

ROSANNA LEY

*Her  
Mother's  
Secret*

Quercus

## CHAPTER I

### *Colette*

Colette let herself in at the front door of the house on Peverell Terrace – she'd been lodging here for a year so it felt as much like home as anywhere had lately. Before that . . . There had been other lodgings, other jobs, helping to look after her grandparents. And before that, fifteen years before that, was Belle-Île-en-Mer, the island of her birth.

She slipped her jacket on to the hook by the door, stepped on to the first stair, put a hand on the wooden banister, and saw it. A letter. Thin air-mail paper. Her name in spidery, sloping, old-fashioned writing that for a second looked like . . . But it wasn't. Colette exhaled. She grabbed the envelope and took the stairs at a gallop – just in case Adam and Louise her friendly landlords should emerge from the kitchen and fancy a chat. Because it wasn't from her mother, no, but it had a French postmark and so it had to be from Belle-Île.

Something must have happened. Colette opened the door to her studio on the second floor. The one room comprised sitting area, bedroom and kitchenette; the small bathroom was

next door. Usually, she walked over to the window the second she came in, because the special thing about the studio was the view. But not today. Today, she dropped her bag on to the table and held the envelope gingerly between thumb and forefinger as if it might bite or even swallow her whole. She took a deep breath and ripped it open.

*Dear Colette.*

No, it wasn't her mother's hand. Colette's gaze flipped to the bottom of the short letter. *Sincerely, Francine Quintin*, she read. Francine was her mother's neighbour. She read on, with more urgency now. Why would Francine Quintin be writing to her?

*J'espère que tu vas bien.* It was written in French of course and these days Colette hardly spoke the language of her homeland, let alone read it. The writing was difficult to decipher too. She frowned, let the words work to form their old meanings. Her British mother had always spoken English with her from as far back as she could remember – at least when no one else was around. Perhaps Thea Lenoire had known even then that one day Colette would leave Belle-Île-en-Mer and return to the place that was Thea's beginning rather than her own. Colette sighed. She had lived in Cornwall for fifteen of her thirty-two years. By now, she reckoned she thought in English too.

*I hope you are well*, she read again. *I am sorry to have to tell you that your mother is not.*

Her mother was not well. The unfamiliar French words danced clumsily on the page. *Your mother is very ill*, she read. *She may not have long to live. She has leukaemia.*

Colette stared at the words. *May not have long to live. Leukaemia.* But her mother was only sixty-five. These days that was still quite young. At least, it wasn't old. How could her mother have leukaemia?

*You should come here as soon as possible, the letter went on, before it is too late. She does not know I am writing. But as you are aware, there is only you.*

Colette stared at the words until they blurred. *There is only you . . .* Her mobile beeped a text in. She ignored it.

She couldn't believe that everything outside still looked as it had a few minutes ago, before she'd entered the house. How was it possible? And yet . . . From the picture window, a shaft of early evening sunlight still dappled the water and slanted through on to the bleached pine floorboards of the studio. Colette crossed the room. She looked out over Porthleven harbour and the green-grey ocean; the assorted buildings on the other side of the inlet, the higgledy red-ridge tiles and grey slate roofs of the tall Victorian houses in Bay View Terrace, the wide expanse of cloudy sky. There was a ship way out at sea, no more than an inky stamp on the horizon, while in the harbour basin the brightly coloured pleasure craft and fishing boats bobbed in the yellow light.

Her mother had leukaemia. Just over a year ago, Colette's grandparents had both died – her grandfather only three weeks after the woman he adored – and Colette had been upset and furious that her mother hadn't even had the grace to attend the funeral. Colette hadn't spoken to her since. Before that there had been other issues; a long estrangement, so many things unsaid. And before that . . . Colette didn't even want to think about it now.

She looked down at Francine's letter still in her hand. She pictured Francine's dour features and thin, complaining mouth. Their neighbour in Sauzon had always had her nose to the *rideaux*, her crochet-lace curtains, desperate to catch all the action – probably because it had been years since she'd

experienced any herself, Colette used to think. Francine seemed to know everything that went on. She had seen fifteen-year-old Colette creeping home late with her *amour*, she had seen them kissing at the gate, and more besides. And she hadn't wasted a second before relaying every detail to Maman.

'Clearly, it is because the girl has no father.' Colette could hear the smugness in Francine's voice. 'And incidentally, Thea, I have not seen either of you in church for a while, eh?'

