."

"What's he like?" I ask, unable to hide the pathetic glimmer of hope I'm feeling.

"You know, he's . . ." Frida hesitates as she tries to find the right word. "*Ypperlig*."

*Ypperlig.* One of those funny words that doesn't really have an English equivalent. Mum always says it about Dad. It means "perfect," in just the right way. The woman's deluded.

*Ypperlig Leo*, on the other hand . . .

"Plus," says Frida, kneeling up on my bed to peer out of

the porthole, “in a few days’ time there will be a full moon, and then, gradually, it will disappear until it’s completely hidden. Amazing!” She looks back at me. “It’s a time of new beginnings, Kat, growth and love. It’s called a *dark* moon. Isn’t that beautiful?”

She kneels up a bit higher, trying to get a better view from the porthole. Peeking out below her chunky sweater is her pale pink bottom.

“Frida, I think I can see it. . . . I can see the dark moon!”

“What? Where?” She sticks her head farther out of the porthole.

“Attached to the top of your legs, not covered in a pair of *pants* like it should be.”

“Ha!” Frida laughs. “It’s too hot for underwear.”

“But you’re wearing a sweater.”

“I didn’t want to embarrass you,” she says.

“Thanks.”

“No worries.” She gets up, has a good long embarrassing stretch, then goes to the door. “*Godnatt måne*,” she says. It’s what Mum always says to me at bedtime.

“Good night moon,” I reply.

As soon as she’s gone, the homesick feeling creeps back. I roll over in the hard bed and think about home. Usually, Britta’s the last one to go to bed. After she’s finished her college work, she watches TV until late to try and relax. I like hearing the muffled sound of the TV. Sometimes, if she’s watching something funny, I hear her laughing. She’s got a really weird, snorty laugh.

I actually miss *Britta*. I try not to think about her horrible bathrobe that she's been wearing since she was twelve, or the way she bites her nails like she's nibbling a nut, because for some strange reason this makes me feel even sadder. Instead, I think about meeting Ypperlig Leo. I imagine lying on a beach, sunbathing in my Roxy bikini, and a shadow falling over me. I peer over the top of my (new yellow) sunglasses and see a tall blond Scandi God.

"I'm Leo," he says, gazing into my eyes. Clearly, he thinks I'm beautiful. It's love at first sight.

The boat sways and suddenly my fantasy Leo is wearing Britta's gray bathrobe. Annoying. I replace the bathrobe with board shorts and a ripped chest and I make him say, "Do you need some help with that sunscreen?" But then Leo starts to bite his nails and snorty-laugh, so I give up trying to control my mind and fall asleep.

# FOUR

“Next stop, Stråla!” says Frida as the boat pulls away from the dock. The horn blasts and thick gray smoke pours out of the funnel. We’re sitting on the deck at the back of the boat, our feet resting on chairs, faces tilted to the sun. For the past two hours we’ve been cruising between islands, as the boat picks up and drops off vacationers. It looks like we’re the only passengers left. I take this as a bad sign.

“Time for *fika*?” asks Frida. She’s big on Swedish traditions, including having coffee and cake at eleven on the dot.

“Sure, but can I have Coke instead of coffee?”

She rolls her eyes. “Okay, but it’s all wrong.” She sets off across the deck, clinging to the backs of chairs to keep her balance. “You’re fifty percent Swedish, Kat,” she calls back. “You need to embrace your inner Swede!”

I lean back in my chair and shut my eyes. The vibrations from the engine are making me feel sleepy. Suddenly, I

remember that I haven't done my nails and I rummage in my bag for my makeup. Frida rushed me this morning and when I got out of the shower, she was ready to go. I didn't even have a chance to straighten my hair.

By the time she comes back with our drinks, I've applied two messy coats of "Alexa Cashmere."

"Pretty color," she says.

I hold my hand out in front of me. My nails are a soft pinky-white. "It goes with the sea," I say.

"You're just like your mum. She's good with colors." Mum paints watercolor pictures. I can only paint nails. I got a D for my last piece of art homework. As we sip our drinks, I get out my phone. "You'd better use it quickly," says Frida. "You'll lose reception soon."

