

**T H E
G R E A T
G O D D E N**

**M E G
R O S O F F**

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And we are put on earth a little space,
That we may learn to bear the beams of love.

William Blake

1

Everyone talks about falling in love like it's the most miraculous, life-changing thing in the world. Something happens, they say, and you know. You look into the eyes of your beloved and see not only the person you've always dreamed you'd meet, but the *you* you've always secretly believed in, the you that inspires longing and delight, the you no one else really noticed before.

That's what happened when I met Kit Godden.

I looked into his eyes and I knew.

Only, everyone else knew too. Everyone else felt exactly the same way.

2

Every year when school ends we jam the car full of indispensable junk and head to the beach. By the time six people have crammed their bare essentials into the car, Dad says he can't see out the windows and there's no room for any of us, so half of everything is removed but it doesn't seem to help; I always end up sitting on a tennis racket or a bag of shoes. By the time we set off, everyone's in a foul mood.

The drive is a nightmare of shoving and arguing and Mum shouting that if we don't all pipe down she's going to have a breakdown and once a year Dad actually pulls over to the side of the road and says he'll just sit there till everyone shuts the fuck up.

We've been coming to the beach since we were born, and on the theory that life existed even before that, Dad's been coming since he was a child, and Mum since she met Dad and gave birth to us four.

The drive takes hours but eventually we come off the motorway and that's when the mood changes. The familiarity of the route does something to our brains and we start to whine silently, like dogs approaching a park. It's half an hour precisely from the roundabout to the house and we know every inch of landscape on the way. Bonus points are earned for deer or horses glimpsed from car windows or an owl sitting on a fence post or Harry the Hare hopping down the road. Harry frequently appears in the middle of the road on the day we arrive and then again on the day we leave; incontrovertible proof that our world is a sophisticated computer simulation.

There's no such thing as a casual arrival. We pull into the grass drive, scramble out of the car, and then shout and shove our way into the house, which smells

of ancient upholstery, salt, and musty stale air till we open all the windows and let the sea breeze pour through in waves.

The first conversation always goes the same way:

MUM (*dreamy*): I miss this place so much.

KIDS: So do we!

DAD: If only it were a little closer.

KIDS: And had heat.

MUM (*stern voice*): Well, it's not. And it doesn't.

So stop dreaming.

No one bothers to mention that she's the one who brings the subject up every time.

Mum's already got out the dustpan and is sweeping dead flies off the window sills while Dad puts food away and makes tea. I run upstairs, open the drawer under my bed and pull on last summer's faded sweatshirt. It smells of old house and beach and now so do I.

Alex is checking bat-box cameras on his laptop and Tamsin's unpacking at superhuman speed because Mum says she can't go down to see her horse until everything's put away. The horse doesn't belong to her but she leases him for the summer and would save him in a fire hours before she'd save any of us.

Mattie, who's recently gone from too-big features and no tits to looking like a sixteen-year-old sex goddess, has changed into sundress and wellies and is drifting around on the beach because she sees her life as one long Instagram post. At the moment she imagines she looks romantic and gorgeous, which unfortunately she does.

There's a sudden excited clamour as Malcolm and Hope arrive downstairs to welcome us to the beach. Gomez, Mal's very large, very mournful basset hound, bays at the top of his lungs. Tamsin and Alex will be kissing him all over so really you can't blame him.

Mal clutches two bottles of cold white wine and while everyone is hugging and kissing, Dad mutters,

‘It’s about time,’ abandons the tea and goes to find a corkscrew. Tam hurls herself at Mal, who sweeps her up in his arms and swings her around like she’s still a little girl.

Hope makes us stand in order of age: me, Mattie, Tamsin and Alex. She steps back to admire us all, saying how much we’ve grown and how gorgeous we all are, though it’s obvious she’s mainly talking about Mattie. I’m used to being included in the gorgeous-Mattie narrative, which people do out of politeness. Tam snorts and breaks rank, followed by Alex. It’s not like we don’t see them in London, but between school and work, and what with living in completely different parts of town, it happens less than you might think.

‘There’s supper when you’re ready,’ Hope calls after them.

Dad wipes the wine glasses with a tea towel, fills them, and distributes the first glass of the summer to the over-eighteens, with reduced rations for Mattie,

Tamsin and me. Alex reappears and strikes like a rat snake when Hope leaves her glass to help Mum with a suitcase. He downs it in two gulps and slithers away into the underbrush. Hope peers at the empty glass with a frown but Dad just fills it again.

Everyone smiles and laughs and radiates optimism. This year is going to be the best ever – the best weather, the best food, the best fun.

The actors assembled, the summer begins.