Her mother's murmured reply, Colette could not catch.

'You must take a firm hand with the girl, Thea,' continued Francine. 'She is your responsibility now, you know.'

Responsibility. That was Francine. And it seemed that now, nothing had changed. She still knew it all. And so, it had fallen to her to tell Colette that her mother had leukaemia.

Gulls were still circling over the harbour and people were still wandering down the long finger of the granite jetty eating ice-creams and enjoying the last of the early evening sun on this late spring day. Nothing had changed and yet everything had changed. There was an art exhibition in the old lifeboat station, it was market day and Porthleven had been heaving, crammed with families who flocked here at half-terms and holidays. Colette knew more about that than most – she worked in the holiday letting office in the harbour.

Why had her mother not told Colette herself? Why had Francine not simply picked up the phone? But Colette knew why. Francine wouldn't know her number and as for her mother . . . Colette grabbed her mobile from her bag, found the number she called so rarely, listened to the phone ring and ring.

Without realising it, she had crumpled the letter in her fist. She straightened it out. 'Maman.' *There is only you.* Colette felt

the emotional floodgates shift. She closed her eyes, felt herself sway. She had turned her back on her mother and the island fifteen years ago and God knows she'd had her reasons. Most of the time it was easy enough not to think about it. But now . . .

Colette's mobile rang. She glanced at the number but didn't answer it, continued looking out instead over the jumbled buildings around Porthleven harbour – the old fish-curing factory, the china clay store, the ice house, the lime kiln and the black and white Ship Inn. This town had been her mother's home – at least until she'd left Porthleven at the age of eighteen. Had her mother felt as Colette had felt when she left Belle-Île-en-Mer? They'd been almost exactly the same age after all. She realised that she had no idea; they'd never talked of it. There were so many things they hadn't talked of. And there was still so much that Colette didn't understand. But . . . Leukaemia. Her mother could be dying. And what Francine had said was true – there was only her.

The ringtone of her mobile stopped, then started up again. Mark was not the kind of man who could be ignored. She put the letter on the table and picked up her phone. 'Hello.'

'Hi, sweetie.' He sounded almost unbearably cheerful. 'I'm outside.'

'Oh.' She couldn't think. Her mind was still trying to process the contents of the letter, this awful news. 'Mark . . .' For a moment, it hovered unspoken on her tongue.

'So, can I come in?' There was laughter in his voice now.

Colette forced herself to focus. 'Course you can.' She was vaguely surprised that her voice sounded so normal. She went to the window, looked directly down to the pavement where he was standing; tall, dark, smart in his light-pink shirt, dark chinos and jacket.

He grinned and waved.

‘I’ll come down.’ Colette shoved the letter into her bag. She took a deep breath and headed for the stairs. Her emotions were tangled, her feelings numb. She wasn’t sure that she was ready to talk about this to anyone, not even Mark – at least not yet.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Colette*

In Koto Kai's – one of their favourite restaurants – Colette let Mark do most of the talking while Francine's letter continued to simmer quietly in her bag.

'How's your day been?' he asked her, his attention half on the menu.

'Oh, busy, you know.' Today at the letting office had been much the same as usual: managing the cleaners, a complaint from a holidaymaker, more bookings – mostly for the summer to come but also for winter when the town was at its most dramatic and chilly with high winds and even higher seas sometimes, lashing the houses of Harbour Road. 'How was yours?'

Over cocktails, he filled her in. Mark managed an estate agents; it was successful and he was on commission. Privately, Colette thought that the number of places being bought for holiday lets was shocking; it didn't seem right that house prices were far too high for the locals to afford to buy. She'd said this to Mark on more than one occasion and he was always outraged.



‘Everyone has a right to move around,’ he said. ‘Look at you. Everyone has a right to find somewhere else they want to live.’ He had a point. And Colette knew him well enough to let it go.

They ordered, and when the starter came Mark launched into a long story about a property along Loe Bar that was derelict but had great potential. ‘. . . And they offered a hundred and thirty thousand for the place. I mean, after all that, what a joke.’

Colette blinked at him. Her starter of squid with mango salad had tasted as delicious as ever, but she had almost eaten it without noticing.

He leaned forward. ‘Colette? Are you even listening to me?’

‘Sorry, yes.’ She tried to recapture some of the conversation. ‘With those sea views? Did they really?’ She forced a little laugh, unconvincing enough for Mark to frown.

