

CHAPTER 1

Love is ... a madness most discreet
Romeo & Juliet Act 1, Sc i

Lydia's key scraped in the keyhole. Damn! She'd hoped to sneak in quietly, without anyone noticing. She didn't want any awkward questions before she'd got her story straight in her head. She held her breath for a moment, pressed her ear to the door, and then turned the key another half-turn. In its secret place of cogs and pistons, embedded in the wood of the door, she could feel the lock click open. Still Lydia stood there, her arm extended, the key tensed between her fingers, and listened for sounds on the other side of the door. Nothing.

Gratefully, gently, she pushed the door and slipped around it, into the hall. No one called out. No one appeared. Good. She pressed the door closed again behind her and leaned her back against it. Made it.

A giggle rose up in her. She was behaving like a ridiculous character in a detective movie, sneaking into her own house. It was four o'clock in the afternoon, for goodness' sake. It wasn't as though she'd been drinking cider in the park or smoking behind the bicycle sheds. She'd only been to the second-hand CD shop to sell off a bunch of her least favourite CDs and buy a new one with the proceeds. She'd only met Jonathan Walker

there and spent five (fabulous) minutes chatting to him. She'd only agreed to go for a coffee with him tomorrow afternoon in the glitzy seafront cappuccino bar, where the stainless steel equipment gleamed like precious metals and the customers shone like superstars – or so it seemed to Lydia, who didn't shine at all.

There was nothing wrong with meeting Jonathan by chance in a music shop. Nothing wrong, either, she told herself, with agreeing to meet him again. He was stunningly good-looking: high cheekbones, lightly tanned skin, a flop of rich wavy hair over his forehead, widely spaced blue eyes – it was all too good to be true. Lydia had said it herself, six months ago. Anyone who looked like that couldn't possibly be good. Beauty like that was bound to corrupt. Still, no one would have had anything against him, or against Lydia's going to meet him, if it hadn't been for Julia.

But there *was* Julia. There was no getting around that. It was definitely a problem, no matter what way Lydia looked at it.

Julia was Lydia's identical twin. They had the same pale, freckly skin, the same crinkly, red-gold hair, the same grey-green eyes. But that's where the resemblance stopped. With her unruly mane of hair, Julia managed to look as if she didn't own a hairbrush; Lydia wore her hair pinned back with a hair slide or plaited or swinging in a ponytail. Julia wore spangly bracelets and fluorescent boots and tights with Santa Clauses

on them, even in the summer, and mad purple embroidered things that swooshed as she walked and got tangled up in machinery; Lydia preferred jeans with runners and T-shirts most of the time, or else just black trousers and what Julia called ‘sweet little tops’. Julia spent hours on the phone organising her social life; Lydia had friends, but she didn’t much like using the phone.

Officially, Julia was still ‘getting over’ Jonathan. She’d had an amazing though short-lived reign last term as Jonathan’s girlfriend, wandering proudly, slowly, home from school with him, sitting over endless lattes in the cappuccino bar with him. But then somebody else, somebody cleverer, prettier, wittier, blonder and with a neater bum and a navel-revealing dress style and who didn’t have a problem ordering ‘law-tay’ the way they pronounced it on American TV – Julia could never bring herself to do that – had stolen him from right under her nose, and Julia had been in mourning ever since. Nobody was allowed to mention him. He was like a shadow person attached to Julia, always there, always ignored.

Mind you, Julia might be expected to have got over Jonathan by now. The break-up had been three months ago. But getting over Jonathan seemed to suit Julia. It gave her an excuse to slouch around the house, changing TV channels with her big toe from the sofa – the remote was always missing – and complaining about life’s unfairness. It was the excuse she used also for sitting in the twins’ shared attic bedroom for

hours each day, playing endless music by dead rock musicians too loudly. They had to be dead, Julia explained, because that was in keeping with her feelings. At first, Lydia had thought this a little weird but kind of poetic; now she just thought it was self-indulgent – she was starting to get tired of passionate wailings.

It was time to stop feeling sorry for Julia.

You'll never guess who I just met? she rehearsed to herself as she strode down the hall towards the kitchen, from where she could hear her twin's voice complaining to their mother about something. *Jonathan Walker! In the CD shop, imagine!* As soon as she thought his name, Lydia felt a blush racing up her pale, freckle-sprinkled face. *Jonathan Walker*, she thought resolutely to herself again, and again came the rush of blood to her cheeks. *Jonathan Walker*, she persisted, and it seemed to her that perhaps the crimson tide subsided. *That old boyfriend of yours, Julia*, she went on grimly, *Jonathan Walker. God, I thought he must have emigrated, it's been so long.* Her heart was beating too fast, but her cheeks felt reasonably cool now. She might be able to carry it off.

