

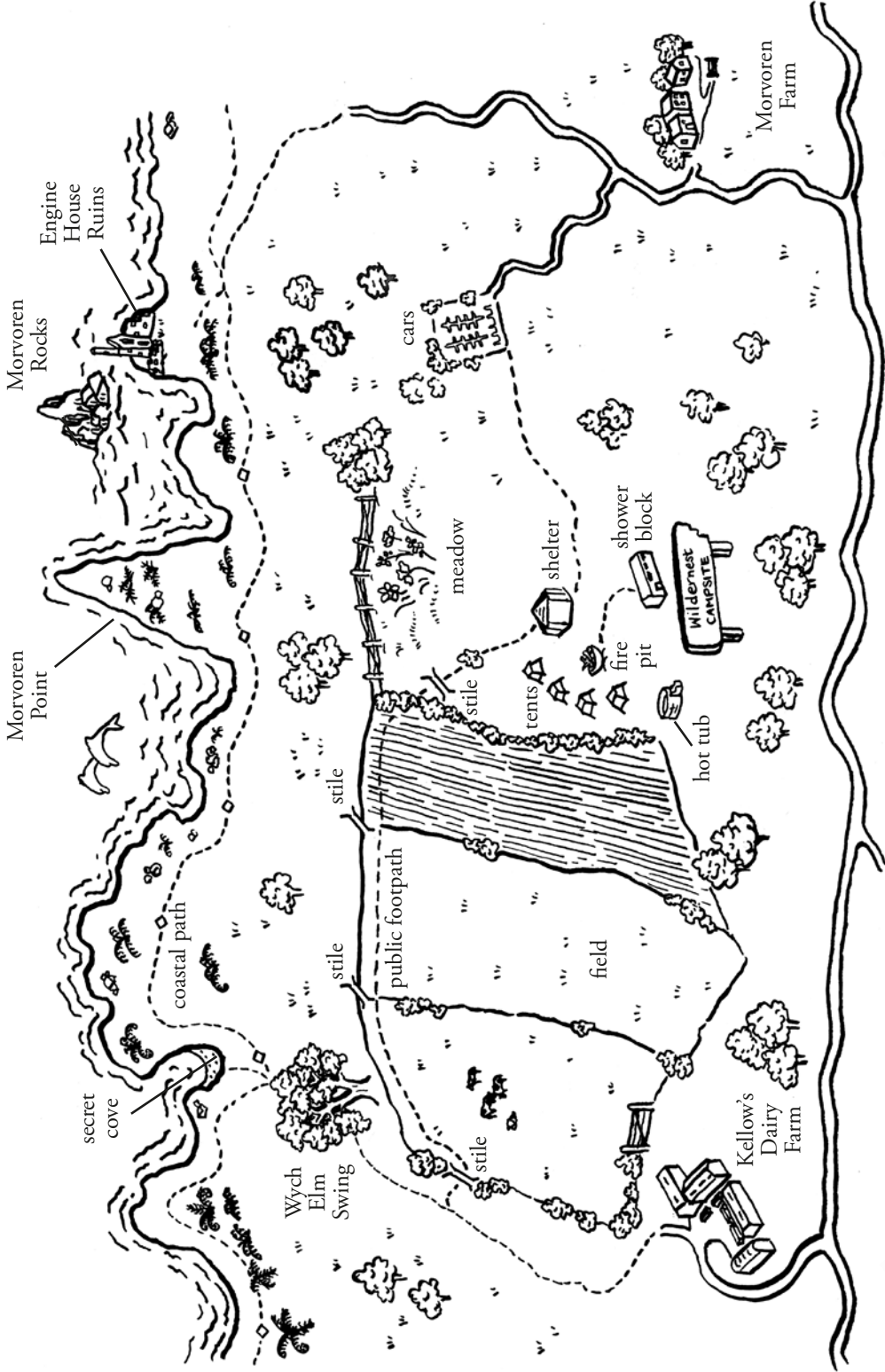
HANNAH
RICHELL

THE
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Morvoren Rocks

Engine House Ruins

Morvoren Point

coastal path

secret cove

Wych Elm Swing

public footpath

stile

stile

stile

meadow

tents

shelter

shower block

WILDERNESS CAMPSITE

fire pit

hot tub

field

stile

Kellow's Dairy Farm

Morvoren Farm

ST IVES →

← LAND'S END

PROLOGUE

The girl stands in grey morning light, her feet perched at the crumbling cliff edge. Below her, waves smash against jagged rocks, granite shards rising like decaying teeth from the foaming sea. At her back are fear and despair, and his words, urging her on.

She tries to distract herself with the details around her. The roar of the ocean. The gusting wind ripping at the bracken. The small, white flowers growing at her feet. The loud, too-fast thump of her heart. Only it's impossible to focus; she can't seem to fix anything in her mind. Nothing can compete with his voice – all his ugly words bearing down on her. *Do it*, he says. *What are you waiting for?*

The ledge shifts beneath her toes. A fragment of earth crumbles and falls, vanishing into the swirling water far below. Carried on the wind, a bird cry rises high and mournful. She lifts her gaze and sees a gull turn in the sky above. Free.

Do it now. His voice is louder, closer. Goosebumps rise as if his words curl through the air and graze the back of her neck. *What are you waiting for?*

HANNAH RICHELL

There is no escape. Nowhere else to go.

She closes her eyes and unfurls her arms, stretching them wide as if she too has wings to rise and join the bird hovering above. With a final breath, she launches out into the void. Fall or fly – she no longer cares.

DOMINIC

Sunday afternoon

He has no idea how long he's been sitting there. There's no clock in the room, just a table, three chairs and a single, narrow window set high into the wall – too high to offer anything but a glimpse of the blank grey sky outside. It could have been twenty minutes since the police ushered him in and asked him to 'wait here, please'; it could have been far longer. Dominic knows in moments of heightened stress that seconds can feel like minutes and minutes like hours, though the vending machine cup of tea someone brought him cooled ages ago. He also knows that every time he thinks about what might be happening outside this room, he feels a painful constriction in his chest, a tight band pressing vice-like against his lungs, making breathing hard.