The waitress brought their mains – pork belly with pak choi for him and Massaman chicken curry with jasmine rice for her. It was decorative, highly aromatic and she had chosen it for the delicate blend of spices with coconut. But tonight she simply wasn’t hungry.

Before she could even taste it, Mark reached over to put his hand on hers. She looked down at their two hands. Why did she feel the urge to pull hers from under the pressure of his? Why didn’t she just tell him about the letter? He was so caring. What was the matter with her?

Colette had been feeling pretty vulnerable that first day Mark Johnson had walked into the letting office. It was only weeks after her grandfather’s death and she felt so lost now that both her grandparents were gone. She wanted to work, she needed a distraction, but she couldn’t help thinking of Grandpa’s sad face and how her mother hadn’t even come to say goodbye.

Mark was asking about a property they'd been letting out that was about to be marketed for sale and he'd chosen Colette to talk to.

'You're new here, aren't you?' It was a casual enough enquiry but even then, Colette had sensed that with Mark, nothing was casual. He saw something and he went for it – that was his style.

'Only a few months.' Since first arriving in Porthleven fifteen years ago, Colette had drifted; it had seemed so hard to find her way. She had worked a summer season in the town as a waitress, staying with her grandparents, finding her feet as Granny J had put it; she had lived in Truro and done more of the same. Her grandparents hadn't seemed too surprised that Colette had left Belle-Île and she hadn't wanted to confide the reasons; they had accepted that she wanted to travel, wanted to see something of the UK and that she wanted to spend time with them. Her grandparents were pleased, she knew. She had done a stint in St Ives working in a gift shop this time and had returned to Porthleven for the summer season to be near them. Only when their health had begun to fail, had she made things more permanent. She had secured a job in a business that continued all year round and she had found the little studio in Peverell Terrace.

'New in town too?'

'Not exactly.' She explained a bit about the coming and going.

'So you have family here?' He didn't seem in any hurry to get back to work. Colette caught the glance of Tracey, her boss.

'My grandparents lived here, but—' She didn't want to go on, but Mark seemed to understand.

He leaned closer. 'I'd like to talk some more – over a drink perhaps?'

‘Oh. Well . . .’ She hadn’t been going out so much lately.

‘How about The Ship at eight tonight?’ Even then, Mark had smoothed his way over her hesitations as if they didn’t exist. ‘It’s full of old codgers,’ he added, ‘but they’re a nice enough lot if you don’t mind listening to tales of smuggling and wrecking in Porthleven in days gone by.’

Colette had laughed, surprised at herself, not sure if he was joking or not. She’d already come across quite a few of the old-timers, the ‘fish ’n’ guts Porthleveners,’ as some referred to them, though this was a town full of incomers, whether from two years ago or twenty. Even her grandparents weren’t born here; they’d moved to Cornwall in the early fifties shortly before Colette’s mother was born. Porthleven had been a thriving town back then, apparently – thirteen butchers’ shops alone, her grandmother had told her once.

Colette had looked at Mark with his dapper dark hair, grey suit and blue tie. Why not? she’d thought. Why not admit it? She was lonely. She’d made friends, but they were hard to keep when you moved around a lot. There had been a few boyfriends too, but no one serious. She was still feeling a bit raw, but she needed to get out, she needed to shake herself up a little and get on with her life. Maybe this confident-sounding man might help her do that. ‘OK, I’d like to.’ And that was how she and Mark had begun.

‘Is something wrong, darling?’ His voice was tender now, his brown eyes kind.

He was a good man, Colette reminded herself. A nice man. He had taken her out, talked to her, comforted her when she was still grieving for the loss of her grandparents. He was always there for her, he would help her if she needed him – or even if she didn’t, she thought sometimes. She gazed down at

the food on her plate. So what was stopping her? She ought to be telling her boyfriend about this, not bottling it up inside.

Mark removed his hand, nodded encouragingly and started eating.

‘Well . . .’ Colette opened her mouth to tell him about the letter, about her mother, about the leukaemia. Then she saw a flicker in his eyes as he glanced over her shoulder.

She stopped. It was this thing he did – as if someone else might be having a more interesting conversation, as if he was slightly irritated that she was taking time to get going. She’d seen that flicker before. When she wanted to have some time to herself and he wanted to do something together. When a waiter in a restaurant didn’t respond quickly enough to his requests. When an attractive woman on a nearby table was laughing a glittering laugh. Colette knew that look and she didn’t much like it. She didn’t want to tell Mark about the letter because he would immediately take charge, he would tell her what to do about it. And this time, for once, she wanted to make up her own mind.