Their mother was ironing. She never did in term time but in the summer she ironed and ironed, as if to make up for term-time domestic neglect. Her daughters always laughed at this summertime ironing frenzy of their mother's, but they loved the hot, clean smell of it and didn't object too strenuously to

the piles of freshly smoothed clothes that arrived daily in their bedroom.

‘You need a project, Julia,’ their mother was saying from the ironing board as Lydia opened the door.

‘That’s such a schooly word,’ moaned Julia, waggling her arm to make her new silver bracelet slide down towards her elbow. ‘Can’t you stop being a teacher for a minute, Frankie, and just be my mum?’

‘Don’t call me Frankie,’ said their mother, stomping the iron with excessive vehemence up and down the sleeve of one of her daughters’ shirts so that she was ironing in as many creases as she was ironing out.

‘Hello!’ said Lydia brightly.

‘Hello, love,’ said Frankie.

‘Where’ve *you* been?’ asked Julia. Her tone was peevish. ‘You’re fiddling with your plait. Always a sign you’re nervous about something.’

Lydia guiltily dropped the hand that had been playing with her plait and waved the CD she had in her hand.

‘Out to get this,’ she said. Her voice was high, excitable. She coughed, to try to bring it down a tone. ‘You’ll never guess who I met?’

‘Who?’ asked Julia, without much interest, still watching the way the bracelet slithered up and down her arm.

Lydia’s resolution failed her. ‘Eh – Marni Dolan,’ she said, blushing, though she had in fact caught sight of Marni in the

distance, so it wasn't a lie, not really. 'Imagine! I thought they'd moved.'

'What made you think that?' asked Julia. 'You're all red. Were you running?'

'Yeah,' mumbled Lydia and then rushed to change the subject. 'I could murder a cup of tea. Anyone?'

'You never drink tea,' said Julia.

'I'm thirsty,' Lydia muttered, pushing her plait over her shoulder while she ran water into the kettle. 'It's hot.'

Julia lost interest.

'I've needed a "project", as you call it, for *months*,' she said, turning back to her mother, 'but you've only just *noticed*. That's parents all over for you, isn't it Lydia?'

'Eh?' said Lydia, plugging in the kettle.

'You can't get their noses out of your business most of the time, constantly ringing you up on your mobile, telling you to come right home, right now, but as soon as you hit a little blip in life, they suddenly develop an urgent interest in painting the spare bedroom, or applying for a new job, and they completely lose interest in you and your problems.'

'Painting the spare bedroom?' said their mother, wonderingly. 'We haven't painted the spare bedroom for years. Though now you come to mention it ...'

'Oh, *Mum!*' said Julia.

'Joke!' Frankie threw her hands up. 'Look, no weapons. I hope you've counted me in the tea, Lydia.'

‘Not for me,’ said Julia. ‘I’m going to see if there’s anything on the telly.’

‘It’s a sin,’ said Frankie, as Julia stood up to go, ‘a *mortal* sin, to be watching TV on an afternoon like this, when you could be out in the garden.’

‘What would I *do* in the garden?’ Julia asked from the doorway. ‘Sit around pretending to be a garden gnome?’

Frankie ignored her. ‘Although I suppose I’d make an exception for Wimbledon,’ she called encouragingly to Julia’s back.

Julia slammed the door. She hated tennis.

CHAPTER 2

That vast shore, wash'd with the farthest sea
Romeo & Juliet Act 2, Sc ii

For several weeks, it had hurt. A lot. To console herself, Julia'd dreamt about him – awake and asleep – dreamt about Jonathan coming back to her, telling her it had all been a dreadful mistake, that he didn't after all love the Belly Dancer (Julia's name for the navel-flaunting slapper who'd nabbed him), begging her to have him back. In the dreams, she'd opened forgiving arms to him and gone floating off with him into the sunset, violins singing joyously, a single, wavering star piercing the dusky sky.

In reality, she hoped she wouldn't be such a doormat, even in the unlikely event that one half of the dream came true and he did come crawling back to her, all regrets and ready to make amends. She hoped she'd have the strength to turn him away. But that's the advantage of dreams: you don't need to be strong in dreams; in dreams you can be shameless about your desires; when you reach for the stars in dreams, you can find yourself with a fistful of sparkle.

But by now, even the dreams had started to fade. The time was coming when she was going to have to admit that she was 'over' Jonathan. And she *was* over him, she knew it, because

she'd started to feel bored as well as lethargic, to wish that something – anything – would happen.

