

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

.
CURE FOR THE DAMNED: A NOVEL

&

THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION:
FIRST-PERSON NARRATORS IN *THE TURN OF THE SCREW*,
LOLITA, *THE SECRET HISTORY* AND *CURE FOR THE DAMNED*

JUDY FORSHAW

A thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Anglia Ruskin University
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ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

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CONTEMPORARY FICTION

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This thesis comprises a novel and a critical commentary. The novel *Cure for the Damned* is in the Gothic tradition but has a contemporary setting. The story is told by two first-person narrators. Magnus, a forensic psychiatrist, and his partner Tom, a meteorologist, leave their life in central London to set up a therapeutic community in the Sussex countryside. Isolated in a damp cottage on the edge of woodland and cut off from their support network, old hurts and fears surface. Mistrust lies at the heart of their story. Tom and Magnus provide subtly and, at other times, starkly differing accounts of a disintegrating relationship that ends in murder. Both narrators slide between truthfulness, untrustworthiness and fallibility in a world where the real is undone by deception and trickery. The subplot is informed by the Orpheus myth, introducing a magical realist strand to the narrative in which the underworld intrudes in dreams, imaginings and hallucinations. In the commentary to accompany the creative practice element of the thesis, I use the theories developed by Elke D'hoker, James Phelan and Greta Olson to examine three broad categories of unreliable first-person narration in a trio of well-known works: narrative instability in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, bonding and estranging unreliability in *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, and the untrustworthy narrator in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*. In exploring the impact of these different types of unreliability on my own novel *Cure for the Damned*, I aim to show how the study of narrative theory is a useful tool for a writer of fiction, in that intuitive and sometimes impulsive choices are made conscious, thereby opening up narrative options, as well as clarifying and providing solutions to essential concerns of voice, structure and mood.

Key words: narrative instability, bonding and estranging unreliability, untrustworthy, fallible, Orpheus myth, magical realism, Gothic.

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Cure for the Damned

A Novel

by

JUDY FORSHAW

Prologue

Do I blame Tom for my death? Even if by some miracle I had survived, crippled in a wheelchair, a rug wrapped around my knees; even alive, I don't think I would have held a grudge.

My new existence suits my personality type. I wasn't much when I was alive, teetering on the edge, never properly connected. I take a pleasure in my weightlessness. I enjoy the sensation of being carried through the garden, into the kitchen, up onto the roof on a current of air with only the faintest prickle of vertigo. I can hang suspended for hours like a swimmer paddling face-down staring at the blue bottom of a pool, pinpricks of brightness against the silvery rim. Someone opening a window, a door at the end of a corridor has the power to tug me into another room or out into the garden. Sometimes I have been trapped for days in an undisturbed room.

It is a dark afternoon in early November and I am circling glider-like above the chimney on the roof of the cottage, carried on a thermal from the fire in the sitting room. At some point the wind will change direction and I will drop down, singed and bruised, into the grate in the living room where they all are, Tom and Kitty, and Kitty's dog Skinny, and Tom's sister Angela. Tom is reading the newspaper. Kitty is doing something on her iPad. Angela is prowling by the window trying to get a signal on her mobile phone. These are my people, the ones I was given to love, and I've not done well.

* * *

My death appeared as a headline in the local newspaper, *The West Sussex Gazette*: 'Psychiatrist murdered in wood'. In *The Times* the emphasis was slightly different, *Psychiatrist dies in homophobic attack*. Three men are serving life sentences for murder in HM Parkhurst Prison on the Isle of Wight. But I was already dead by the time they got hold of me. I had died quite a few hours before, and the person responsible was Tom. He knows this, and I know this, but neither of us is going to tell.

They came after me, chased me through the woods, trampling, screaming, shouting. They were very drunk. I stopped running and waited for them in the darkest part where there was the least chance of us being disturbed. It is the strangest thing to view yourself from the outside, to see yourself as others see you, no longer trapped inside your own head. My coat is torn at the shoulders; blood seeping from my nose, the side of my face is blue from where one of them has lobbed something at me. My stillness spooks them.

They stop a little way off, huddled together, deliberating whether this was worth it after all. André, younger, stockier, breaks from the group and ventures towards me. He takes a packet of cigarettes from his jacket pocket, a match flares, the smell of phosphorus mingles with the sweet tang of tobacco, a trickle of smoke. He bends down; his broad hand forages in the snow and emerges pink and stinging from the cold, holding a sharp, shiny black stone. The hand holding the stone moves to brush something away from his face and seems to flick back like he is swatting a fly. The stone bounces up into the still, clear air, glints for a moment and is dull again; a furious little missile, it flies towards me, hitting me on the side of the head. The man stands motionless; the hand that threw the stone hangs down inert. I think he is bemused by what he has just done.

Patrick, the oldest of the three men says something in their language, words along the lines – ‘What the fuck?’

The third man, a little skinny one, kneels down, feeling under the snow, and picks up a pale, prickly piece of rock; and before Patrick, the peace keeper, as I have come to think of him, has a chance to stop him, lobs the stone at me. It hits its mark with a loud crack; blood seeps out from the front of my head into the snow. I lie on my back not moving, but still breathing.

André finds another stone, small and green coloured. He hurls it with a swift splicing movement like he is skimming it along the surface of water. It misses me and lodges into the side of a tree. His skinny friend is kneeling, filling his pockets. He jumps forward and shouts something in his language as he hurls a stone; it bounces against the side of a tree and misses me. André lets fly another pellety black stone, followed by a volley of stones supplied by his friend, thwack, crack, bringing more blood.

And I am singing, dancing in my cold bright spot. ‘You will go to prison for the rest of your lives, you will come out as old men, broken, destroyed.’

Never think the dead are sanguine. Acceptance, if it can be called that, takes a long time, like learning to ride a bike, fly a kite, writing your name for the first time.

* * *

Skinny yelps as I am spat out onto the rug inches from her nose. She patters over to Tom and rubs her face between his legs. He reaches out from under his paper and strokes her long soft ears. She settles down, resting her head on her front legs. But she is not quiet and keeps an eye on me. Kitty has left her place in front of the fire and has gone through to the kitchen. As the door slams I am drawn out of the room into the corridor, gloomy on a late November

afternoon. Skinny races past, her head low, her ears back. She stands at the kitchen door emitting a thin, high-pitched whine.

Kitty comes over to her. ‘Silly girl,’ she tells her. ‘What’s got into you?’ She puts her cup of tea on the windowsill and takes hold of Skinny’s collar. ‘Come on you stupid old dog.’

But Skinny will not move, and uses all her strength to resist, her front legs stiff as a deckchair.

Kitty looks straight at me, through me, her large dark eyes beautiful. ‘Tom,’ she calls to the other room. ‘Tom, something’s wrong with Skinny.’

I hear the click of the sitting room door. Tom appears in the corridor and switches on the overhead light. ‘What’s up?’ he says, rubbing his eyes under his glasses.

‘She’s gone all peculiar,’ Kitty says.

Tom is wearing the fern green jumper I gave him for Christmas a couple of years back – the last Christmas we spent together. It was a careless, lastminute present, bought in a rush at one of those boutique shops in St Pancras station. He had given me a beautiful little barometer, early nineteenth century, meticulously preserved. I kept it in my office at the hospital, it was a good icebreaker – Tom would have known that.

He removes his glasses and rubs them with bottom of his shirt, in that way he does. ‘It’s the weather,’ he says. ‘The low pressure.’

Tom is a meteorologist; he scratches together a good enough living to keep Kitty, and his sister Angela and the dog afloat in this damp old cottage dug into the side of the hill on the edge of woodland. My choice – not Tom’s; he hated it on first sight. I knew exactly how he felt. I would pretend to myself he was a mystery, but I always knew – better than I knew myself most of the time.

‘She’s seen something,’ Kitty says. ‘The other day she was doing the exact same thing.’

The door to the sitting room slams, footsteps and Angela appears. ‘There’s an odd smell in here.’ She sniffs, ‘like aftershave.’

Angela is Angela, will always be Angela in the same old faded blue jeans and denim shirt, hair scraped back in an untidy bun, little wire glasses perched on the end of her nose. She peers short-sightedly at Tom. ‘You’re not wearing aftershave?’ she says to him.

No one says anything, and I know all three of them are thinking the same thing. Skinny’s nose twitches. They can smell me.

Tom moves to the window and peers out. ‘There’s no one out there,’ he says for something to say and tugs at the catch.

The window slams back and I am swept up in a gust of chilly air, drawn out and up the side of the house, through chimney smoke. I will wait until nightfall, till it is dark as pitch outside and the wind has dropped, and the fire in the chimney has burned down, and they have turned off the lights and have gone to their separate beds; then I will sink down, drawn on a current back into the house, into their rooms, careful not to alert Skinny. And I will settle on each of their pillows, enter the turmoil of their dreams, and together all four of us will go back there, one last time – and by the morning when they wake I’ll be gone, and all will be well.

Chapter One

Tom

When I first saw Lane End it was hate at first sight. I'm exaggerating of course; let's just say my first impression was not auspicious. The damp, mouldy couple of cottages shoehorned into one, squeezed up against a remote hillside, was just about the last place on earth I'd have chosen to settle down and build a life. The move was Magnus' idea; he needed to be close to his place of work, a fancy new mental hospital called Beechridge that specialised in private care. As for me, I was in a bad way and hanging on by a thread.

It was an overcast afternoon in early June. We'd travelled on from Beechridge to view the property; Magnus was driving. We were in the old Volvo estate; I was in the front with my feet on the dashboard and my hand on his knee. I had decided that I would submit to his will; if he liked this place I wasn't going to put up a fight. I'd ceased trusting my instincts months back, and was only happy that he still wanted me – at the time he was the centre of my life and had been for the last couple of years. I had an Ordnance Survey map of the area. The cottage was by Bedham woods on the ridge of a hill overlooking the River Arun with the South Downs on the other side of the valley. I directed Magnus off the country lane onto a potholed track leading up into the woods. The light dimmed under the thick canopy; branches scraped the roof and slapped against the windscreen. We bumped along the track and round the corner towards a lump of sunlight that glowed at the end of the tunnel of trees. It's odd how it happens – out of the blue – how the shaky, snarly bit of you is triggered; a piece of branch

flapped across the track and I saw a black dog, the size of a small pony; it stood motionless on the verge, merging into the shadow, its turret-shaped ears twitching as it deliberated for a moment before retreating into the bracken. I am used to these flashes, I know how to deal with them.

We drove out into a clearing fenced in by clumps of bracken with yellow gorse in full bloom, and from there we started the steep climb up a stony track to the cottage. The woodland thinned and we were able to see over the low hedge into the valley below.

Magnus tugged the handbrake and stopped to look out. ‘What do you think, Tom?’ he said.

The slithery wisp of whatever it was back there still lingered. ‘It’s remote,’ I said.

‘So?’

He was annoyed. I tried again. ‘It’s beautiful.’

He released the handbrake, revving the engine, and we climbed the last few hundred yards to the cottage. Through the gap in the trees I caught a glimpse of Beechridge; the squat red-bricked building appeared for an instant on the brow of the hill, its tawny rust-coloured self surprisingly compact for all its size when seen from a distance. I craned round, watching the dark slate roof slide behind the trees, and settled back against the seat – if Magnus had noticed, he didn’t let on. I was shocked. I hadn’t expected Beechridge to be so close: it was two or three miles away at the most. And I wonder now, looking back, if it was this proximity that lay behind my instant aversion to our new home.

As we came out of the woods the track levelled off and Magnus pulled up against a hedge. The cottage was buried in a dip on the leeward slope of the hill and was cast in shadow. It appeared to be two or even three dwellings knocked into one. To the right, the walls were of warm Horsham stone, while the larger portion to the left was a wooden frame construction with white stucco infill. There was a red tiled roof with squat brick chimneys. Small lattice windows appeared at irregular intervals on both floors; access was through two small porches with gothic gable ends. An unruly cottage garden covered the front, giving the impression that the building had grown out of the landscape. I got out of the car and walked down to a wrought iron gate built into a low wall. When I looked back I realised I couldn't see the valley. I glanced up at the little windows on the first floor – there would be more of a view upstairs.