He would be more help out there. Not shut away in a hospital consulting room, sitting in his damp clothing, waiting to answer questions – questions he's certain he won't have the answers to. But the two detectives had been insistent – he was to assist with their enquiries. Almost, he thinks, as if they suspect him of something.

The door opens and Dominic springs from his chair. ‘Any news?’ he asks, his eyes darting from the lead police detective in her grey suit to her burly, blond colleague just behind.

‘Nothing yet I’m afraid, Mr Davies,’ she says. ‘Take a seat please.’

Dominic hesitates. The last thing he wants to do is sit. ‘I think I’d be more use—’

The detective raises her hand. ‘We’ve got a team scouring the site now. As soon as we know anything – anything at all – we’ll be sure to let you know. Right now, Mr Davies, we need you to take us through everything you can remember.’ She gestures towards his chair, before pulling out her own with a screech, slapping a thin, cardboard file on the table between them. The second officer takes his seat, his huge frame swamping the small plastic chair. He opens a notebook and uncaps a pen.

Dominic eyes the chair with frustration. He wants action and consequences, not talking and note-taking, but sensing the resolve rising off the female detective, he takes the seat.

Lawson, he remembers. DI Sue Lawson. She’d introduced herself earlier. Her younger colleague, the rosy-cheeked young man with the bleach-blond hair and shoulders that would be better suited to a muddy rugby shirt than a starched police uniform, is Barrett. No, Barnett. DC Barnett.

Lawson nods and Barnett starts the recording device resting on the table between them.

‘To reiterate,’ states Barnett, clearing his throat, ‘your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary. You can

leave at any time, though of course,' he adds, 'the more information we can gather about the weekend's events, the more successful we are likely to be with our investigation.'