"I only have two bars. I'll wait until we get to the island."

"Nope." Frida holds her cup in the air as we're rocked by a wave. "Can't do that. There's no reception on the island."

"What?" I stare at her. "Are you sure? Doesn't everywhere in the *world* have reception now?" My voice rises with panic. "An eighty-year-old man climbed Everest and called his daughter from the top. It's true. We saw it in geography. If Everest has reception, then Stråla must have it."

Frida shakes her head. "No reception. You're going to have a holiday from technology. Isn't that exciting?"

"Frida, once I left my phone in my locker at school and when I realized, I *cried*." Frida laughs. I don't think she realizes this isn't supposed to be a funny story. "How will I talk to my friends?"

“You can write to them. The postal service is excellent. Letters get to the UK in three days, and they can send letters to you.”

I look down at my phone. One bar left. Do my friends even know how to write a letter?

“Quick, Frida,” I say. “I need the address.” As I write my text, the single bar on my phone keeps vanishing and reappearing. **No phone reception on Stråla. DISASTER. Please, please, please send me a letter TODAY.** I add the address and then sign off: **Don’t forget me!! Kat xxxxxx**

I send the message to Bea, Betty, and Pearl, although there’s almost zero chance Pearl will write to me. She doesn’t even write in school. The single bar disappears. I stare at the screen. One, two, three minutes pass. My phone is useless, just a great big watch. I sip my Coke and keep glancing down at it, forgetting that nothing will appear. To stop myself, I shove it in my bag.

“Oh, look, Kat!” Frida leaps to her feet and peers over the rail, her skirt blowing in the wind. “I can see Stråla.”

I stand next to her and she points to a distant island. Until now, there have been so many islands in the archipelago that it’s almost been crowded, but Stråla looks like it’s the last one. It’s a lump of pine trees and gray rock. That is it. Beyond Stråla is the open sea, and beyond that . . . I don’t know. Finland, I guess.

Mum and Dad have sent me to the end of the world.



“It’s so wonderful to be back,” says Frida, as we pull the last pieces of our luggage off the dock. An old man was waiting for us and now he starts to chuck our bags into a trailer attached to his scooter. He’s wearing a blue cap pulled low on his head and a yellow tracksuit that is so seventies it’s actually cool. His brown face is covered in deep wrinkles. My suitcase won’t quite fit so he starts pounding it with his fist.

“Careful,” I say. “My straighteners are in there.” He stops what he’s doing and turns to stare at me. “They’re GHD . . . IV . . . the jade ones.” He blinks, slowly, and continues to stare like I’m speaking in a foreign language, which I suppose I am.

Frida is crouched on the floor picking some wild flowers. She looks up. “This is my niece Kat,” she says in Swedish. “She’s English.”

The old man nods as if this explains everything. “Otto,” he growls. Then he turns around and carries on pounding my case until it fits in the gap.

Once everything is loaded onto the trailer, Frida’s guitar balanced on the top, we set off along the path. It was Frida’s idea to bring the guitar. She says I can play to her in the evenings while she meditates. So depressing.

Otto drives at a snail’s pace so that he can answer all of Frida’s questions about Judit’s chickens and Alvar’s new shed. “You know, Kat,” says Frida, switching to English, “Otto’s scooter is the only vehicle on the island.” We’re walking along a sandy path through a forest. “He’s just been telling me about the plans for the festival tomorrow.”

“Festival?” My ears prick up, although I know we’re not talking Glastonbury here.

“I forgot to tell you about it.” Frida links arms with me. “Tomorrow there will be a little festival on the island, the Solsken Festival. Do you know what *solsken* means?”

Of course I know what *solsken* means—Mum’s relatives love testing my language skills, but I never play along. “Awesome famous rock bands?” I say.

“No, ‘sunshine,’ but there will be a band playing.”

“My band,” says Otto, speaking in heavily accented English.

“And a disco,” Frida adds.

“My disco,” Otto says. “I run all the discos on Stråla.”

“Oh,” I say. He takes his eyes off the path and looks at me, like he’s waiting for me to say something. “You must like music,” I add.