Magnus came up behind me and opened the gate. He went down a couple of steps to the front door. 'The key's not here.'

I saw a green fob sticking out from behind a pot. I was tempted to lie. 'It's behind the geranium,' I said.

'Where?'

I knelt down beside the pot. It was musty from the recent rainfall; a swarm of ants circled round the base. I grabbed the key and felt something sting. I rolled up my sleeve and saw a small welt on my arm.

'I'll do this.' Magnus took the key from me. It was large and old fashioned with a long stem. He slotted it into the lock and rattled it round. Something clicked and the door opened with a nasty hee-haw sound like a mean little laugh. The stench was horrible. We peered into a cold room coated in dark, streaky patches of bird droppings. Magnus walked across the empty, echoey

space, sending up puffs of dust in the evening sunlight, and went over to one of the tiny latticed windows.

‘You can’t see the valley,’ I said. ‘It’s down in a dip, it’ll get hardly any sunlight.’

‘C’mon Tom.’ He brushed past me into the narrow corridor. ‘Give it a chance.’

I hovered on the threshold, mesmerised by the dust particles whirling in the wispy evening light. Magnus’ footsteps clattered on the bare boards. I heard a door open and bang shut behind him. Careful to keep away from the mouldy walls, I followed him down the corridor and reached a narrow door. I tried to open it but it was stuck. ‘Magnus.’ I tugged at the handle. The trick, Susan, the nice CBT woman had said, was to get the calm sensible me to whisper soothing messages into the ear of the panicky other me. I shoved my shoulder against the door and tripped down into a large gloomy kitchen with low, black ceiling beams. The room was deep in shadow and nearly dark on a late summer’s afternoon. Magnus was standing with his back to me by the sink. He looked round, amused. ‘Tom, steady on.’

Was he ever going to take me seriously again? ‘The door was stuck,’ I said.

He looked away. ‘So – what’s your verdict?’

Through the dusty window above the sink, I could see out into the overgrown garden. ‘It’s north facing, we’re not going to be able to grow much in the shade.’

His shoulders tensed. ‘I want to see the garden.’ He walked over to the back door and slid the top and bottom bolts back with ease. Everything obeyed his touch in this house.

I followed him out onto a narrow red-bricked terrace. The large overgrown garden sloped down to the woods. Amongst the brambles and the long grasses, I spotted the remnants of fruit frames and raspberry canes, and traced the remains of a planting scheme; there was a drift of foxgloves growing alongside some Himalayan poppies.

Magnus looked round. ‘What do you think?’

‘The person who lived here knew their plants,’ I said. ‘They understood what grows in shade.’ I was talking gobbledygook – foxgloves don’t need shade, Himalayan poppies grow in the mountains under clear blue skies.

A breeze rippled along the top of the long grass; sunlight fell in a pool right where we were standing.

‘This is a magical spot,’ he said.

I stepped out of the sunlight into the shade. I felt a sort of despair – of all the places – he picks this.

‘I’m going to explore,’ he said. ‘Are you coming?’ He climbed down off the terrace and was soon swallowed up to his shoulders in bracken. ‘C’mon Tom, you can always get the jacket dry-cleaned.’

The grass was newly flattened near the hedge running along the lane side of the garden. ‘Someone’s been here.’ I pointed. ‘Over that way – there’s a path.’ Sometimes when it got bad Susan would let me hold her hand. I stared up at the grey sky, flat and dead-looking.

‘Tom, are you coming?’ Magnus shouted.

I heard him wading through the grass, stirring up a swarm of flies. I scrambled into the damp, sticky undergrowth. My jacket and trousers were coated in tiny green spores; a fly flew into my eye. I stopped and fished out a black, soggy mess on my fingertip.

‘Where are you?’ Magnus shouted.

‘Over here.’ A bramble grazed the side of my face; a streak of pinkish blood smeared my palm. I wasn’t worried; blood doesn’t bother me. I edged round a clump of stinging nettles and came into a flattened patch of grass. I stepped back, swatting at flies, and stumbled into a wooden structure smothered in ivy; dried tendrils clung to the long grass where the ivy had been torn back from the entrance. I approached the door and saw that the walls were made of glass and coated with thick green mould. The doorknob was unusual; it was a crystal design and looked like it belonged in a bedroom. Without stopping to think, I grabbed hold of it and the door clicked back as if someone had opened it the other side. The panic went off, roaring inside my head like a thousand tiny insects. I stumbled in the darkness and fell against a sticky green wall. Susan was back. ‘Tom we’ve been through this – breathe deeply, calmly and whatever it is that is bothering you will go.’

A smudge of light trickled through the glass walls and ceiling; there was just enough light to see my way. I went over to the straggly collection of plants growing in trays and found a few sundew snares struggling for life; behind the tray of snares was a row of pots containing fluted pitcher plants, wilting against the glass. All the plants were carnivorous; they were the standard types that a young boy might cultivate on his bedroom windowsill. The gardener had been more of an enthusiast than an expert. I stood listening for the sounds of insect life, but the glasshouse was silent as a tomb. I found a rusty watering can with a long, thin spout and emptied the last dregs into the tray of snares. I turned to go and saw that the door had closed behind me. I reached for the handle, fully expecting to find the door stuck – careful careful – but it opened easily.

I had done well, Susan's top patient. I could do this. I followed my tracks back through the insect-infested jungle, and stopped to take stock of my bearings. I could hear Magnus trampling around a few feet away. A clump of ferns parted and he appeared, thrashing at a swarm of flies with a long, bendy twig. 'This place is wild.' He pointed with his stick. 'There's a whole bunch of yellow archangel back there.'

'Magnus.' I wanted to tell him about the ugly little greenhouse.

'How big is the garden? What did it say on the website?' he said.

'Around three hundred square feet – why?'

He waved the stick over his head, swatting at the flies. 'It's pretty spacious. It could take four chalets, five at a push. What about the house, do you like the house?'

I thought I heard a car pull up, a door slammed. I had to duck to avoid getting hit by his whirling stick. 'I think we could find somewhere better,' I said without really thinking.

He dropped the stick and stood looking at the ground. 'It needs work; it could be beautiful.' He came over and kissed my forehead. 'You have to imagine it completely gutted, rebuilt, landscaped.' His hand was on my shoulder. 'We don't have to decide straight away.'

A tiny part of me froze. A voice whispered – he's treating you like a child; we're never going to get back to normal, to how things used to be.

A woman called from the direction of the house. 'Doctor Hunt, Mr. Barker. Are you there?'

Magnus looked round. 'It's Jessica from Tyler's, she said she might drop by.' He waved the stick above his head like an enthusiastic tour guide. 'Over here,' he shouted and set off back to the house.

My arm was throbbing where the ant had bitten me. I rolled up the sleeve to inspect the damage. The welt had risen into a purplish, angry-looking lump, the size of a five pence coin. I noticed tiny black dots that looked like insect eggs on the backs of my hands and shirt cuffs. I brushed my face and my fingers came away coated in an ashy smear; there was the smell of burning in the air. I looked up. A slender woman in tight jeans was watching me from the terrace; she turned away and peered over Magnus' shoulder, pointing to something on the piece of paper he was holding. They made a handsome pair, he elegantly gangly, she neat and slim. I wondered, and this wasn't the first time – how gay Magnus really was?

Her hand slid off his arm, she turned round and our gazes collided. Frightened that my thoughts showed on my face, I looked away and noticed a wisp of smoke wafting up from behind the hedge.

She clambered down off the terrace. 'Mr. Barker, lovely to meet you at last. Magnus has told me a little about you.' She was wearing a beautiful wedding band made up of a serpent-shaped creature with a green emerald eye. She laughed nervously. 'You're a meteorologist; that must be fascinating.' She hovered a few feet away, separated from me by a trailing bramble.

'What're they burning?' I said.

'It doesn't happen very often, it's nothing to worry about. Doctor Hunt tells me that he's planning to build some chalets in the garden; he wants to set up a therapeutic community or something?' The nervous laugh again. 'I didn't realise he was a psychiatric doctor?'

Too many questions. If she was that curious, she could ask Magnus herself. 'Why the bonfire?' I said.

She picked at the bramble, avoiding my eye. ‘There’s been a foot and mouth outbreak. They burn the carcasses.’ She glanced up, her green gaze slightly dented.

I was about to say something friendly when Magnus shouted from the terrace. ‘Tom – look what I’ve found.’ It would be some plant he’d stumbled on – he does this sometimes to make amends. He was crouched down beside a small brick outhouse. ‘Tom – come here.’

I climbed up onto the terrace and peered over his shoulder at a strange, unfamiliar thing; it was a few moments before I realised that it was a trap, big and rusty, about a yard in diameter with raggedy-hinged claws.

He glanced up. ‘Isn’t that something, the mechanism’s set. Look, Tom.’

The roaring inside my head started up again, black specks flying like tiny crows. I must not close my eyes, it makes it so much worse. Susan was clutching my hand, hanging on tight. ‘Incredible,’ I said. Why is it that sometimes we are totally at one, and at other times we are at opposite poles? What Magnus saw as a beautiful piece of mechanical engineering was horrible to me, as horrible as the stench inside the house, as horrible as the sticky ash all over my face and clothes, as horrible as the mouldy little greenhouse.

Chapter Two

Tom

I knew Magnus would have the final word; even before my ‘blip’, was how he put it – we never used the word breakdown – he made the decisions. I blame the indolent streak in my nature. If I had been bolder, braver, not such a slouch, I would have summoned up the energy to fight my corner. But if deep down you are never sure of your corner, the fight isn’t worth it. Perhaps it’s because I have been overly aware that I’ve pootled around on the periphery, predicting weather patterns whilst Magnus has worked at the coalface. He arrived in England nearly twenty years ago, fresh from medical school in Toronto, and secured his first post at one of the top maximum security therapeutic hospitals that specialised in treating offenders suffering from severe personality disorders. Magnus was good at his job; moving between hospitals, he’d climbed the ranks, and by the time I met him he was well established in his field. In the early days of our relationship I would press him about his work but my constant questions soured the atmosphere between us. From time to time his name would appear in the newspaper in connection with a high-profile patient that he was treating, and I would read with a mixture of awe and disappointment just how much he had hidden from me, but by then I had learned not to trespass. It all changed on the day we visited Lane End; that morning, out of the blue, he suggested we drive out to Beechridge, the new hospital he had been working at for the last couple of months. The chance to get a glimpse into his inner sanctum was an opportunity

that was too good to miss; it was only after we had left the hospital that he told me we were booked in to view a cottage nearby.

* * *

On the drive back to London we travelled in silence for the first few miles, trapped in tetchy uncomfortable bits of ourselves. I abandoned the map, letting Magnus and the sat nav guide us back to London. I nodded off against the warm glass and was jolted awake as he pulled up onto the verge. We were still only a few miles from the cottage on a narrow tarmac lane surrounded by woodland. I stayed in the car; I was comfortably groggy. The sun was warm; in the distance I could hear the faint hum of cars from the main road. The sky was a pale blue and streaked with cloud. It was a perfect evening. I had a snapshot image of our life here in the future: balmy summer days spent pottering in the sloping garden, sitting on the terrace watching the sun go down. Susan would say it was fear of the new, the unknown – take the plunge, don't hang back – she knew what she was talking about, she'd been in the job long enough. I forced myself out of the car and went over to Magnus. He was kneeling on the verge beside a grey squirrel; it lay on its back, its legs splayed, its head sticky in a dark pool of blood.

The brief pastoral idyll shrivelled. 'Don't touch it,' I said. It was clear to me as a bloody cross on a door.

'We can't just leave it here.' He grabbed the animal by the tail and tossed it into the grass.

Tiny red dots of blood decorated my shirt and the front of my jacket. I wiped my face; the back of my hand came away smeared with blood. I went back to the car and dabbed ineffectually with a piece of tissue from the glove compartment.

‘It’ll wash off,’ he said as we jolted off the verge. He was driving too fast, swerving into the bends and out across the narrow lane. We went round a corner and met a tractor coming the other way. Magnus slammed on the brakes and drove the car up onto the verge. The driver squeezed past, scarcely acknowledging our existence. We sat crushed against the hedgerow, the sound of the tractor receding into the distance.