'I've already told you,' says Dominic, 'it's not me you need to talk to. It's that kid. He's got something to do with it, I know it.'

Another nod from Lawson. 'As I said, we'll be talking to everyone involved.'

'They're always making excuses for him, but trust me, there's something wrong with that boy.'

'Mr Davies,' DI Lawson leans forward and fixes him with her level gaze, 'I hear your concerns. I know how worried you must be.' Her eyes, he notices, are an intriguing colour, grey like sea pebbles, an almost perfect match for the streak running through her short, dark hair. 'But I'm afraid we do urgently require your assistance. We'd be grateful for your *full* cooperation.'

There's a part of Dominic that can't help wondering if they are deriving some small pleasure from this. It can't be every day they get to interview someone off the telly. This whole incident will no doubt provide a flutter of excitement at the station. *Guess who we had in the chair today.* God forbid this should reach the press. He should probably call Barry. Give him the heads-up in case the tabloids come sniffing for another salacious Dominic Davies story. They'd certainly raked him over the coals a few years back, around the time of his divorce. He frowns, glancing between the two detectives. 'Do I need to call my lawyer?'

'Would you *like* legal representation?' Barnett glances up from his notepad, pen poised.

It's like falling into one of those gritty crime dramas, Dominic thinks, the kind Tanya loves to watch on a Sunday night, curled up on the sofa in her pyjamas with a glass of wine in her hand and her phone on her lap. He's always thought them silly – overblown and too predictable – and yet here he sits, in an airless interview room with a recording device on the table between them, blinking its red light like an evil eye. 'No,' he says, 'of course I don't need my lawyer. Let's just get on with it.' He folds his arms across his chest. 'What do you want to know?'

Lawson leans back in her seat and nods again at Barnett to continue.

'It was a reunion amongst friends? Four families meeting up for the May Day weekend?'

'Yes.'

Barnett checks back through his notes. 'And there were fifteen in your party?'

Dominic considers this for a moment, counting in his head. 'Well . . . we were sixteen, if you include the baby.' He reaches for the plastic cup in front of him before remembering it's cold and undrinkable. At the sight of the brown film floating on its surface, he slides the cup away.

'You were all invited to stay at Wildernest?' Barnett is consulting his notes again. 'The site belonging to Max and Annie Kingsley, located out beyond the Cape, near Morvoren Point?'

'That's right. I'd just wrapped filming on the latest series of the show, so it was good timing. *Star Search*,' he adds. 'You've probably seen it.'

Barnett nods but the female detective maintains her

inscrutable stare. Dominic can't hide his smile. He knows her type. Wants to pretend she's above reality TV. Doesn't like to admit she's one of the ten million viewers tuning in religiously each week, cheering on her favourite contestants, texting her votes.

'No matter,' he says, with a small wave. 'Max and Annie had invited us for the bank holiday to road-test their new "glamping" business.' He lifts his hands and emphasizes the apostrophes. 'You know the sort of thing. All the rage: save-the-planet, sustainable eco-tourism. Max's dream.'

'I understand the Kingsleys had relocated to Cornwall last year, with their son?'

He nods. 'To tell you the truth, none of us quite believed it when they announced they were leaving London. We were supportive, of course. You have to be, don't you? It's not exactly the done thing to tell your friends that you think they're making a terrible mistake.'

'Why did you think it a mistake?'

Dominic lets out a sharp laugh. 'They'd spent years building up their architectural firm, making it a success. Only last year they won a prestigious RIBA award for the "Grand Designs"-style makeover I commissioned from them on my pad. It was a big deal. It got a lot of press.' He looks at the officers in turn, but Lawson still refuses to give an inch. 'Anyway, they did a great job. Knocked out the back of the entire house and built on a huge glass extension. Very cool. Very minimal. But it wasn't just the fact they were giving up successful careers,' he adds. 'They had their own place, right on Clapham Common . . . a good school for Kip . . . London at their feet, and they

were throwing it all away to move to the sticks to do what?’ He throws them both an incredulous look. ‘Set up a camping business?’ Dominic shakes his head. ‘It seemed madness to me. But I suppose they had form for springing big life decisions on us all.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘Well, the kid. The adoption.’