‘Up to our eyes at the office,’ she said, ‘that’s all.’ And she took a mouthful of caramelised sweet potato.

‘Hmm.’ He frowned. ‘They work you too hard at that place. But now it’s the weekend.’ He grinned his handsome grin. ‘So, how about a day out tomorrow? We could go up to Bude or Exmoor. Have a walk. A pub lunch. Some you and me time. What do you reckon?’ He turned his attention back to his pork belly.

‘Lovely.’ Colette felt a ridiculous panic begin to rise. She was breathless though she hadn’t even moved. She got to her feet. ‘I just have to . . .’ She grabbed her bag. ‘Go to the bathroom.’

‘Oh? OK, fine.’ He watched her curiously as she left the

table. She had the odd feeling that sometime in the future he'd be telling this story to someone, say – *So then she dashes off to the bathroom right in the middle of dinner. I ask you. How crazy is that?*

Colette gripped the banister and made her descent down the wide wooden staircase with the wrought-iron railings, huge paintings of Porthleven's stormy waves staring down at her from the walls above. She shut the door of the Ladies' behind her and let out a breath. Mark was lovely, but he didn't always understand that sometimes she needed more space. She appreciated the way that he organised their lives. She loved his tenderness, their intimacy, the security he had given her. But just occasionally she felt as trapped as she had on the island. Trapped and somehow losing an important part of her.

It must be the letter that had brought this on . . . In the loo, she pulled it from her bag and read it again. She closed her eyes and tried to recapture something of her mother. Her voice: the pauses and the stresses; the rhythm that was her mother's rhythm, her way of talking, her way of life. Colette thought of her childhood days – the dreaminess in her mother's eyes sometimes when she looked at her, as if she was almost not there at all; as if she were forever thinking of someone else, someone she loved more perhaps, some place she would rather be. So who had always come first for Thea Lenoire? Not her husband Sébastien, not her parents in Cornwall, and certainly not her daughter.

'Maman, maman . . .' Colette remembered how she had tried to get her mother's attention, tugging on her arm and apron strings until she would push her gently away. 'Run along and play, Colette. Maman is busy.'

Always busy. Running the flower shop, tending the plants, arranging the bouquets for christenings, weddings and funerals.

*There is a funeral parlour in Sauzon, so why not a flower shop?* Colette had often heard her say. *Why not? It is not just for death, no, it is for remembering. For life, for colour. To bring a smile to people's faces. Why not?*

Colette swallowed hard. And now? Would she be able to get her mother's attention now? Would she find any answers to all the things she needed to know? She shoved the letter back in her bag. She'd been in here for ages – Mark would be sending in the cavalry if she was any longer.

She made her way back up the elegant staircase into the long narrow room with a high ceiling that had been used as a sail-making loft once upon a time. Now, the Asian-style restaurant had positioned all its tables in a long row next to the windows for the best harbour views and a pleasing sense of space, each one lit with a cream candle in a brass lantern. The atmosphere was buzzy. There were more candles in a metal cage on the gleaming counter of the bar and ceiling lights encased in large woven baskets. The panelled walls were cream and white, the wooden floor the colour of hazelnuts. Usually, Colette found the decor tranquil, but tonight . . .

Sure enough, Mark looked worried as she slipped back on to the bench seat by the window.

'Hey,' he said, 'are you OK?'

Colette nodded. 'But ready to go when you are.' She pushed her plate to one side.

He raised an eyebrow. 'Not feeling well?'

'I'm not very hungry.' She gave a little shrug. 'Sorry.'

He leaned towards her and once again took her hand. 'Your place or mine?' He was smiling, and Colette smiled back at him. It was hardly his fault. How could he know what was wrong when she hadn't told him?

‘Mine?’ It was only five minutes’ walk away and Adam and Louise never minded. ‘For a change,’ she added quickly, seeing his expression.

He barely hesitated, though Colette knew he’d much rather go back to Highburrow. ‘Course not.’ He got out his wallet and waved away her offer to contribute. ‘Don’t be silly. I earn lots more than you and anyway, we’re together, aren’t we?’ And then spent several long minutes frowning and scrutinising the bill. Colette didn’t mind. He was generous, but also careful; there was nothing wrong with that.