‘What’s wrong?’ I said.

‘You don’t want to do it, do you?’ he said.

I stared out into the lush greenness. ‘If you really like it; if it’s what you want. I don’t mind.’

‘What do you want Tom?’

I hated it when he pretended like this. ‘I’m easy.’ I was falling down a deep well.

His hands relaxed on the steering wheel. ‘This has got to be something we both want.’

‘It is.’

‘Do you want to stay in London?’

‘I thought you wanted to get out.’

‘That’s not what I asked. What do you want Tom? It doesn’t have to be heart of the countryside, we could always stay in London.’

I wished he wouldn’t lie; there was no option, there never was with him. We lumbered off the verge. He drove carefully, keeping to the left side of the lane until we reached the edge of the woods and crept out onto the main road. The last of the afternoon sun had faded. It was overcast; a few of the cars had switched on their headlights, the beams flared against the pale grey sky.

By the time we hit the motorway we were talking about easy neutral stuff: what we were going to cook for dinner, whose turn it was to put the rubbish out, a vague itinerary for the week ahead. I was drowsy. My head was resting against his shoulder; we often drive like this. I felt him tense as he swung out into the fast lane to overtake a large lorry; a spray of rainwater shot out from the huge tyres, smearing the lights from oncoming cars in a bright arc across the windscreen.

‘Tom you’re not listening. I was trying to remember how much each of those chalet things came out at. I was thinking we could fit about five in the garden.’

I hitched myself up, forcing myself awake. ‘What garden?’

He accelerated to overtake the lorry. ‘The cottage, Lane End.’

I clung onto the side of the seat, my heart quickening. He managed to overtake on a slight hill and swerved in ahead of the lorry. A horn boomed through the rain; lights flashed in the rearview mirror. ‘Arsehole.’ He moved his knee away from my hand. ‘How many do you think we could fit in the garden?’

I closed my eyes. ‘I don’t know,’ I said, fighting the strange feeling in my stomach. ‘Five probably.’

‘We could have two in each chalet. I don’t think we want to go bigger than ten to start with. What you think?’

Magnus had always wanted to run his own community. When we first met he’d talked about this doctor called William Tuke who, motivated by his Quaker faith, set up the famous York Retreat in 1796. Unlike the terrifying asylums of the time, where the mentally ill languished in dungeon-like conditions, chained to the walls in squalid cells, Tuke’s establishment provided a quiet rural environment, where people crushed by life, broken, and sometimes

unmendable, were given the space and time to recover. Magnus envisaged a similar clientele, those that had hit a dead end, a brick wall, a very different category of patient than the ones he had dealt with all his working life. My role in the venture was peripheral, it was in no sense a collaboration, but that didn't matter, I was easily transportable, I could work anywhere as long as I had a computer and the right sort of software to hand. In my line of work I deal with clients on a remote basis for the most part; there are the odd meetings and phone calls but these were few and far between. Magnus' pipedream had been rumbling on for years, way before we met. He had researched suitable locations and had drawn up a list of possible properties; when I insisted we stay close to London, the search was narrowed to the South East. There were a couple of possibilities, but he never quite found what he was looking for. There was always a glitch: not enough land, the garden was too small, the ceilings too low, planning permission would be a nightmare. I didn't take his venture seriously; as far as I was concerned it was a pleasant fantasy, a delusional space that made it easier for us to bear the locked room that was his work.

'I've got a good feeling about this cottage. I think it's going to work. What do you think? You're very quiet,' he said.

'Sounds good. We're getting a bit close to that truck.'

He glanced into the rearview mirror and pulled out into the fast lane, the needle on the speedometer started to climb.

'Do we have to go this fast?'

'It's a future thing of course; it's not going to happen straight away. We can just live there for the first few years. It's got everything we want, enough land to build on. Jessica said we'd probably get planning. The price is good. 'One

of the chalets could be your office. You've never had an office, somewhere to store your computers and charts and stuff.'

I didn't need an office, I was perfectly happy with my computer perched on the little bedroom table in the Blackheath flat.

Magnus glanced at me. 'Say something.'

We were wedged between two enormous lorries, great dark towers, and taillights leaking blearily into the night. Susan says that my 'panic events' are a blind to hide something else. 'What're you hiding Tom?' she'd say to me. These CBT people like to fix your fears onto something concrete. 'What about Kitty?' I said.

'I thought we'd been through all this. I thought you were okay with it. What's changed?'

'Nothing's changed. I don't think we should be having this conversation right now.'

Kitty was a long story. I have a younger sister called Angela; she's not that much younger, a couple of years or so, but for her it's a lifetime. She's the free spirit, the tearaway. She got pregnant at university. She struggled with bringing up her daughter for twelve years, and then gave up, which is when I stepped in. It could've been a pain, but as it turned out, it was one of the best things that's happened to me; apart from Magnus of course.

'If you're not okay about this move, you have to tell me now,' Magnus said.

'Do you have to drive so fast?'

'If I go any slower we'll have an accident.' He jerked the wheel and we drew out alongside the lorry, which had started to accelerate. The engine of the old Volvo sounded strained.

‘Are you saying you don’t want to do this?’

‘No I’m not saying that.’ We passed the lorry as we reached a slight hill. The engine judder was getting louder. ‘I’m worried about Kitty.’

‘We’ve been through this. You’ve not been well Tom. She has to understand.’

‘It’s her home,’ I mumbled. ‘This is really going to hit her.’

We were driving at a more sedate pace in the inside lane; cars pelted past at speed, splattering the windscreen.

Magnus glanced at me. ‘She knows the score. It was only ever a temporary arrangement. We can’t keep going through this.’

I stared out into the dark motorway. A gap had opened up where there were no cars; for a moment everything was dark.

‘You have to tell me if you’ve changed your mind,’ Magnus said.

‘No, I haven’t, of course I haven’t.’

‘You have to think of yourself, your own health. Kitty can be quite demanding, you’re not strong enough right now. What does Susan think?’

Susan would never venture an opinion on something this sensitive; Magnus knew that, he was making conversation. It was all decided.

His hand was back on my knee. ‘I don’t mind telling her.’

My heart felt like lead. ‘No, I’ll tell her.’

I closed my eyes, shutting out the glare of the oncoming cars. ‘Where will she go?’ I was thinking of Len, her fencing coach, and his wife Fran, or Imelda, her best friend from school.

‘She can always go back to live with Angela.’

I sat up, the glare making me nauseous. ‘Magnus don’t.’

He increased the pressure on my knee. 'I know how hard this is for you.'

'She's not going back to Angela.'

The rain had stopped; the city was a hazy lump on the horizon.

Magnus removed his hand from my knee. 'We were only ever caretakers Tom.'

'She's not going back to Angela,' I said. Len's big, old, untidy fivestorey pile. Imelda's stuffy little apartment, her other friend Sheryl's wacko caravan, anywhere but back with my sister. I pushed myself up against the seat; I was sweating, I could feel the plastic sticking to my back.

Magnus pulled out into the fast lane to overtake a slow-moving truck spitting bits of straw out from under a tarpaulin cover. He thumped his hand against the wheel. 'Okay, okay, she can move with us, if that's what you want.'

I was having difficulty breathing. I felt light-headed, strange. 'It's not what you want.'

'You're saying all this is my fault. You're blaming me. I thought this was going to be a new start for us. I thought it's what you wanted.'

I closed my eyes, feeling the lights of the cars fluttering over my lids. I was fighting back tears; the past, that old place, was it ever going to come back? 'It is what I want,' I said.

'But not without Kitty.'

I hated these conversations.

'She's not yours Tom; you have to let her go. Angela's going to want her daughter back at some stage. Kitty's going to want her mother.' His hand was back on my knee. 'It was something you were always going to have to face sooner or later.'

The road ahead was unusually clear for a weekday evening; we had hit an empty pocket, a space outside time. The next ten to fifteen years was being decided in this smelly old car, we were shuffling off our old life, everything that was familiar. I closed my eyes in an effort to quell the panic, I felt giddy, like I was on a swing being pushed too high, unable to shout out and tell the person to stop.

* * *

So often when I am away from Kitty I think about that dreary November afternoon when it all began. It was a Sunday. I was in the front room with the papers; we'd just finished a large lunch. Magnus was in his study working. I polished off the rest of the wine and settled down for a short nap. I told myself I was working, planning the outline for the next book, *The Unruly Cloud*. I'm a meteorologist; increasingly, I've let my client base slip and have focused on teaching and writing about the subject. My special interest is the history of clouds and cloud atlases, and I had in mind a short monograph about an eighteenth-century cloud man, Luke Howard, whose compendium *The Climate of London* was the first book on urban climatology – you could say he was the godfather of clouds. I'm a bit of a geek like that. I collect eighteenth-century meteorological instruments, barometers, thermometers and hydrometers, measurers of humidity. I was torn between slanting the book towards an examination of Howard's cloud paintings and taking it in the direction of the 1783 Great Fog, caused by a massive volcanic eruption from the Eldeyjar in Iceland and the Asama Yama in Japan a few months later. A great dust cloud was carried by westerly winds round the Northern Hemisphere, blanketing continental Europe in a deep fog, an event that had a profound influence on the eleven-year-old Howard, prompting his lifelong fascination with the weather. As

I mulled over the pros and cons of the two approaches, working on the titles, imagining the covers, assessing marketability, my mind kept drifting back to the dust cloud and for some reason, in the way the mind does, my thoughts did a somersault and I was thinking of my sister Angela.

The last couple of times I'd seen Angela were over two years ago; she'd turned up at my flat out of the blue with her ten-year-old daughter in tow. She wanted me to lend her five thousand pounds to buy a piece of photographic equipment. At the time I had a lucrative contract with NASA and could afford to write off the debt, but a stubborn, peeved part of me held out on her. I should've been bigger; she was a struggling single parent, and her photography was her livelihood. When my mother, who was visiting at the time, suggested she take out a loan, the floodgates opened. Mindful of my niece, a stranger to me back then, I made the mistake of suggesting Angela tone it down in front of her daughter. This prompted an angrier, more virulent outburst. I was a fucking superior arse who'd always looked down my nose at her. Her daughter watched on without a flicker of emotion, she'd heard it a million times before. It took a while for everyone to calm down and communicate like ordinary human beings before the real reason for my sister's visit came out; she wanted me to take the kid. Seconds after she'd dropped her bombshell, there was a ring on the door. I went to answer it and found Magnus standing there, damp from the rain, all long coat and eyes and large bony features, more beautiful than I remembered him from Arnold's barbecue. And there I was wearing those awful orange socks and the shit-coloured cardigan.

The problem between myself and Angela was partially money, stoked by her fixation that I won hands down when it came to our mother; it wasn't even a contest as far as she was concerned. It is difficult to tell it from the position of the

favoured one, but let's just say Angela didn't help herself. Unable to compete with her smug arsehole of a brother, she launched into a full-scale rebellion, becoming the very thing our mother, who we both called by her Christian name, Sylvia, dreaded. Her daughter had wilfully made the choice to embark on motherhood without a man, she hadn't even tried to find a husband, whilst Sylvia had been abandoned by our father and left to struggle with two young children. Angela knew that her choice would wound Sylvia deeply; pregnant in her first year at university, she dropped out of medical school, intent on pursuing the itinerant life of a documentary filmmaker – an artist! I on the other hand, the dutiful son, my mother's rock, chose the sensible path – science at university leading to a career in meteorology. As it happened, my mother loved nothing better than to speculate about the weather. It was her daily obsession; her diaries, which I only discovered after she died, were wonderful daily records of the weather, the clouds, the rain patterns, predictions for the days, weeks and months ahead.