‘By “kid”, you mean their son, Kip?’

He nods, glancing from one police officer to the other, waiting for them to delve further, but Lawson, to his irritation, doesn’t bite. ‘How about you take us back to Friday. I gather you set out from Hertfordshire around lunchtime?’

‘Yes, we left Harpenden at one.’

‘We being . . .?’

‘My wife Tanya and my kids, Scarlet, Felix and Phoebe.’ Dominic stretches his legs out in front of him, notices the rip in his trousers and the mud-caked hems, and quickly folds them back again.

‘Everyone was happy about the trip?’

He shrugs. ‘I suppose there was some resistance, but I really don’t see how that’s relevant.’

Lawson eyes him. ‘We’re simply trying to build a clear picture of the weekend. Given the trauma you’ve all faced and the questions that still need to be answered, we need to be as thorough as possible.’

‘Personally, I thought the invitation sounded fun,’ he says, addressing Lawson, holding her gaze. ‘After the pressures of filming, I was looking forward to some downtime with old friends, a long weekend in the great outdoors. I assumed the kids would love it too, but you know how

it is with teenagers these days.’ He glances between them. ‘The merest hint of a few hours without Wi-Fi and panic sets in.’

DI Lawson nods. ‘Carry on, Mr Davies. This is helpful.’

Dominic narrows his eyes. ‘You said you’re talking to everyone?’

She nods again. ‘We’ve sent an officer to the farmhouse. Family Liaison.’

‘Good,’ says Dominic. He can’t help wondering what the others will say, how their stories might intersect, how their words might corroborate or contradict. All he can hope for, he supposes, is that when all is said and done, twenty years of friendship still counts for something. ‘Good,’ he says again, raising himself in his chair, tilting his chin, flexing his hands out of the tight fists he hadn’t realized he’d formed, ‘because I’m sure you’ll find we *all* did things this weekend that we regret.’

DI Lawson maintains her level stare, those impenetrable grey eyes boring into him. Dominic is annoyed to find he is the first to look away.

SCARLET

Friday afternoon

If a weekend had ever been designed to ruin someone's life, then it was surely this one. It was bad enough that she was missing Harry Taylor's seventeenth birthday party, but squished in the back of her dad's midlife crisis SUV, jammed in beside Phoebe's booster seat, listening to the tinny hip hop thud emanating from Felix's headphones, with nothing ahead of them but a snaking line of traffic and the promise of three days camping in the middle of nowhere, Scarlet felt a hot rage bubbling inside her.

School was out. She knew it without even checking the time, because her phone had begun to buzz with a near-constant stream of notifications about party arrangements, outfits and gossip, none of which Scarlet could join in with. She eyed her dad in the rear-view mirror. 'I just don't understand why you're forcing *me* to go,' she said, unable to contain her simmering fury a moment longer. 'I could've stayed home.'

'I've already told you why,' said Dominic, meeting her gaze. 'We're going to support Max and Annie.'

They worked so hard on our wonderful renovation. It's our turn to show up for them.'

'But I could've gone to Mum's . . . or Lily's.'

'As I think I stated last night,' Dominic said, 'if you'd proved yourself to be a little more trustworthy in recent weeks, Tanya and I might have considered it. But this is *my* weekend with you and Felix,' he continued. 'I see little enough of you both as it is. There will be other parties, Scarlet. Sometimes you have to put family first.'