Today she was crouched, as usual, on the window seat in the attic bedroom, her music blaring, also as usual, her knees in their floral leggings hunched under her chin, staring out to sea. The twins' room had a view right over the tops of the neighbours' garden trees, over the high wires of the electric railway, over the squat Martello tower clinging like a fat sea anemone to the coastline, right out to the blue horizon, where the sea shimmered into the sky and the sky dipped into the sea.

She didn't hear the bedroom door opening.

'JULIA!' Lydia yelled over the noise.

Julia started. She jabbed the remote control, which she held between her brightly coloured knees, and a silence you could almost hear filled the room.

'I've brought you a storybook,' Lydia said, holding out her peace offering.

Julia had no idea it *was* a peace offering. She didn't know there was anything to make peace about. She knew nothing about the chance meeting between Lydia and Jonathan yesterday in the CD shop, and the plan to meet again today, this time for coffee.

'A *storybook!*' she said. 'We're not *seven*, Lydia.'

They always called novels 'storybooks'. It was one of their little jokes, a reference to their shared childhood. There was no

need for Julia to react like that. Still, Lydia smiled determinedly.

‘It’s all right,’ she said. ‘It’s not a *Harry Potter*.’

Julia had been notoriously unable to read any of the *Potter* books, not when she was younger, not now either. ‘Too many *words*,’ she’d muttered when asked why.

‘It’s a twinnny book,’ said Lydia.

‘Oh!’ said Julia. A sudden smile chased the irritation from her face. The twins had for years had a shared passion for stories with twins in them. ‘Remember the O’Sullivan twins?’ she said, her grin broadening.

‘*Bockety!*’ said Lydia, her voice high and strangulated by a wave of laughter.

Julia and Lydia had gone through a phase, when they were about eight, of trying to *be* those horribly well-brought-up, bright-cheeked English girls with bobs and fringes and an innate sense of fairness. They’d acted out bits from the books, jumping on overflowing suitcases to make them close and cooking sausages over an oil-stove – the sausages had stayed resolutely pink and tasted of paraffin, which just goes to show, Julia had said, that things in books are not like things in life. They were enchanted by the idea of lacrosse, and they’d tied tennis racquets onto a long bamboo-handled feather duster and onto a broom handle so they could have makeshift lacrosse sticks. The racquets and the broom handle had survived the game, but the long-handled feather duster was never

the same again.

‘It’s gone all bockety,’ their mother used to complain. ‘I can’t understand it, I’ve had it for years, and suddenly it’s bockety.’

Ever afterwards the mere mention of the word *bockety* had sent the girls into gales of laughter.

‘You don’t think we should have grown out of twinnie books by now, do you?’ asked Julia, sobering up and turning the book over. It didn’t look as promising as *Jacob Have I Loved* or *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, but at least it was by an author she liked.

‘I don’t see why,’ said Lydia. ‘You don’t grow out of being a twin, after all.’ You certainly don’t, she thought. She stood up. ‘Anyway, I’m off. I have to meet someone,’ she added tentatively, half hoping that Julia might ask who, and she’d be forced to confess to Jonathan. This secrecy she’d imposed on herself was weighing her down.

But Julia had gone dreamy again, and Lydia didn’t know how to bring her back to the subject. She hesitated for a moment, and then opened the door.

Julia wiggled a finger at Lydia absent-mindedly and turned to look out to sea again. The book had slithered into her lap.

When Julia was younger, she’d imagined that this attic bedroom with its view beyond the tame area of water between the outstretched arms of Howth and Dalkey, right out, out to sea,

. *Anything* might come scooting over that stretch of water, and Julia'd be the first to know about it. Not Lydia. Lydia barely glanced out of the window, and then it was just to check the weather in the mornings. But Julia loved this view out over the sea, and she returned again and again to this place, where she'd sat so often through her childhood, for comfort and sustenance, and to dream.

The car-ferry was just coming into view over the horizon. It was only a speck, but Julia knew that shortly the little speck would grow to the size of a bluebottle, and then a mouse and then a cat and then an elephant and finally it would be a ship. It was like the old woman who swallowed the fly – I bet she'll die.

'Well, I'm off,' said Lydia again, holding the door open. 'One of the twins, by the way – in the book I mean – she reminds me of you. But her twin's nothing like me. Still, it's interesting to see what it must have been like to be a twin way back then.'

The door had closed behind Lydia before Julia got a chance to ask what she meant. She sighed and picked the book out of her lap. Lydia was probably only trying to tempt her to read it, saying that one twin was like her. Lydia was always trying to get her to read things. Sometimes she was worse than a teacher. Still, it might be interesting. *The Curiosity Tree* it was called. Julia bent the spine back with a satisfying crack and flicked through the flyleaves to the beginning of the story.