He grunts, then says, “Sometimes Leo helps me. He’s arriving soon.” Then, with a roar, he accelerates ahead of us and disappears around the bend.

“Ypperlig Leo,” I say under my breath.

“What?” Frida asks, tucking a flower behind her ear.

“Oh, nothing. Just daydreaming.”



It doesn’t take long to get to the cabin Frida’s rented. Like most cabins in Sweden, it’s small and square and painted red and white. Unlike most cabins in Sweden, it’s falling apart. One of the windows is cracked and paint is peeling off the



wood in long curling strips. A scruffy garden of dry grass leads to a pebbly beach.

Otto swings our bags onto the porch. *Crunch*, Frida's silver furnace for making jewelry lands on my case, followed by a huge bag of groceries and then the guitar. Frida and I rush to help with the rest of our stuff before anything is broken. "Okay," Otto says, dropping a set of keys in Frida's hands. "Enjoy." Then he frowns and stares at the horizon for a moment before stomping back to his scooter and driving up the track.

The sound of the engine fades and we stand in silence. Frida breathes deeply. "Perfect," she says.

"Mm," I say, which is as close as I can get to the truth without hurting her feelings.

"Come on. I'll show you around." She unlocks the door, but it's stuck in the frame. She kicks it until it swings open.

I peer into the gloomy room. "Are you sure we'll both fit in there?"

"You're so funny," she says. "This was Otto's family's cabin. When he was a boy, six of them used to stay here every summer." I follow her inside. The walls are made of rough wooden planks and the floor is cracked concrete with faded rag rugs thrown over it. There's a stove in one corner and a table covered in a checked cloth. The whole place looks like it should be in a museum. "Let's get some air in here." Frida pulls back the lace curtains and flings open the windows.

She points to two doors. "My room and the shower

room,” she says. “You’re upstairs.” I can’t see any stairs. Then I spot a hole in the ceiling and a ladder leaning against the wall.

Taking care not to chip my nail polish, I prop the ladder against the hatch and climb into the attic. I step into a tiny room and the roof slopes so dramatically that I can only stand up in the middle. It’s boiling up here. I push open the window. The floor and ceiling—there are no walls—were painted white a long time ago and there’s another stripy rug on the floor. The bed is a double mattress. That’s it. Except for a light, there is *nothing* else in the room. No mirror, no wardrobe, no outlets.

No outlets!

“Wahooo!” yells Frida. Through the window, I see a streak of pink flash down the beach and crash into the sea. Frida’s first skinny dip of the holiday. She floats on her back, kicking in circles. “*Hej!*” she calls out, seeing me at the window.

“Frida, does the cabin have electricity?”

“No. Just a gas stove and paraffin lamps.” So when the batteries run out this means no phone, no iPad, no iPod, and no *straighteners*. Without straighteners, I look like Britta!

“Fancy a swim?” Frida shouts.

I shake my head. My chest aches. The cabin is so dark, so small and dusty, and I’ve just discovered that I can’t use any of the things I love. I don’t even have anything to read. The only entertainment I have with me that doesn’t require electricity is one copy of *Cosmo*. And makeup. How am I going to

survive a whole month here? This room is suffocating me. I can't bear to be in here for another minute.

"I'm going to go for a walk," I call out, possibly for the first time in my life.

"Take as long as you like," Frida says, her eyes shut. "There are no rules here."

# FiVE

I grab the brochure that Frida gave me and set off along the winding path. I need something to do. I need to *buy* something. I'll go to the shop. An ice cream will make me feel better.

At the top of the path, I stop and look at the map. It is so simple it could be a joke. There are two “roads” on Stråla: one that goes around the edge of the island, and one that cuts across the middle. On the opposite side is the buzzing heart of the island: the Beach Deck Café, a shop, a youth hostel, and a hotel. I decide to walk around the edge of the island, guessing that I'll end up by the café in a couple of hours. I haven't a clue what I'll do this afternoon. Probably read *Cosmo* . . . or go to sleep.