Scarlet scowled through the back window, watching the cars in the middle lane disappear behind them as her father accelerated down the fast lane. It was so unfair. There were so many inconveniences to having divorced parents, but nothing quite as annoying as the constant juggle of weekends between her mum and dad, the back-and-forth she and Felix had endured these past seven years since Tanya had arrived on the scene, and which only seemed to grow more intolerable now that her own social life was *finally* getting interesting. Her dad just didn't get it. He still thought of her as his little girl, but she wasn't. She was sixteen, virtually an adult.

Of course there would be other parties, she wasn't stupid, but there wouldn't be another seventeenth for Harry Taylor, the boy who just two days ago had sent her a string of messages, asking if she'd be there. There wouldn't be another black-tie party in a garden marquee, with uniformed waiters circulating with fancy little canapes, a smoke machine, a proper DJ and, by all accounts, enough vodka jelly shots to get the whole of Year Twelve completely off their faces.

‘It’ll be fun,’ Dominic continued. ‘There’ll be a barbecue and a campfire. Nice coastal walks. A beach. Everyone’s going. All the other kids will be there.’

Scarlet met his gaze again in the mirror. ‘That’s my point, Dad.’ She gave an exaggerated shudder. ‘I want to hang out with *my* friends, not a load of annoying little kids and that oddball, Kip.’

‘Scarlet, *be nice*.’

She rolled her eyes. ‘Now you just sound like a slogan on a sexist T-shirt. Telling a girl to “be nice” totally plays into the hands of the patriarchy. You’re telling me to ignore my own feelings to please someone else. Besides,’ continued Scarlet, warming to her theme, ‘since when were you into “being nice”? You’ve built a whole career on being the brutally honest “expert”. I don’t think anyone could argue that you come across as particularly “nice” when you’re judging your contestants on *Star Search*.’

‘You have to admit,’ said Tanya, with a small smirk Scarlet caught in the reflection of the wing mirror, ‘she’s got a point.’

‘Thank you,’ said Scarlet, throwing her a nod of satisfaction. ‘See, *Tanya* gets it.’ She was surprised. She couldn’t imagine Tanya being down with her feminist ideals. Frankly, it was rare for Scarlet and Tanya to agree on anything. Scarlet liked to set herself in opposition to most things involving her stepmother, but she wasn’t going to pass up an opportunity for validation against her father.

‘That’s a TV show. A job. It’s not real life.’

‘So why’s it called “reality TV”?’

‘There’s nothing real about reality TV, darling. You’re smart enough to know that. And as for *being nice*, that has nothing to do with gender,’ said Dominic, adopting a patronising, world-weary tone. ‘It’s about being a decent human being. I’d say the exact same thing to Felix if he was acting like you.’

‘Tell me then,’ Scarlet continued, leaning forward in her seat, ‘since when did “everyone else is going” become a reason for us to do something? Wasn’t it you who asked me just two weeks ago when I got in trouble at school, “If everyone else jumped off a cliff, would you jump too, Scarlet?”’ She mimics him well, slipping into his smooth, broadcaster-approved voice.

‘You’re getting too clever for your own good, young lady.’

‘She’s not *that* clever,’ said Felix, lifting a headphone to join the conversation. ‘If she were, she wouldn’t have been excluded for ten days for having weed in her school bag.’

Scarlet leaned across Phoebe and thumped her brother hard on the arm. ‘Shut up. What would you know?’

‘I know enough to know you don’t take drugs into school, dumbass.’

‘Settle down you two. You’ll wake Phoebe. Anyway, no one’s jumping off any cliffs. This is just a long weekend with some of our oldest friends.’

‘Newsflash Dad: all *my* friends are going to Harry Taylor’s birthday party.’

There was a short silence. Scarlet decided it was time to land her trump card. ‘Anyway, I’m not the only one who’s dreading it. Tanya doesn’t want to go either.’

Tanya turned in the front passenger seat to stare at her. ‘What?’ A telling pink flush bloomed on her cheeks.

Scarlet shrugged. ‘I heard you – on the phone last night.’

Tanya frowned. ‘You shouldn’t eavesdrop on other peoples’ conversations.’