I was my mother's creature, Angela screamed at me. We'd met at King's Cross station a few months later. I'd made the mistake of bringing Magnus with me; we were an item by then. His presence rattled her and it didn't go well. When I explained that I'd just had new windows installed in the flat and couldn't loan her the five thousand she was still on about, she exploded: I'd never taken any risks, had lived a twilight life, buried in my cloud atlases and pathetic weather diaries. With all hope lost of securing the much-needed five thousand, the black card was drawn. Here I was with a partner at last, and I hadn't told Sylvia had I? I was a fucking coward. This was followed by a lot of wild armwaving, and the pronouncement that from now on I was dead to her, she was expunging me, exorcising my oppressive miasma, the great fog that had loomed

over her life. She was relieved that I had turned down her request for a loan because from now on she was free of me, she didn't have to see me or think about me ever again. As I watched my unhappy sister disappearing into the crowd, dragging her child, loaded down under the weight of an enormous backpack, it occurred to me that she was close to destitute and was carrying her worldly possessions on her back. I wanted to shout out that she could have the money, and looking back now I still regret that I let Magnus' hand on my shoulder stop me. I should have gone after her, battled through the crowds, humiliated myself, begged her to take the money.

I was so intensely caught up in this last painful encounter with Angela two years earlier that I didn't hear the knock on the door. Someone was banging on the window. I sat up, ready to deal with a bunch of annoying kids. Angela, with stringy hair clipped up in a messy bun, peered in at me. I was all wrongfooted; it was as if the intensity of my thinking had summoned my sister onto my doorstep. I got up from the sofa, bits of the past flying in fragments, and let her in. Wrinkled by the sun, still skinny, still poor, nothing much had changed; she had come with the daughter, now twelve years old and a grumpy copy of her mother. It had started to rain and as I closed the door I was hit by a sour, feral odour brought out by their damp clothing. Angela strode into the living room, leaving me in the hallway with the daughter. The girl peered out at me from under a grubby hoody, all eyes attached to a pale, pointed face. God knows what stories her mother had told her about me.

Angela was in the front room peering at the mantelpiece, checking my itinerary. She glanced round. 'Meet your goddaughter.' The girl hovered in the doorway.

'My goddaughter?' Some part of me intuited where this was leading.

Angela turned her back on me and dumped a large, smelly-looking canvas bag onto Magnus' Persian silk rug. She turned to the daughter. 'Kit, this is my brother Tom, you remember him. He's your godfather.'

The girl's deadpan look didn't quite hold; she was as surprised as I was by the news. Fighting the urge to tug the bag off the rug, fearful of what might leak out, I followed my sister out into the corridor. 'What the hell?'

Wedged into the cramped, dark hall, she gave off the same sour smell as the child. She looked exhausted, done in, but not the least bit embarrassed that the last time we'd met she'd told me to go to hell, that I was the single worst thing that had happened in her life. But that was Angela, irrational, impossible; we used to be so close.

'I need to sort a few things.' She pulled a pack of tobacco out of her shoulder bag.

The large, smelly holdall was still in the living room along with the kid. I knew exactly where this was going. 'She can't stay,' I said.

Rolling a cigarette with one hand, she reached for the latch. 'It's just for the weekend.'

'That's impossible.'

She tugged the door open. 'One fucking weekend Tom.' She pulled a piece of tobacco off her tongue. 'Take her to the zoo or something. She likes animals.' She bolted onto the step and out into the street.

I didn't have the energy to go after her; the vision of the ugly tussle in full view of the neighbours defeated me. I went back into the living room where the child was sitting perched on the edge of the sofa staring at the floor. 'I'm Tom', I said.

She glanced up, her eyes were enormous and a very dark brown, almost black. 'I know that,' she said.

'And you're Kit.'

'Kit makes me sound like a boy. You can call me Kitty.'

'Would you like something to eat?' I said

She shook her head.

I went over and sat on the arm of the sofa. The feral smell was strong; I couldn't work out if it was coming from the child or the filthy, black canvas bag parked in the middle of Magnus' rug. 'Would you like something to drink?'

She sat hunched with her hands tucked between her skinny knees. 'No.'

'What would you like to do then?'

'Nothing,' she mumbled.

'You can't do nothing for the whole weekend.'

She sat back against the sofa, staring into space; I was too stupid to warrant her attention.

I got up off the arm of the chair. 'How about you take a bath?'

She looked round, her large black eyes fierce. 'What?'

'I can get you a towel and some shampoo.'

She watched me suspiciously. 'I don't want one.'

I wasn't going to put up with the stink for the whole weekend. 'I think it might be a good idea. It's upstairs, first door on the right.' She stayed put, ignoring me.

I went out into the hall. Magnus was standing at the top of the stairs. 'What's going on? Where's Angela?'

'She's gone. She left her daughter here. It's just for the weekend.'

There was a noise behind me; Kit, now Kitty, stood in the doorway, grubby and hunched, a tall, skinny version of her mother. ‘She’s not coming back,’ she said. She peered up at Magnus. ‘I’m going to take a bath now.’ She went up the stairs, her filthy trainers leaving muddy marks on the pale carpet.

‘It’s the first on the left,’ Magnus said.

She barely glanced at him. ‘I know.’

‘Do you remember me? I’m Magnus, Tom’s friend.’

‘I know.’ She pushed past him and went into the bathroom; the door clicked shut and the lock turned.

‘Is she going to be alright in there?’ Magnus said.

There was short silence followed by the sound of the bath tap. We crept off to the kitchen where we could hear water swilling in the bath overhead.

‘Have you got a number for Angela?’ Magnus said.

‘We can get it from Kit.’ I corrected myself, ‘Kitty.’

He sat down at the table. ‘She’s right, she’s not coming back is she.’ When Angela didn’t ring that Saturday I wasn’t worried. By the time it got to nine on Sunday evening I was uneasy. I prized a phone number out of Kitty for a place in Holborn that turned out be some sort of hostel. They had a record of someone answering Angela’s description who’d left the day before. On Monday there was still no sign of her, and by Tuesday I was thinking of calling the police. But Magnus stopped me; he knew the system too well. If we threw her out she’d land up in the hands of the authorities. It would be one dismal children’s home after the next; the best she could hope for was a couple years’ stay with a foster family.

Over the next few years our life shrank out of all recognition. Once we got used to our disrupted routine and let go of our previous orderly existence, life

with a teenage kid, the troubles at school, the fights, the jealousies, the sheer exhaustion of having to share our life with this demanding interloper, created a new equilibrium and we found that we enjoyed the company of this too tall kid. I didn't have any yearning to go back to the way we were; it never occurred to me that Magnus felt differently.

* * *

We had slowed down to a virtual standstill, hitting the logjam of traffic coming into London. Magnus' hand was back resting on my knee.

'I'll tell Kitty,' I said and leaned back, holding on tight to Magnus' hand. Kitty would survive this; I wasn't deserting her, this was a change, a new direction, a fresh challenge. My heart felt like lead – she would be devastated.

Chapter Three

Magnus

When I first met Tom it wasn't love at first sight, God knows – far from it. Something about him irritated me profoundly, a vivid first impression that over the years was difficult to shake. There was a barbecue given by some married friends of mine, acquaintances that I lost contact with soon afterwards. The husband Arnold was attached briefly to The Anderson, a large therapeutic mental hospital in South London, where I was working at the time. I was in two minds about the invitation. I wouldn't have gone if the prospect of another empty Sunday hadn't filled me with stomach-crunching dread.

Travelling back there – it is a grey autumn day; by the time I arrive at five in the afternoon it is nearly twilight. I turn up over two hours late outside a dusty house hidden behind an overgrown front garden. I am out of sorts, and already slightly tipsy, clutching a bottle of white wine that I'd dug up in a nearby convenience store. The door is ajar; voices drift from the direction of the garden. Arnold's wife has a loud shrieking laugh like a tropical bird. It isn't an unpleasant laugh. I follow it down a narrow corridor to a galley kitchen leading out into a small garden with a paved patio area perched on a patch of scrubby grass. As I step out of the back door I am engulfed in a greasy waft of burger fat. I fight my way out of the plume of smoke to face a man in a striped butcher's apron holding a flimsy paper plate. A charred blackened something weights the plate so that it sags at an angle.

'You've arrived just in time,' the person in the striped apron says, thrusting the plate at me.

As the smoke clears I get a better look at the man, quite a bit smaller than me, around the same age. I detect a cardigan under the apron and a pair of slightly too short slacks, along with trainers and orange socks. This person is beaming at me, his head tilted to one side with the look of a chubby bullfinch. He extends an eager hand that I'm not quick enough to avoid. 'You must be Magnus,' he says.

As my hand slaps up against his, the plate tips and a charred burger bounces onto the pale pink patio. The accident draws a squawk from my colleague's wife. Her husband mops the grease off my suede jacket, rescuing the sausage and thrusting another plate at me with some sort of chicken wing hidden under a piece of salad. In the midst of the apologies for their clumsy friend I catch the name Tom and learn that he is a neighbour. Staring down at the chicken wing, melancholy surges through me in a tidal wave. This clumsy character, with his orange socks and flapping trousers, is the reason for my invitation. I am careful to keep away from my prospective mate, which isn't easy, given that there are only my married friends, my 'date' and another couple at the party. It is beginning to rain; the barbecue moves inside, and taking advantage of the change of location I say my goodbyes and flee.

The next day at work Arnold and I don't mention the barbecue and discuss work-related matters. Nevertheless the memory of the miserable afternoon lingers. It seems that my single, unattached status is drawing attention; enough to organise a proxy barbecue with a couple of crowd fillers. It is typical of well-meaning heterosexuals to imagine that two gay men make a match, a sort of 'any old gay man will do' mentality. Three weeks after the event I receive a text from a person called Tom inviting me to lunch. I don't reply, putting off the inevitable excuse.

It is a busy week. Saturday night arrives and I haven't sent my text; by the time Sunday afternoon comes round I'm still dithering. This Tom, who is a neighbour of my colleague, lives miles away in the remote outer reaches of the Piccadilly line. I am recovering from the flu; my temperature has settled to just above normal, but I am still muggy and light-headed. I should've stayed at home and gone to bed. It is gone four by the time I arrive outside a sixties redbrick block of flats in a gentrified residential area. I take the lift to the third floor and knock on number 36, a pale green door facing out onto a narrow, uncarpeted landing. I wait – no one comes. I peer through the letterbox into an empty hall, sure I hear voices inside the flat; he's changed his mind and is hiding. I ring the doorbell again. A door slams and a male voice calls out. 'Coming, coming.' I spring back from the door filled with the urge to turn tail and run – I could be down the stairs and out of sight, he would never know I'd been. But then the door opens.

'Magnus,' I say. 'We met at Arnold's.' This is a tragedy. 'You invited me to lunch.'

'Did I?'

He looks perplexed. He has no idea who I am. For a wild moment I contemplate showing him the text he'd sent the previous Sunday. 'I'm sorry, I should've replied to your text,' I say. He is wearing a manure-coloured, longish cardigan and the same too short trousers and the orange socks. I stare at his feet wondering how many pairs of these socks he owns.

'That was next Sunday,' he says.

I hear the sound of voices, women's voices. An older woman calls out, 'Tom – where are you?'

‘I’m so sorry,’ I say. ‘I’m so sorry.’ I want to shrink away and disappear through a hole in the concrete floor. I feel his hand on my arm.

‘It’s really good to see you. I’m so pleased you came.’ He is smiling with kind eyes. ‘Even if it is on the wrong day at the wrong time.’ I don’t pull away. ‘I haven’t brought any wine,’ I say.

His hand doesn’t leave my arm. ‘I’d love you to meet the family.’

‘I can’t disturb you.’

‘You won’t be disturbing us, not at all; they’ll be delighted to meet you.’

He hasn’t taken his hand off my arm. ‘I’m not sure,’ I hear myself say. A rush of something that feels like home sweeps over me. I steady myself against the door.

‘Please,’ he says. ‘Don’t run away.’

I follow him down the narrow hall. A child’s figure flits across the end of the corridor, and, for a wild, head-splitting moment, I think he is married, and that I have read the invitation all wrong. I enter a wide, pleasant sitting room with a big expanse of windows looking out over a drab winter park. A small woman in her mid to late thirties, perhaps early forties, it is difficult to tell, glances up, her gaze hostile. In a frightened, sweaty leap, my first thought is that this is the wife, used to coping with her husband’s bisexuality, defensive, terrierlike, ready to see me off. The child, a pale, unhappy-looking creature, scowls out at me from under a blonde mop of greasy hair. A strained misery pervades the room. I am interrupting something important. Sitting across from the mother and child, on the end of the L-shaped sofa, is a small, stout woman in her late sixties, early seventies, neatly dressed in matching fern green twin set and woollen skirt, with the green picked out in the piping on a pair of shiny shoes and matching bag. The woman beams at me with the same small sparkly dark eyes as her son.