Twenty minutes later, I'm standing outside the café. It's shut. I've explored half of the island in twenty minutes, leaving me twenty-eight and a half days to explore the other half.

On the way, I passed a few people carrying rolled-up towels, but that was it. Oh, and lots of trees. And some rocks. I didn't even see any cows. Still, the empty café looks surprisingly okay. It has a deck stretching over the sea, long benches topped with white cushions, and a chalkboard advertising *kaffedrinkar*, *pommes*, and *alkoholfritt*. I don't know what *alkoholfritt* are, but I know Pearl would like them.

I quickly check out the harbor in case any of the boats look like they belong to billionaires (nope), then walk across a grassy area the map says is the *mötesplats*. A notice board advertises tomorrow's Solsken Festival, which kicks off at three with the Otto Orkester Dansband, with Disco Otto taking over at 9 p.m. Through the trees, I see a plastic polar bear licking an ice cream. The shop! Stuff to buy . . . lip gloss . . . magazines . . . who knows!

It's cool and dark inside. I drift up and down the aisles, wishing my friends were here with me. There are so many bizarre things they'd love: bubblegum and popcorn-flavor sweets, a banana lollipop you can peel, packets of cookies that cost *four pounds*, and, best of all, *tampongs*. *Tampongs* are tampons!

Quickly, I take a selfie of me holding a box of *tampongs*. I wish I could send it to my friends. We could start a band called the Tampongs. Obviously, Betty and Bea would have to stop hating Pearl, but it could happen. I want to tell them this right now. Then I remember I can't. Ahhhhhh!

I stare at my useless crappy phone, then look up and see a shelf stacked with stationery. I pick up a pack of paper and

envelopes decorated with hedgehogs. That's what I'll do this afternoon: I'll write letters to my friends and tell them that we're going to form a groundbreaking girl rock band called the Tampongs!

I get a Hello Kitty popsicle out of the freezer and go to pay.

There's a small line at the register. An old lady wearing jeans is resting on the counter, talking about herring, and standing behind her are a boy and a girl who are arguing over whether to buy a bag of Flamin' Hot Cheez Cruncherz or a tube of RäkOst paste. I'm pretty lazy with my Swedish, but an argument is always worth translating.

"I'm a vegetarian, you *arsel*!" yells the girl, as she tries to pry the paste out of the boy's hands. From the tutting of the jeans woman, I'm guessing *arsel* is not a nice word. She picks up her shopping basket and leaves the shop.

Next, the boy calls the girl a *dumskalle*—which definitely isn't a nice word—drops a note on the counter and walks out of the shop carrying the RäkOst.

The girl stares at the Cheez Cruncherz she's still holding.

"Are you going to buy those?" asks the lady behind the counter.

"I haven't got any money, Juni." The girl looks at the chips then turns to me, opens her eyes wide, and says, "Can you lend me ten kronor?" She blinks. Her eyes are lined with very badly applied purple eyeliner. "I'll pay you back."

"Erm . . . okay," I say, handing her the coins.

"Hey, you're English!" she says, quickly switching

languages. While she pays for her chips, I check out her look. She's wearing pink high-tops, denim culottes, and a T-shirt that says "Awesome and Beefy." I pay for my popsicle and we leave the shop. "So, hi, I'm Nanna," she says as she rips open the chip bag, "and that moron squirting paste in his mouth is Sören. My twin. Can you believe we're twins?"

"Well, I—"

"I know. Shocking. We look *nothing* like each other." They look exactly like each other: Sören is Nanna, but he's wearing less makeup. Even their curly blond hair is cut the same way. "Who are you?" Nanna asks.

"Me? I'm Kat."

"*Weird* name," says Nanna, which is so hypocritical it's not even worth mentioning. "Chip? You wanna walk with me?"

"Okay," I say, because Nanna is the only teenager I've met on Stråla. Even so, I'm a bit worried about being seen with her.

Sören disappears into the trees. "He's shy," says Nanna. "Seriously. He'll probably never speak to you."

As we walk, I tell her that I'm spending the summer on the island. "I've only been here a couple of hours," I say, "and I'm already *so* bored."