‘See.’ Scarlet threw a triumphant look at her dad. ‘She’s not denying it.’

Tanya turned back to her father. ‘I didn’t say I didn’t want to go.’ She wrestled for the right words. ‘Not exactly. It’s just – it’s camping, isn’t it? Hardly the most relaxing break.’

‘It’s not camping. It’s *gl*-amping,’ Dominic insisted.

‘Changing two letters on a word doesn’t make sleeping outside and peeing in a stinking portaloos any more *gl*-amorous,’ muttered Scarlet.

‘They’re *your* oldest friends,’ Tanya said, after a beat. ‘I don’t have the same history with them to draw upon. All your stories about your university days, the student radio shows you did together, the parties . . . I suppose, sometimes, I feel like a bit of an outsider.’

‘You shouldn’t. They see how happy you make me.’ Scarlet watched as her father reached for Tanya’s hand, pulling it into his lap, the huge diamond ring on her left hand catching the sun falling through the windscreen, refracting back at her like a strobe light. ‘You had a good time at Kira’s fortieth last year, didn’t you?’

Tanya raised her eyebrows and let out a dry laugh. ‘Are we remembering the same weekend?’

Scarlet leaned forward, sensing gossip.

‘We don’t need to worry about a repeat of that,’ Dominic said. ‘Kira’s in a completely different place now.’

A new man. A baby. It's all change, from what I hear. Even better, you won't be the newcomer to the group anymore,' he added. 'Kira's boyfriend should be the one feeling nervous. You're an old timer now.'

'Less of the old, please.' Tanya pursed her lips, seemed about to say something else before sensing Scarlet's craning interest from the back seat. 'Well, we'll see,' was all she said.

Dominic lifted Tanya's hand to his lips. 'I know it's not quite the May Day weekend you would have liked. I'll take you somewhere more luxurious in the summer. But we're going to have fun. I promise.'

Scarlet was about to interject with another sarcastic comment when a wall of red brake lights flared on the motorway ahead. Dominic cursed under his breath and slowed the car until it came to a halt. Phoebe stirred in her booster seat, her blue eyes opening and blinking at the sudden shock of daylight, taking in her surroundings before leaning back against the headrest of her seat.

'Hello sleepy,' Scarlet said.

'Are we nearly there?'

Scarlet shook her head. 'Not yet, but could you please have a word with Bear. He's been snoring *so* loudly.'

Phoebe threw her a drowsy smile and adjusted her teddy tucked in the crook of her arm. 'Bear doesn't snore.'

Scarlet gave her a wink. It was hard to maintain the intensity of her fury when confronted with Phoebe's sweet face. There were so many shitty things about having divorced parents, but one of the few good things about her dad meeting Tanya was her surprise half-sister.

Throughout Tanya's pregnancy, Scarlet had maintained a solid level of disgust at the idea of her dad becoming a father again, but as soon as he'd dragged her to the hospital on that first reluctant visit and placed the baby in her arms, as soon as she had gazed down into Phoebe's red, screwed-up face, seen the dimples in her cheeks and felt her tiny hand curl around her little finger, holding on as if for dear life, all her anger and protest had fallen away. Whatever feelings she had about Tanya and her parents' messy divorce, she had come to accept her half-sister's presence as something inevitable and welcome.

'*Wild Things?*' Phoebe asked, addressing the car.

'Oh god, Pheeb, not again,' protested Scarlet, and even Felix, usually so affable and laid back, let out a deep groan. They had heard the audio book countless times on car journeys, but its appeal never seemed to wane for Phoebe.

'Sure thing, sweetie.' Tanya fiddled with a cable, connecting her phone to the car stereo.

Scarlet fell back against the seat and scrolled through the latest messages on her phone. The last was from Lily.

OMG. You should've heard Caitlin in tutor group today.

Scarlet typed a quick reply. *What??? Tell me.*

She could see Lily was online. Scarlet waited, impatiently watching the 'typing ...' status blink.