Tom, in his apron, walks behind the sofa, his hand brushing her shoulder. 'Mum, meet Magnus. He's a colleague of Arnold's.'

Her gaze sweeps me from head to foot. She gives an imperceptible nod and I read her approval. I was, when I was alive, an elegant dresser; I put it down to my Greek heritage. She glances up at her son. 'Arnold, the one with the squeaky wife, parrot lady.'

Tom grins at me and shrugs.

I instinctively like his mother, and feel a wave of homesickness. My mother, who died when I was twenty, would have warmed to this sprightly 'can do' woman. I feel ridiculous tears pricking the back of my lids, and am seized with an irrational, impossible desire to be taken into this rickety family.

The hostile mother of the grubby, unhappy child stands up. 'Do you live in this block?' Her impatient gaze brushes over me.

'No, no, I live the other side of town, Blackheath.'

The woman shoots Tom a look, not bothering to hide the question – what the hell's he doing here? He blanks her and walks into the kitchen. 'Can I get you glass of wine?' He holds up two bottles. 'White or red?'

The woman's gaze bores into me, willing me to refuse. 'I really must go.' I turn to the mother. 'I stupidly got the wrong Sunday.'

The neat old lady beams up at me. 'So easy to do.' Her gaze strays to my shoes, and flits back up taking in my navy-blue camel hair coat. 'Now you've come all this way, stay for a glass of wine at least.'

Tom returns from the kitchen holding a large glass of red wine. 'The white's just dregs.'

'It's really very good, I got it from Sainsbury's, marked down from ten ninety nine to five ninety nine,' his mother says.

I take a sip. I feel myself floating for a moment, a peculiar out-of-body experience that I am well used to now. It is how I exist; back then it was horribly unnerving. I sit down with a thump on the low sofa beside his mother, by some miracle not spilling the wine, my head swimming. Tom lifts the glass out of my hand while his mother leans across with instructions to loosen my coat, remove my scarf, telling him to open the windows. Someone helps me out of my thick coat, loosening the buttons on my jacket. I close my eyes and lean back against the cushions, the prickliness behind my lids threatening to break out. It is the waspish, resentful voice of the younger woman, who I am only half sure is Tom's wife, that saves me from further mortification.

'I'm really sorry,' her voice is crisp, laced with impatience. 'But we must finish this conversation.'

'Angela,' Tom says, 'we will finish it, there's no rush.'

I am floating, my helpless, useless self, sliding into blue sea, brilliant against a pale sky, the heat of the sun burning my lids, gulls crying, the soles of my feet scorched on hot rocks, the sound of the surf, my sisters' voices nearby, my mother shouting instructions.

'It might be sensible to call a taxi. He needs to get home,' the angry woman says.

'Darling,' the older woman cuts in, 'we can't just pack him off in this state.'

The angry woman ignores her. 'Tom do you have a number for a local cab company?'

I am on a hot rock, the sun on the soles of my feet, scorching my arms, gulls overhead. She had to ask him for the number; she doesn't live here, an exwife with his ex-child. It explained the atmosphere – a divorced man making

arrangements with his estranged wife, carving up the property along with the child, his mother there as arbitrator.

‘Mum,’ the girl says. ‘Stop pushing it.’ Pushing what?

‘Kitty,’ the older woman says, who I now realised is the granny, ‘Tom hasn’t said he isn’t keen, have you darling?’

Everyone is Darling to this calm sensible old woman. On the edge of the Aegean Sea my mother and sisters’ voices fade into the sound of the gulls. I want to be called Darling, a strange English endearment, quaint, old-fashioned.

‘I don’t think we should be discussing this now,’ the girl says.

‘When are we discussing it?’ the angry woman snaps.

‘Mum stop,’ the girl wails. ‘Just stop, I don’t care where I live.’

‘What’ve you been saying to her?’ her mother says to the granny.

‘I haven’t said a thing. Tom, tell her, I haven’t said anything to Kitty, I’m not getting involved.’

‘Then what’re you doing here?’

‘Angela stop it,’ Tom snaps.

‘No please explain. What is she doing here? This is between you and me, she doesn’t even need to be here. This is nothing to do with her.’

‘I invited her.’

‘Why?’

‘Precisely because I knew it would escalate into this.’

‘Fuck you Tom.’

‘Mum stop swearing please.’ The girl’s voice is as tight and anxious as her mother’s.

‘No, I’m not going to be silenced. Tom if you don’t want to do this, you just have to let me know. You don’t need mum at your side holding your hand, man up and tell me straight.’

My heart does a little jump, standing on the baking rock, the blue sky beating down. Angela is his sister, the child is in all probability his niece. I haven’t misread the signs after all.

Tom’s voice is contained. ‘I don’t want to do this now if you don’t mind.’

‘What if I do?’

‘Darling can’t this wait?’ the grandmother intercedes.

‘No it can’t wait. I’ve been waiting all fucking morning, and now it’s the afternoon. How much longer are you going to make me wait for a simple answer to my very simple question?’

‘Mum stop it,’ the child wails. ‘You’re embarrassing yourself.’

‘I’m sorry Kit, I have to get this sorted, I’m due in Madrid the day after tomorrow. I have to make plans.’

‘Darling, I know you’re stressed but you must understand, Tom has only just heard about this. It’s not easy to make a decision in an afternoon, or even a weekend,’ the grandmother says.

‘Mum, it’s not an out of the blue thing, Tom and I have been talking about this for some time.’

‘Darling is that true?’

‘Why’re you asking him, do you think I’m lying, that I’m making it up?’ Angela’s voice rises.

‘No one’s saying that,’ the grandmother says. ‘Let’s all calm down, we have to think of Kitty in all of this.’

‘She’s not fucking Kitty, her name’s Kit,’ her daughter shouts.

‘Mum,’ the unhappy girl is crying. ‘Stop.’

‘This isn’t helping anyone,’ the mother says. ‘We can’t be carrying on like this in front of guests.’

‘What’re you talking about?’ her daughter shouts.

‘Darling not now.’

I don’t mind, they can shout as long and loudly as they want. On my hot rock, the soles of my feet roasting, the sounds of my mother’s voice raised, my sisters shouting – it is home from home.

‘So now suddenly we’re not going to talk about this.’

Tom jumps in. ‘That’s not what Mum’s saying.’

‘You should’ve told me. You should’ve had the guts to tell me that this wasn’t what you wanted.’

‘Nothing was agreed,’ the grandmother whispers.

‘That’s not how I understood it. What is it with you, why can’t you keep out of it?’

‘Darling I haven’t said a thing, Tom hasn’t told me anything.’

‘Stop calling me darling all the time, it’s totally fake. You’ve always hated me.’

‘This is ridiculous. Tom I don’t think I can take much more of this.’

‘I know, I know I’m fucking impossible. Well fuck the pair of you. This was never a real thing. You could’ve told me and not got Mum in to do your dirty work for you.’

‘Hang on here.’ The mother’s voice is stern. ‘I haven’t discussed any of this with Tom.’

‘Too right you haven’t.’

‘Angela, she really hasn’t.’

‘Then what the fuck’s she doing here, why did you invite her for Christ’s sake, and why did you invite him? What’s he doing here?’ I am being talked about.

‘Leave him out of this,’ Tom says.

‘And leave me out of it,’ the grandmother says.

‘You’re such a fucking coward Tom. Why else is she here, and him. So you don’t have to face me – admit it.’

‘Angela that’s not it, I was genuinely in two minds.’

‘No you weren’t, you never were.’

‘Mum stop,’ the girl shrieks. ‘Stop, stop, the lot of you. No one’s asked me what I think.’

A silence settles in the room. I can hear the wind booming round the building, a slow shriek as it whistles across the wide parking area.

‘What do you want to do darling?’ the grandmother says.

‘I could come and live with you Granny.’ The girl’s voice sinks to a whisper. The silence lengthens.

The grandmother sighs. ‘Darling, you know that’s not a possibility.’

‘Why not?’ the girl whispers.

‘Because, because...’ There is a gap. ‘Because there simply isn’t enough room in my tiny flat and besides...’

Angela cuts in. ‘She’s a selfish old goat, she doesn’t want you cramping her style. So what about you Tom?’

‘I have to think about it,’ he says at length.

‘So that’s decided then, Kit stays with me,’ the girl’s mother says. ‘I’ll take her with me to Spain.’

‘I’m not going,’ the girl mumbles.

‘You don’t have any option, neither of these two will have you. So much for family.’

‘I’m not going,’ the girl says.

‘Kit this really isn’t up to you.’ ‘I can stay with Imelda.’

‘Not for six months you can’t.’

‘I can ask, they have a spare room.’

‘Do you really think Imelda’s prissy mother is going to put up with you for six months?’

‘I can go and live with Sheryl, she’s asked me.’

‘In the caravan? Get real.’

‘They’ve moved.’

‘I don’t care where they live; I’m not leaving you there with those crazy hippy parents of hers. Stan’s a total drug fiend.’

‘He only smokes weed on the weekends.’

‘When’re you going to Spain darling?’ the mother interrupts.

‘Don’t call me that,’ her daughter shrieks. ‘A lot you care. Kit we’re going.’

‘Darling it doesn’t have to be like this.’

‘No it doesn’t but it always is.’

‘Why can’t we talk this through?’

‘A moment ago you were telling me to shut up because of him.’

She is talking about me. I ought to remove myself, give them space to resolve things, but a stubbornness keeps me wrapped up in my dream of the past. I am comfortable and more relaxed than I have been for years. They can squabble and shriek at each other all they want, I don’t mind.

‘Can we all please stop?’ It is Tom speaking. ‘Angela I think it would be best you leave, we can talk later when we’ve all calmed down on the phone.’

‘Fuck you Tom, I’m never talking to you, either of you, ever again. Don’t worry I won’t be bothering you. Kit we’re leaving.’

‘I don’t want to go,’ the sullen girl mumbles.

‘You heard them, neither of them want you, neither of them care a shit about either of us.’

There is the sound of rustling, bags and coats and shoes, footsteps across the carpet out onto the wooden floor of the corridor.

‘Angela this isn’t fair on Kitty,’ the grandmother says.

The footsteps stop. ‘How many times, she’s Kit. And no, I agree it’s not. C’mon Kit, let’s get out of here.’

The door slams. I hear the sound of their footsteps out in the corridor. Another door bangs. They are out in the street, their voices still audible. The flat is silent. I open my eyes. It is like emerging from a long period of meditation. ‘Well,’ the grandmother says, hitching herself up. ‘That’s Angela for you.’ She looks to her son. ‘Are you alright?’

Neither of them has noticed me.

‘I’m okay,’ he mumbles. ‘What do you think, should I have taken her?’

The sensible mother is bundling things into her bag. She is ready to leave. ‘She’ll be back.’ She stands up, tying her scarf. ‘You might think about it.’ She inspects her reflection in the mirror, leaning forward to dab her nose with a tissue. ‘You need another person in your life.’

Our gazes meet in the mirror, her eyes widen a little. She turns round. ‘I’m so sorry, I hope we didn’t disturb you.’

I hitch myself up and smile. ‘I slept through the whole thing,’ I say.

Tom tells me later that his first sighting of me at the barbecue, walking out of the billowing plume of fat, was like an apparition, an angel landing beside him, quietly disdainful, and not the least bit impressed. It took a huge amount of courage, his hands trembling as he'd texted my number, sure he'd receive an excuse turning down his invitation. When I turned up that Sunday a week early he thought he was dreaming. His heart was pounding, his hands sweaty as he poured me a glass of the wine, he was wearing his worst cardigan and those awful orange socks. And when I dropped down on the sofa like a tree that had been felled, he'd swooped onto the glass I was holding, desperate to spare me the embarrassment of ruining his carpet. And when I'd fallen asleep amongst his nutcase family, he didn't care that I would know he didn't have a generous soul and wasn't prepared to do the right thing and take the child. And when I sat up, groggy, rubbing my eyes, and lied to his mother saying I'd slept through it all, he'd known that I, in my own way, buried under the disdain, the reserve, wanted him as much as he wanted me. And he was confident that I would return, even though a few days later he received the dreaded text, backing out of the invitation for the following Sunday.