They strolled back along the harbourside towards Colette’s, hand in hand. ‘You’ve been quiet tonight,’ he said. Spindrifts of light from lamps and windows seemed to bounce gently against the slick surface of the water, and she could hear music and voices wafting from a bar and restaurant nearby. ‘Miles away.’

She moved closer towards him as they walked. So almost in synch, she thought. And it was her fault they weren’t closer. ‘Sorry, darling.’ She squeezed his hand. Belle-Île, she realised, was never as far away as she’d tried to make it. Here in Porthleven there were echoes of the place everywhere she looked.

‘I always wanted to have a French girlfriend,’ Mark said as they turned to climb Institute Hill. It was dark up here and narrow, but the steep path would bring them right up to the house on the Terrace. ‘It was my ambition.’

She laughed. ‘But I’m not French, I’m half-British, remember.’

‘Even better.’ He turned to kiss the top of her head. ‘You’ve still got a sexy accent and you understand me.’

They were halfway up the path already and Colette let her gaze travel over the rooftops and back towards the shiny darkness of the sea.

‘It’s stupid, though.’ Mark bent so that he was breathing into her hair. He looked up towards the terrace past Flagstaff House, and Colette followed his gaze – and his train of thought. He was right, she thought. She did understand him. ‘Me rattling around in a whole place of my own, you living in someone else’s house here. When we could be together all the time.’

This conversation came up every three weeks or so, give or take. Which told her how important it was and how much he thought about it. She should be flattered. She *was* flattered. *Why do you want to live in someone else’s house when we could live together in mine?*

It was a good question. Was it Mark? Was it her? Was it whatever they formed together? His house at Highburrow was modern and spacious; it had all the mod cons but . . . It didn’t have the right view, she had joked to him in the past. The truth was that although Mark wanted it to happen, it was a commitment Colette wasn’t ready to make.

She answered the question by reaching up to him for a kiss, then more kisses when they got inside and by the time they made love in the bed that was in her space, rented or not, the question had dissolved. It would re-form, though, like the snail trails of foam that circled the rocks on Pointe des Poulains, the northernmost point of Belle-Île-en-Mer; it would re-form and crash into the rocks outside the harbour once more. It always did.

In the middle of the night, Colette slipped out of bed, careful not to wake Mark. She sat in the chair by the window and switched on her laptop. The waxing moon was sending a pool of light on to the water in the harbour; the mismatched buildings circling the basin stood guard; the dark, curling sea was quiet, gently rolling in. Colette googled channel ferries,



transport links and finally the ferry from Quiberon to Belle-Île. She scribbled notes, made calculations, got out her credit card. At last she closed down her laptop and sat staring out to sea and thinking of that other sea she'd grown up with. It had been such a long time. She closed her eyes. Felt a shiver of fear – or maybe anticipation? But she was ill and she was her mother. How could she not go?

When Mark woke up at seven-thirty, she greeted him with coffee and a croissant. Guilt breakfast, she thought. But it was a new day and things seemed clearer this morning.

'Haven't we skipped something here?' he groaned, but he sat up and ate it anyway.

Colette took a deep breath. She reached out and smoothed his dark hair from his forehead. It wouldn't be easy. 'Mark, I had a letter yesterday,' she began.

'Oh?'

'It was about my mother.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'About her?'

'It was from her neighbour, a woman called Francine.'

'What did it say?' She had all his attention now.

'My mother's ill.' Colette swallowed. Why would she cry? Her mother had never believed in her. Why would she cry for her now?

'What's wrong with her?' Mark pushed the tray aside and swung his legs out of the bed. He was naked except for black boxers.

'She has leukaemia.' Her voice trembled. It was insidious, the word as much as the disease. Colette could almost feel it growing and taking over.

'Why the hell didn't you say?' Mark grabbed hold of her and held her close. 'So that's what was bothering you last night?'

She nodded, didn't trust herself to speak.

'It's all right, darling,' he soothed. 'I'm here. I'll look after you.'

'I have to go back there.' She leaned against his shoulder. 'I have to see her.' Mark was a tall and sturdy man. His solidity had always made her feel safe.

'Yes, darling.' He was stroking her hair. 'We'll both go. I'll get some time off work, we'll—'

'No.' She drew away from him then. This was why she hadn't told him last night. 'I'm sorry, Mark.' She hated to say it. 'But I have to do this alone.'