She told everyone she was going to get with Harry tonight.

Scarlet's insides clenched. Caitlin was one of the prettiest girls in their year. If Scarlet wasn't there, maybe Harry would go for Caitlin. She chewed her bottom lip as she typed her reply. *No way! Bitch. She knows I like him.* 🙄

THE SEARCH PARTY

Don't worry, I've got your back. I'll stick to him like glue, remind him of you every five minutes.

🙏. This sucks. Wish I was there.

Me too. 😞 I'll send photos.

As the intro music for Phoebe's audio book began to play through the car speakers, Scarlet threw down her phone in disgust.

'All I'm asking,' said Dominic, attempting a last-ditch effort to mollify his captive family, 'is that we try to have some fun ... that you're open to new experiences and making some memories this bank holiday.' He grinned at Scarlet in the mirror. 'I bet you a tenner I'll be driving you back on Monday evening kicking and screaming.'

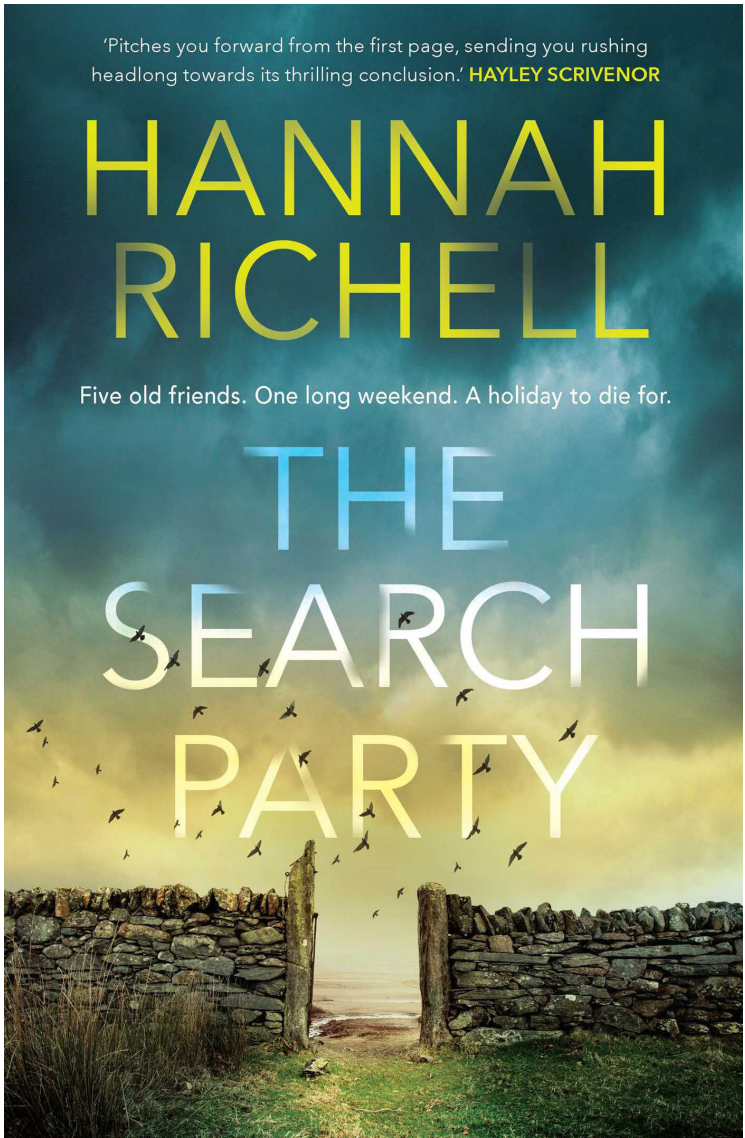
Scarlet turned back to the window with another eyeroll and made a mental note to claim her money on the return journey home.

'Pitches you forward from the first page, sending you rushing headlong towards its thrilling conclusion.' **HAYLEY SCRIVENOR**

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