"Really?" she says, pushing her little pink glasses up her nose.

"Well, there isn't much to do."

"There's *loads* to do! I've been coming here most of my life. C'mon, let's jump rocks." She leads me off the path and down to the sea, and before I know it, I'm rock-jumping. Nanna flies

off ahead of me, leaping from one huge gray rock to another. I hang back because I'm *fifteen*, and clearly this will destroy my nails (finger and toe). But then Nanna starts talking to me and I have to catch up with her to hear what she's saying.

It turns out, jumping on big rocks is dangerous in flip-flops. And *really* tiring. Nanna must have stronger thighs than me. She jumps around like a monkey while I crawl after her. It doesn't take her long to tell me her entire life story. She's thirteen and staying on the island in a cabin at the youth hostel. She's "mad chatty" and Sören's "mad quiet"; oh, and she loves "mad cool" fashion, black-and-white films, gerbils, and cold milk, but not orange juice because it's too "spicy."

"I can't jump any more," I say, pulling myself onto a huge rock and flopping back. Nanna sits next to me and stops talking for a few blissful moments.

She can't last long. "You see that rock," she says, pointing out to sea. I force myself to lift up my head. The rock is quite a long way out and it looks like the back of a whale. "Sometimes I get phone reception on that rock."

I sit up properly and shade my eyes against the sun. The rock doesn't look like a gray lump any more: it's shining golden in the afternoon sun. "Nanna," I say, "I am so glad I met you today."

"Really?" She grins and hugs her knees. "Me, too! And we can go to Solsken together. Can you do the Little Frog dance? I can teach you how to do it!"



“My mum’s Swedish,” I say. “I can do the Little Frog dance. How long does it take to swim out to that rock?”

“About ten minutes. There are no currents. It’s totally safe.”

“Ten minutes . . .” I’m not a bad swimmer. Along with playing the guitar, it’s one of the few things I can do better than Britta.

“This summer is going to be so cool,” says Nanna, wriggling a bit closer to me. “I’ve met you, and Leo is coming for Solsken.”

“Leo?” I say, as if it’s the first time I’ve ever heard the name.

“Wait until you meet him. He’s really kind and, you know, into stuff. Kayaking, swimming, camping. The summer is always better when he’s around.” She starts to throw little stones into the sea. “Plus, he’s *skön*.”

“You mean, he’s sweet?”

“Yeah. He’s yummy.” She grins at me. “You know, hot.”

Save the important information until last, Nanna!



That evening, over spaghetti and soy meatballs, Frida tells me about Solsken Fest. We’re sitting opposite each other at the table with the checked tablecloth. For the third time this evening, the paraffin lamp has gone out, so the room is lit with candles. “The island gets busy for a couple of days,” says Frida, her wavy hair making crazy shadows on the wall. “Every bed

is taken, and tents are pitched all over the place. It's an excuse for another Midsummer, really."

Midsummer is a big deal in Sweden, almost as big as Christmas. On the longest day of the year, everyone heads to the countryside to dress up in floaty clothes, drink loads of vodka, and dance around a maypole. In the evening, they drink even more vodka and keep dancing. When I was little, I loved it. Especially the Little Frog dance.

"Will there be flower garlands?" I slap a mosquito that's landed on my foot.

"Sure, some people will make them. You and Britta used to look so cute making yours together." Frida takes a sip of wine and her eyes glitter over the edge of her glass.

Nice. I'll work a garland into my outfit. I'm willing to do hippy chic for the right occasion. "Pickled herring? Bonfires? Barbecue?" I ask.

"Probably," she says. "Last year it was just *magic*. The sun didn't set until eleven o'clock at night and the party went on till morning. So romantic . . ."

But I've stopped listening. Instead, I'm visualizing everything in my suitcase, trying to decide what to wear. I need to lay some clothes out on my bed. "I think I might have a shower and turn in," I say, taking my plate over to the sink.

"Really? I was thinking you could play the guitar. Or how about a sauna?"

"This place has a sauna?"

"In the shed by the dock. It's heated by a wood burner, so I'll need to get it going."