His confidence makes him patient; he clears his diary, expunges all his social engagements, avoids his mother, his friends, and keeps his communication down to a minimum. The whole of Christmas has been emptied, up to and beyond New Year's Eve. He tells his mother that he is away on a trip to Madeira with a couple of colleagues from the NASA project. I too have cleared the diary, turning down invitations to spend the Christmas period with old friends. But still I dither – am I ready for this – is this what I really want? I know practically

nothing about this person. I don't check him out on social media, preferring instead to rely on the memory of that Sunday afternoon, and the one before at the colleague's barbecue, the sweaty palm in mine, his eagerness, his hand on my arm, the warmth of his smile, his determination not to let me escape. I revisit that walk down the narrow corridor, my first impression of the wide pleasant sitting room looking out across the bleak park. I remember an expensive-looking computer, books and rolled-up charts, a mess of papers, and a dusty collection of meteorological instruments tucked away on a top shelf, the framed photograph of an angry sky over a low horizon.

It is Christmas Eve at the end of a long shopping day; everything is closed down, the start of the long retreat. I have been waiting for this moment. When I make the call he picks it up after the third ring. 'Hello,' he says like he knows who it was.

I almost forget to tell him. 'It's Magnus,' I tell him.

I wonder now whether this little scrap of family, this intimate connection, was part of the draw for me with Tom. My family splintered when my mother died, we ran adrift in our different ways. The sister closest to me, I was the youngest, had battled with mental illness since she was a teenager. Without my mother holding her up, she went down fast. My eldest sister cut and ran, popping up in different places; I used to get the odd postcard. I'd taken a year out of medical school to sort the house, organise the sale, steer the will through probate, and take care of my younger sister. I got her out of the country into a more sympathetic environment; the provision for mental illness in Greece at the time was crude to say the least. I installed her in long-term residential care, and then, like my older sister, I ran away and relocated to Canada with a bursary to finish

my degree at McGill University. It was a horrible, cowardly thing to do, but it was all I was capable of at the time.

After completing my degree I lingered on for another couple of years in junior placements. When an opportunity in my field came up in the UK I didn't plan on staying more than a few months, a year at the most. I had a short placement at The Anderson, a forensic therapeutic mental hospital in South London, one of the very few places in the country dedicated to the rehabilitation of diagnosed psychopaths. I was with doctors, nurses, all specialists working at the cutting edge. I was getting drawn in, I was doing well; I had found a sort of home amongst the hardworking team of professionals. I had been there three months when I was offered a permanent contract. I couldn't avoid my sister any longer. I contacted a private detective agency round the corner from the hospital; the information supplied for the modest fee told me she was hospital free, living in the outer reaches of North London, married to a Matthew Green with a four-year-old child. I wrote straight away to the address supplied and waited – weeks went by until I summoned my courage and tried the number. A man answered, softly spoken with an accent I couldn't place. I asked for my sister Marge and said I was a family friend. There was a long wait before she came to the phone. She answered my questions in monosyllables while I babbled, floundered and found out practically nothing about her life. If it hadn't been for the detective agency I wouldn't have known the name and age of the husband, that her daughter was called Sylvie – Sylvia was my mother's name. I put down the phone after three excruciating minutes knowing that we would probably never speak again.

Tom's family was a sort of 'what if' – if my mother were still alive, if I hadn't run away and abandoned Marge – his situation might have been mine. We

both had estranged sisters, we both had a niece; his mother and my mother might have been friends. When Angela dumped her child on us and did a runner, I suggested that we keep her. This sulky, soon-to-be teenager, might have been my niece, my sister's child. I was piggybacking on Tom's life, living it by proxy.

But six months in, I knew it wasn't going to work for me. Tom's growing bond with his niece, irritating at first, became increasingly painful, a daily reminder of my failure. It was envy, pure and simple, that drove the conversation after that first visit to view Lane End cottage. When his mother died we were nearly equal: she was gone like my mother was gone. If Kitty went too, I wouldn't have to envy him anymore. Seizing on the opportunity offered by his breakdown, I insisted that she wasn't his, that her feckless mother would one day want her back, that we were only ever temporary caretakers in her life. I slugged it out, quietly, reasonably, knowing full well that I was slicing him in half.

Chapter Four

Tom

I never really understood Magnus' motivation when he suggested we keep Kitty. At the time I was too furious with my sister for her *fait accompli* to properly think it through. Only the biggest shit would have refused, given the alternatives, incarceration in some soulless children's home or temporary residence with foster parents, her life devastated, smashed up. When Angela hadn't returned to retrieve her daughter by the middle of the week, we both knew that she wasn't coming back. It was late, we were in bed reading. Magnus put his book aside and I settled down, my head on his shoulder. It was a stormy night. He said something about a loose roof tile, we talked about the cost of repairs, the conversation drifted to a halt and we lay listening to the storm.

'We have to keep her,' Magnus said.

He was a better person than myself, spontaneously prepared to do the right thing. Whereas I was selfish, cowardly, happier than I'd ever been, I couldn't bear the thought of my sister's sulky, hostile daughter upsetting everything. Her fuck-you hostility made me horribly conscious of the poison she'd imbibed on my account. We were inviting a goblin into our home to stand in judgment, the embodiment of my bad conscience. I lay beside the man I loved more than life itself; I would've died rather than reveal my foul heart to him. Terrified he would see me for what I was, I forced my fury aside, and agreed that Yes, it would be a very good thing if my niece came to live with us.

In my heart I understood enough of Angela to know that she must have hit rock bottom to have resorted to such tactics. She wasn't a bad person, her action, I can't really call it a decision, was a cry for help. She was drowning. Mum and I had blocked our ears to her, and covered our eyes; it was nothing new, baby Angela had never really figured in our landscape, which was more about survival than anything else. Angela was too young, too angry, to understand, and her resentment grew into a fury that triggered a steely selfdestruct. She'd got into medical school, shown us just how clever she was, and then she'd dropped out, pregnant, a single parent at nineteen, wilfully choosing the path that was forced on Mum. Wrapped up in our struggle to keep afloat and not go under, we had no idea of her loneliness, and only ever saw her misery as a burden. Angela was always the problem, a position she adopted throughout her life, throwing away everything that was dear to her, her hard-won place at medical school, no doubt the father of her child, her freedom, her youth, her considerable abilities – and now her child.

Kitty stayed on in the guest room at the top of the house and kept herself locked away, only appearing briefly for meals and baths. Magnus was working long hours at the hospital, whilst I was working more and more from home. At first Kitty and I kept a mutual suspicious distance. She started at the local secondary school in the January, and with the house to myself during the day, I started to relax a little and to my surprise discovered a connection with my sulky niece. We found a way of rubbing along together; despite our differences we had a similar sense of humour, noticed the same things, and had a way of guessing each other's thoughts. After a rocky start at school, she started to thaw and would talk to me at length about the other girls: her two friends, a tiny angry girl called Sheryl, whiplash clever, with hippy parents who understood nothing of their

ferociously intellectual daughter; and childlike Imelda, pale, moon-faced and dreamy. Between the three of us, Sheryl, myself and Imelda – Magnus kept his distance – we drew Kitty out of her shell. She took up fencing and got good at it, she started washing her hair and taking a tentative interest in clothes. She was still bad-tempered, and every bit as waspish as her mother when she wanted to be, but it didn't matter, I liked having her around. I became a devoted, proud, and at times pushy parent, driving her to various fencing tournaments around the countryside, standing in freezing halls with other anxious parents watching their kids being whacked round the head and sliced with fencing foils. Fiercely jubilant when she aced her fights, and a furious, prowling tiger parent when she was defeated. I burst into tears of pride when the letter came through that she had got a place in the county team. Motherhood, fatherhood, had crept up on me, wound its tendrils around my reluctant heart, and I was bound tight. As far as I was concerned Kitty was ours, mine mainly, I was her father and her mother, and wherever we went, she came too. I didn't ever really stop to think where this left Magnus. Stupidly blind, I was absorbed and happy with both of them, and saw no reason for anything to change.

* * *

It was a Sunday just before noon, almost two years to the day since Angela had arrived on our doorstep with Kitty that dreary November morning. I was in my dressing gown, starting on a late breakfast. Magnus had gone out somewhere early, Kitty was still in bed. I was standing at the sink admiring a batch of photos that I had taken of her at the most recent tournament; she was fourteen years old then, tall for her age, just shy of six foot, all arms and legs, a

skinny gangly thing with enormous dark brown eyes. She had been fencing for a year and was a fierce fighter, although undisciplined and erratic. It was Len, her coach, who had spotted something and had fast-tracked her into the junior team. I was summoning up the energy to phone him to arrange a lift to a tournament in Durham when the doorbell rang; it was such a quiet, tentative ring that I ignored it at first. By the time I got to the door, Angela was halfway down the street. I stepped out onto the pavement in my bare feet and dressing gown and shouted after her.

She turned round, scruffy, dusty, loaded down with the habitual oversize backpack. ‘Tom you lazy bum, did I wake you?’ she shouted out for the entire street to hear.

Time had stood still since I had last seen her, two years previously. She was in the same long blue coat, the same speckled scarf and tortoiseshell clip; even the trainers looked the same. She followed me into the hall and hovered on the threshold of the kitchen, all swanky white and chrome glass panelling, with sliding doors looking out into my herb garden. My hands were trembling as I pulled cups out of the cupboard above the sink. I had a dread of facing her in the bright, relentless space and took the coffee out into the garden. There was nowhere to sit, forcing us to stand. I poured a large mug of black coffee and handed it to her.

She stood with her skinny hands wrapped round the mug, her flesh blue with cold. ‘Where’s Kit?’ she said at length.

For a moment I wasn’t sure who she was talking about. ‘Kitty – she’s upstairs – she’s still asleep.’

There was a pause. ‘How is she?’ she said.

‘Good,’ I said.

‘Good?’ She sounded annoyed.

‘She’s doing fine. She’s taken up fencing.’

‘Sword fighting?’ She laughed. ‘Who got her doing that?’

‘It was something they offered at school, some taster day, she got the bug.’ The photographs were burning a hole in my pocket, I could take them out, show them to her, and then maybe she’d go away.

She took a loud slurp from the cup and wiped the coffee off her mouth with the back of her hand. ‘So she’s settled in. She’s happy here?’ ‘She’s doing okay,’ I mumbled.

‘I can’t have her back Tom.’

Worried that she would read the relief in my face, I forced myself to meet her in the eye for the first time since she’d arrived.

Weathered by the sun, she look tired, done in, large crow’s-feet across her cheeks. ‘I’m flying out to Nairobi in a couple of days. She can’t come with me.’

It took a few moments for it to sink in. She wasn’t here of her own volition. Someone had contacted her. ‘I can wake her if you want?’

‘Don’t do that.’ She put the coffee cup down on the sundial plinth that we were using as a makeshift table. ‘It wouldn’t be good for either of us.’

I took the photographs out of my dressing gown pocket. ‘I’ve got some snaps of her here.’

She took them reluctantly and looked through the first few.

‘You can keep them,’ I said. ‘I’ve got copies.’

She handed them back. ‘I’m okay.’ But her hands were shaky as she bent into the breeze to light another cigarette. She gulped the smoke down like a fresh drink and shot a look in my direction. ‘It’ll stress me out; I’ll worry about losing them. She’s very tall.’

We stood peering out across the raggedy garden. I was tempted to make some quip about my gardening skills, but silence was easier.

‘You think I’m a shit,’ she said.

‘No, I don’t.’ I met her gaze, nervous, suspicious, and had a sense that I was looking in a mirror. I turned away. A tangle of unhappy shrubs struggled along the back wall; they needed tidying up. I thought I saw signs of Japanese knotweed.

‘Say something.’

I glanced at my sister and was shot back to the much younger Angela, like a slide passing across a screen, gone in an instant, and the present Angela was back again, dark around the eyes, gaunt, much too thin with lots of little crisscross lines, whiskery smoker’s skin. I wondered what she was seeing as she looked at me.