“Maybe another night.” Will I be too hot in jeans? I could wear my skinny jeans with a really loose shirt. “Frida, is there any hot water here?” I’ve got the tap turned on full to wash up, but the water is still icy.

“Sometimes.”

“But not tonight.”

“No. Hey, jump in the sea if you want a wash. That’s what I’m going to do.”

I try to scrub at the greasy marks on my plate. Another mosquito buzzes around my ear. “No, thanks.” I leave my kind-of clean plate on the draining board and go to the ladder. “*Godnatt måne*,” I say, but I don’t think Frida hears me. She’s collecting logs from a basket under the sink and singing a song about elves.



I’ve decided what I’m going to wear to Solsken. I look at the short flowery dress, thin white belt, and cropped cotton sweater that I’ve laid over my bed and I know it looks good. The only problem, of course, is shoes. I’ve brought five pairs with me, but none of them look right. I decide to sort it out in the morning.

Before I turn out the light, I get out my hedgehog paper and write two letters: one for Betty and Bea, and one for Pearl.

Dear Beatty,

Sorry you have to share a letter, but I can’t be bothered to write two. I am so sad. I’m on Stråla and it’s TINY.

There is nothing here except rocks and trees. Seriously, there isn't even any sand on the beaches. As far as I can tell, there are two teenagers on the island and they are both freaks. Well, the girl is. I don't think I've laughed since I last saw you two. Tomorrow there is going to be a festival with a band and a disco and even though I know it's going to be the most tragic event in the world (even more tragic than Hattie's party when her dad flicked the light switch on and off to make strobe lights) I am actually excited about it.

One interesting thing has happened, or might happen. Everyone keeps talking about this boy called Leo who is turning up tomorrow. He's obviously some massive big deal on Stråla. The word "hot" has been used to describe him. I will be ready!

PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE write to me.

Love, Kat xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

P.S. Forgot to mention the most important thing: I might be able to text or call you if I can swim out to a rock. There is the small possibility that I will drown doing it, but it's a risk I'm willing to take.

Hey Pearl,

This is a letter . . . bet you never thought I'd write you one of these!?! Anyways, this island I'm staying on is smaller than Bluewater . . . also, it has 299 fewer shops than Bluewater. Let me make this clear: it has ONE shop. But this one shop does sell loads of licorice products

(chocolate, chewing gum, cakes) and I remembered that you like Licorice Allsorts, so I thought you might like to know that I have access to licorice everything.

I hope your summer is significantly less crappy than mine.

Love, Kat

P.S. If you write back to me, I will bring you back some licorice babies. That is a promise.

I turn on my phone for a nanosecond to get their addresses, then put the letters by the attic hatch. I'll mail them in the morning.

After I've turned off the light, I open my window as wide as it will go and lean out, trying to find some cool air. The sea is inky blue and so still it could be a painting. Small waves must be breaking somewhere because I can hear them. Next to the dock is a shed. Smoke twists from its chimney and the window glows orange. I can see Frida's pink shape moving around inside.

I look up at the sky and try to imagine Bea, Betty, and Pearl back at home, in our town, and what they might have done today. Maybe Bea and Betty met up and got milkshakes. Pearl would have gotten up late and spent hours online. She has all these different names she uses. Some I know about—like Peargirl and Peawitch—but she has loads of others she keeps secret. Sometimes, she spends entire lessons telling lies to random people online.

I can't believe yesterday morning I was at home. Right

now, I feel like I'm on another planet. The moon is low in the sky, round and yellow, like it's cut out of paper. I lie back on my mattress, the wrong way, so I can stare through the window at the stars.

Bea, Betty, and Pearl can see those stars, so can my mum and dad all the way around the world in America. This doesn't make me feel better. My heart races. I feel tiny, like I've disappeared. I force myself to think about all the pairs of shoes I've left at home. Blue Converse . . . ballet flats . . . silver flats . . . rain boots . . . Nikes . . . suede ankle boots (brown) . . . suede ankle boots (black) . . . I work through every pair I own and then I start again at the beginning.

My eyes start to close. Shoes work so much better than sheep.