‘It’s good to see you,’ I lied.

She laughed. ‘No it’s not. You looked like you’d seen a ghost. Magnus didn’t tell you did he? This must be quite a shock. He’s always been a sneaky shit, I warned you Tom.’ She was watching me gloatingly, a smile hovering.

My heart was thundering, roaring in my ears. She mustn’t see. She mustn’t see.

A door banged upstairs. I felt the hairs on the back of my neck. Angela looked round. ‘I’d better be off.’ She ground the half-smoked cigarette into the sundial plinth, marble from Umbria. We’d spent weeks getting it shipped over. The ash would stain. I’d get it off.

She grinned, reading my thoughts, and wiped her cuff against the sooty black stain, brushing the cigarette onto the ground. ‘Tom,’ she lowered her voice. ‘She can’t come back – ever.’

Our gazes met fully for the first time.

She was watching me with a careful, considered look, like an old haggler woman at a market stall.

‘I understand,’ I said. ‘It’s okay.’ I wanted to hug her. ‘I don’t think you’re a bad person.’

‘Fuck Tom.’ She looked away, rummaging in her backpack, ready to flee.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that.’

‘Fuck you. I’m a fucking saint.’ She struggled with her bag, scrabbling with the straps.

I wanted her gone. I followed her across the kitchen. ‘Have you got everything?’

She went ahead of me into the hall, hunched over her pack, checking her pockets, and it struck me that she was carrying her worldly possessions, that this was all she had. For a wild, desperate moment I thought of offering her money; five hundred pounds, I could wire her a couple of thousand, at a stretch I could find five thousand, there was nothing to stop me taking out a loan. I lost my footing in the dark hall. I couldn’t pay her to go away – could I?

She reached the front door and grabbed for the catch, but it was sticky and wouldn’t turn.

‘You pull it back and then twist.’ I couldn’t let her go empty-handed.

She tugged at the catch. ‘It won’t work.’

‘Sometimes you have to kick the bottom with your foot.’ It was now or never. ‘Do you need help?’

She glanced round. ‘I’m okay. I can do it.’

‘No – help – money help.’ I twisted the niggardly catch and shoved the door, sticky from the rain.

‘You should have that fixed.’ She edged onto the step, ready to run.

I grabbed at her arm, bony under the canvas material of her jacket. ‘I can help.’

She twisted away from me. ‘Don’t.’

‘I mean it; give me your bank details. I have the money, it’s not a problem.’

Her eyes were pale in the wintery light, faded like an old chair cover.

‘Write to me,’ I said. ‘You’ve got the address.’

Her face did something strange. I felt my stomach lurch; I had played this all wrong. As I let go of her arm I realised that she was looking at something behind me. I swung round.

Kitty was on the stairs, concealed in shadow. She stood hunched, her arms folded. She was wearing the pink childish dressing gown she had been nagging me to replace. She yawned. ‘What’s going on?’

I wanted to shove Angela out of the way and slam the door on her like some sitcom when the guilty partner hides his girlfriend by pushing her into a cupboard or behind a curtain or under the bed. Kit wobbled and reached for the wall to steady herself, still half-asleep. ‘Mum.’ Her voice was tiny, frightened. Angela muttered. ‘Shit. I’ve got to go.’

Kitty had reached the bottom step. I could see her more clearly now, in the grey light from the open door to the living room. Time opened up and I saw a Kitty five years on, beautiful, slender as a reed, poised on the brink, ready to fly; it hit me with a thump and I knew Angela had seen it too, this was the Kitty that was waiting in the wings, ready to emerge if all the conditions were right, the Kitty that she was destined to be if she stayed with me.

‘I’ve got to go,’ Angela muttered. ‘Tell her I had to go.’

But she didn't move and Kitty didn't move. We were frozen in a moment that was burning into our hindbrains, a piece of ingrained memory that would never be erased. Kitty was staring at me, her face grey; she could have been carved out of marble. 'I'm not going with her,' she whispered.

'Angela's going,' I said.

But no one moved.

'I'm not going with her.' Kitty's face crumpled.

Angela seemed to have shrunk, she looked lost, disorientated. I had a dread that she would collapse and have to be brought back in and laid on the sofa. I felt sweaty with panic; she couldn't be here when Magnus got back. 'Maybe you'd better go now.' I put my hand on her arm and pulled her out onto the step. The pavement looked a long way down.

She clung onto the railing and went down step-by-step like an old person afraid of falling. She reached the pavement and turned back. Our gazes met; it was horrible to think that this was the last image of me she would carry away with her. I was certain that we would never meet again. I didn't stay to watch her go, and turned back, closing the door behind me.

Kitty was sitting on the bottom of the stairs, her long legs folded under her. I went over and sat down beside her. I felt like a thief, an interloper. She was shivering. 'It's okay, I whispered. 'It's okay.'

'Has she gone?'

'Yes.'

'When's she coming back?'

'She's not coming back.'

'I'm not going to live with her.'

'Of course not.'

‘Promise.’

‘I promise.’

She pulled away from me, all eyes, tiny pointed face. ‘You really promise?’

‘I promise.’ It was a pact, rock solid, unbreakable.

Her face relaxed and seemed to fill out and come back into shape. She stood up. ‘I hate this dressing gown; it makes me look like a kid. You said you’d get me a new one.’

‘We’ll go today.’

‘You’re always promising.’

‘No seriously, we’ll go today. I don’t think we should tell Magnus about this.’

She glanced round, wary. ‘How come she turned up?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘He phoned her didn’t he?’

‘It wasn’t like that.’

‘That’s exactly how it was.’

I followed her into the kitchen. ‘Kitty – don’t.’

She padded across the shiny blue marble floor, walking on water. I held my breath, afraid she would lose her balance and sink. ‘He hates me,’ she said.

‘Kitty. No one’s going to chuck you out. You can stay with me forever if that’s what you want.’

She smiled and walked across the watery blue floor to the fridge.

By the time Magnus arrived back that evening, it was gone eight. I’d been out onto the front steps a couple of times, straining for signs of the car. The

second time I was so sure I'd spotted the Volvo that I'd gone down into the street in my socks, returning with soaked feet, padding down the hall to my study, leaving muddy wet patches on the pale carpet. I closed the door quietly behind me, not wanting to alert Kitty. That morning there'd been a phone call from Eric at the hospital. I'd heard bits of the conversation from the other room where Magnus had taken the call; there was an ongoing problem that had been brewing for the past few weeks, it was legitimate business. My heart thumped. Or was it part of a plan to make himself scarce the following day when he knew Angela would be visiting? We never talked about it, but he knew; everyone knows the wordless dreads of those closest to them. If he really hadn't understood, if he'd thought that he was doing me a favour, genuinely doing the right thing, then he had got me so frighteningly wrong, Kitty so frighteningly wrong, that on balance I would have preferred his treachery. Slumped at my desk staring at the computer screen in a sort of stupor, it occurred to me that this was neither conscious betrayal nor blind indifference to my feelings, but instead a sort of mulish practicality. He didn't want Kitty around anymore. He hadn't wanted her around for a long time, and he had decided to return her to sender. I felt a coldness scudding around my heart. Magnus wasn't malicious or treacherous, or highhandedly principled, but he was self-interested.

I didn't hear the front door open, and only realised he was back when I heard him drop his keys on the hall table. He peered round the study door and retreated. The warning spark that should have held me back snapped. He looked guilty, contrite even – he knew. I leapt up, all caution thrown to the wind, and grabbed the door handle. He was on his way down the corridor to the kitchen.

'Magnus.' I bounded after him, ignoring the tiny thread, the cautioning whisper. 'Magnus.'

‘Tom.’ He turned round. ‘I didn’t see you there.’ He walked towards me into the light. ‘Are you alright?’

‘I was in my study.’ My voice had sunk below a whisper.

He stopped a little way off. ‘Is everything alright?’

‘Angela was here.’ I could hardly get the words out.

‘Angela?’

‘My sister. You know, Kitty’s mother.’ I couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

‘Are you alright?’ He came towards me and stopped. ‘You’re not alright are you? What happened?’

‘How could you?’

‘How could I what?’

‘You phoned her.’

‘Why would I phone her?’

I had to stop, but I couldn’t stop. ‘You don’t want Kitty here.’

His face was dark and crumpled in the shadow. He turned his back and walked quickly off to the kitchen, the door closed behind him with a soft click. Magnus rarely, if ever, loses his temper.

I must have heard something, I looked round and thought I saw a flash of pink, Kitty’s dressing gown at the top of the stairs, but it was dark and might have been my frightened imagination. I returned to my study and lay down on the sofa. I knew I wouldn’t be able to rest, that I would be up within seconds. My head had hardly touched the cushion when my phone started ringing. It was my mother. I didn’t want to think, I couldn’t think. The sound of traffic filled the room. My phone stopped ringing and immediately started again. I leaned over and picked it up.

‘Tom,’ my mother’s breathless voice eddied into me. ‘Darling, thank God I got hold of you. Darling, did Magnus pass on the message? Has Angela been to see you?’

I could hear my heart thudding gently. Car lights tracked across the ceiling. ‘Darling – are you there? Has Angela been round – Tom?’

Chapter Five

Tom

I cut her off. I got up from the sofa and went to the window. Car headlamps flickered against the tarmac, catching lampposts, tall trees, a bottle on a step. The sound of the traffic, the wind whistling along the top of the buildings filled my head. I pressed my hand against the cool glass and kept it there. When I took it away there was a perfect print. I placed my palm back inside the silhouette, I could not think, I must not think, I refused to think.

Later that evening Magnus knocked on my study door. He was sorry, he was preoccupied, he said, stressed with work – I'd been out at a school play with Kitty, he was asleep by the time I got back, and had left first thing in the morning before I was fully awake. If he'd had a proper chance, of course he would have told me. I apologised. I reassured him – a storm in a teacup. We were both so reasonable. He went ahead up to bed. I said I'd follow. I didn't tell him that Angela had come to sign off on Kitty, and was relieved that he hadn't pressed for details.

Sitting at my desk, hugging the warmth of the little electric bar fire, I sat staring at the computer screen in a vegetative trance; even if, even if he was tired and stressed, even if I was back late with Kitty and he had already gone to sleep, even if he had received any number of upsetting calls from the hospital, even if a million other reasons – how could he have not warned me? He must have known what Angela's visit was about, he knew the total and utter devastation it might have unleashed onto our lives, and he hadn't breathed a word. He'd gone up to

bed, gone to sleep, and slipped off first thing in the morning. How was it possible for him to have overlooked something so momentous, something potentially so catastrophic?

He hadn't wanted Kitty in our lives for a long time. My happiness was not his happiness; our idea of happiness had dislocated somewhere along the way, it happened to couples all the time. I was panicking, and I did what blind, stupid people do when they're very frightened. I scrambled around and found a target for my fear, although I didn't recognise it as fear because I had turned it into something else, in my case a righteous, aggrieved fury. My mother was to blame. She was the culprit, the engineer of my destruction, she had acted out of a high-handed determination to force her vision through, her notion of how things ought to be. In her book, Kitty belonged with her mother. I was, as far as she was concerned, only ever a temporary caretaker. I was a bit player in Kitty's history, a walk-on part.

At the end of five days of brooding, I decided to pay my mother a visit. Her flat was a short walk from Wimbledon tube station in a sixties, purpose-built block that had once belonged to the Water Board. She had lived there for around ten years after selling the family home in Romford. Her new flat had seemed a substantial move up in the world at the time, with its streamlined all-mod-cons kitchen and panoramic view through swanky French windows onto playing fields and woods beyond. Split-level with two en suite bedrooms, one on the lower floor, and another above, it was a sort of heaven to my mother. She loved her new home with a passion and had become fiercely house proud; it was spotlessly clean, the paintwork pristine, and the furnishings all brought new at the time of the move.

It was a long cry from the small Victorian Romford house with its untidy garden filled with children's toys and bits of furniture that never quite reached the dump. Our mother worked full-time at the Water Board; with two young kids to bring up, housework was low on her list of priorities. Family life was a grind. She wasn't maternal. Our staple diet was fish and chips from the local chippy, with a large lump of home-cooked broccoli as a side dish and a banana to follow. The lingering smell of the broccoli mixed with the whiff of dry rot gave the house a distinctive smell, so powerfully evocative that if I smell broccoli or dry rot to this day I am immediately shot back there. When she first moved to the Wimbledon flat my mother's transformation into her own version of domestic goddess amused me, although I couldn't help a twinge of quite intense resentment at her considerable home- building skills.

The flat was on the fourth floor, up a flight of uncarpeted concrete stairs. There was a lift but it was a slow goods vehicle and was rarely used by the residents. I lingered on the landing. I could hear the sound of the radio. My mother was at home. I rang the doorbell and stepped back out of sight of the spy hole. My mother never answered the door without checking. I could feel her anxiety and indecision the other side of the door as intensely as if I was standing beside her. I thought about playing a cruel game, ringing again, and sneaking back out of her line of vision. I stepped forward into view. It was with a feeling of vindication that I heard the chain rattle. The door swung open. She was wearing the crab apron that I had bought her from an expensive fish restaurant in Cornwall on our last holiday together before Magnus arrived on the scene. The apron was creased around the middle, slicing the crab's eyes into a worried expression; its eyes seemed to wink, sending out a silent warning – 'Be careful – watch out.'

I followed her down the narrow corridor into the wide, airy kitchen diner with its view over the wintry park. She went off to the kitchen area, leaving me on my own in the living room. Looking out through the wide French windows onto scrubby green, it hit me forcibly that my old flat was an almost carbon copy of my mother's Wimbledon home; it was the same era, in a similar block, with the same style of kitchen diner, with a similar view across playing fields. I turned and watched my mother bustling in the far corner of her kitchen. I belonged with Magnus and Kitty now, they were my home.

She looked round. 'Tom.' She was holding a tea towel with the same crab design, only smaller, a baby crab belonging to the big mother crab on the apron. 'We have to get past this.'

I looked away, my heart started to thump. She wasn't going to get off the hook that easily.

Sensing my fury, she moved back into the safety of the kitchen and started tinkering. 'Angela's back in Madrid. We don't need to get stuck on this do we?' There was a note of pleading in her voice.

I sensed her hands trembling, the tremor of panic. 'So, she phoned you,' I said. Everything had stopped, the traffic, the sounds of children's voices out in the park, all gone, sucked away.

She stopped her tinkering. 'From the airport before she went, it was only a quick call.'

As if that mattered. 'I was surprised,' I said.

'Surprised,' my mother echoed. 'Yes, yes, I suppose you would've been.'

I had given her all the rope she needed to apologise, but she was too proud to take it. 'When did you ask her?' I said. We were staring at each other across the room. It seemed to have got darker.

My mother was so nearly a silhouette, her eyes glinting. ‘Ask what?’

‘When did you ask Angela to take Kitty back?’ I spoke slowly, spacing the words out like I was talking to a simpleton, a very dim person, the way some people too often talk to foreigners.

‘Tom, it wasn’t like that.’

‘You didn’t ask her then, it was her idea?’

‘Not exactly.’

‘How – not exactly?’

Her foot kicked a piece of kitchen appliance. It banged against the skirting.

‘Was it Angela’s idea?’ I said.

‘It was a telephone conversation.’

‘A telephone conversation – when?’

‘It was a discussion, we were discussing Kitty. She wanted to know about her daughter. She was phoning from some payphone, she sounded wretched Tom. She didn’t feel she could phone you. I am a mother. I have two children, there are two of you.’ She put the piece of kitchen appliance noisily onto the counter.

I was all too aware that I was breathing heavily. ‘This is not about me and Angela.’

‘I know it’s not, I never said it was, it’s just that you don’t understand how difficult it is for me, how hard it is being caught between you. What if Angela was to do something stupid?’

She was talking about suicide. I’d known it was a real fear of hers for some time, although we’d never spoken about it. My heart was thumping so hard I could hardly hear myself speak. ‘I don’t care about Angela right now. This is

about Kitty – your granddaughter, who you don't give a fuck about, this is her life we're talking about.' My voice was wobbling all over the place.

'That's not true.' My mother's voice flew up an octave, unjustly accused. 'I adore my granddaughter and she adores me.'

She was right. Kitty loved her Granny. Over the past two years they had become close. She often stayed over with my mother who made a tremendous fuss over her, and had recently got to know her two best friends Imelda and Sheryl.

'That is so unfair.' My mother was on the verge of tears. 'I hope you're not saying that to Kitty, because if you are, it will be very damaging for her. I really hope you're not telling her that her grandmother doesn't love her.' She tugged the corner of her apron up and dabbed her eyes.

'So why – why...' I stopped. 'I just want to know why you sent Angela round to our house?'

'I didn't send her, it wasn't like that.'

'Then tell me how it was, because I really want to understand.'

My mother came out of the kitchen. 'It was a conversation on the telephone. She's very unhappy.'

'So you thought having Kitty back would cheer her up.'

'It wasn't like that. It wasn't like that at all.' She retreated. 'You really don't understand at all.'

'Whose idea was it?'

'What does it matter, it's not happening. Kitty is staying with you.'

I was burning up. I took my scarf off and threw it on the chair. 'So you never wanted Kitty to be with me – is that it? You never thought it was a good idea.'

‘Tom, I never said that.’

I stopped. I was here to be calm, lawyer-like, to get to the bottom of things. ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘Tell you what?’

I couldn’t speak.

‘Tom, it wasn’t like that.’

‘What was it like – you’re not telling me.’

‘We’re going round in circles. It was a conversation we had on the telephone.’

‘You keep telling me that.’

‘There isn’t any more to say.’

‘It was you – you told Angela to take her daughter back.’

‘I told you it wasn’t like that.’

‘I don’t care,’ I shouted. ‘It was you who suggested it. You suggested to Angela that she come round to my house and get Kitty to come back.’ The sound of her breathing filled the room.

‘It must’ve taken quite a bit of persuasion,’ I said.

‘Your sister was in an awful state. She sounded dreadful.’

‘So you thought getting Kitty back would perk her up a bit.’

‘Tom stop,’ my mother wailed. ‘You can’t keep doing this.’

‘Doing what?’

‘Accusing me like this. I have two children, something you’ve never understood.’

‘What the hell is that supposed to mean?’ She didn’t answer.

‘What is that supposed to mean?’

‘You’re not the only one,’ she said quietly.

I was being cut adrift. I felt a frightened little start. ‘You did this,’ my voice had sunk to a whisper.

‘Did what?’ my mother said. ‘What did I do?’

‘You, it was you. It was all your fault. You are responsible for me and Angela.’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ my mother said, her voice small.

‘Yes you do. You do.’ I said, my voice small like hers. We were like two explorers on the verge of a discovery, not sure we wanted to open the casket.

‘You pretended,’ I said.

‘I don’t understand.’

‘You pretended to Angela, and then you pretended to me.’ ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

She did, of course she did, we both knew. ‘And Kitty has got stuck in the middle. Kitty’s the casualty in all of this.’

‘I don’t understand. How did I pretend? I adore Kitty. You children are everything to me. Without you I’d rather be dead,’ she wailed.

‘No,’ I panted. ‘No, that’s not how it is.’

‘It is how it is – it is. I’m telling you the honest truth.’

‘No,’ I shouted. ‘One minute it was all me, I was your rock, the one everything depended on. It was the same for Angela in a different way, she was your confidant, the one you confided in, the one you were close to.’

‘Are you asking me to say which one of you I love most – is that it?’

I stopped. This was ridiculous, idiotic, I was a middle-aged man. We stood in silence, looking past each other in the gloomy, shadowy light.

‘I think we both need to calm down,’ my mother said.

It couldn't end like this. I wasn't going to let it. 'I can never forgive you for what you've done,' I said.

'She's the child's mother.'

'I will never ever forgive you for this,' I said. The silence stretched. She knew what she had to do, she knew. But her pride, her pigheaded stubbornness, stopped her.

'Tom, I think we both need to calm down.'

'No,' I shouted. 'No, I can't calm down. I am not calm. I'm fucking furious. Why can't you hear me?'

'Darling, I am hearing you.'

'No you're not, you're really not. Why, for once in your stupid life, why can't you apologise?'

'I'm sorry.'

'It's too late,' I shouted. 'It's far too late.'

'I'm apologising now. What more can I do? I can't do any more.'

'You should've apologised five days ago when you phoned. Why didn't you apologise then?'

'Darling, I didn't know how much this meant to you.'

'Don't call me that. I'm not your fucking darling. I can see why Angela hates it.'

My mother was breathing heavily. 'We have to stop this.'

'You started it. How can you say you didn't know how much it meant to me? How could you not think that I wouldn't be upset? Angela turns up at our home, and as far as you're concerned, walks away with her daughter, just like that. How could I not be upset? How could I not be devastated? You think that's

okay. You really think I'd be cool with that. What the fuck is wrong with you?' I was sweating inside the heavy coat. I had to get out of there.

'I'm sorry,' my mother said, her voice low and frightened. 'I didn't think it through.'

'You didn't think it through,' I shouted. 'It's not something you have to think through, every instinct in your body, plain common sense could see it was downright stupid.' I stopped. 'Unless it was sheer maliciousness.'

'It wasn't that,' my mother whispered. 'It really wasn't that. Now you hate me.'

'I don't think we should see each other for a bit,' I said.

'Why?' my mother's voice rose in pitch. 'Are you saying you don't want me to see Kitty?'

'I'm not saying that – just you and me.'

We were both silent. All it needed was for me to pick my scarf up off the sofa and go.

'I'm sorry,' my mother said.

I wasn't sure what I was waiting for.

'I said I'm sorry.' She sounded peeved.

'You always do this,' I said.

'Tom.' She was annoyed. 'I think it's time we let this go.'

'This is how you talk to Angela isn't it.'

'I think this is getting stupid.' She retreated to back of the kitchen and started to clatter in the sink.

I walked over and switched on the light. The energy-saving bulbs illuminated slowly. My mother came into focus like a player lit up on a stage; she looked small, finished, crunched up against the sink. She was right. I hated her. 'I

haven't told you a lot of things.' My voice was coming from somewhere deep inside my head.

She turned her back on me and started to scrub at something. 'Tom – don't.'

'Magnus is my partner. We're not just friends living together,' I said.

She kept on with her scrubbing. 'I gathered that.'

'You gathered what?' I said.

'I've known for a while,' she said. The scrubbing stopped, she stood with her back to me.

'Did Angela tell you?'

She turned round, wiping her face on the crab apron; under the bright electric lights she looked old. 'Tom, if this is about Magnus, I don't mind.'

'Why should you mind?'

'I said I don't mind.'

'What's there to mind?'

Her hands flapped up as she pushed past me into the living room. 'I really don't know what this is all about.'

The light from the kitchen sliced the room into long shadows. My mother had retreated into the darkness, her apron glowing white. It struck me for the first time that she was afraid of me. I followed her to the edge of the room. My voice was trembling. 'Is that why you wanted Angela to take Kitty back?'

Her face dipped into the light. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'You didn't want her living with us. You thought that she'd get contaminated in some way.'

'That was the last thing on my mind,' she said.

I struggled to keep the tremble out of my voice. ‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Well it’s the truth.’ She sounded relieved.

I wanted to strip that relief right away from her. ‘So why do you want Angela to get Kitty back?’

She came out of the shadow into a patch of light. ‘Darling, this isn’t all about you.’

My heart started to thump.

‘I don’t know if you realise, but Angela is in very bad way. If she goes on drifting like this...’ Her hands flapped up, pale flags in the gloom. ‘I don’t know what will happen. And don’t say that I’m using Kitty as a cure, a pick-me-up for your sister. She has to be allowed to see her own daughter.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘Because you’re very difficult to tell these things – you don’t like being told.’

‘What did you think would happen?’

‘I wanted you two to talk. Angela came round to see you. I don’t think she knew what she wanted darling.’ She stopped. ‘Sorry I’m not meant to call you that.’

Something snapped, but not obviously, not explosively. ‘This is all your fault,’ I said.

‘I’m sorry, I realise I shouldn’t have encouraged her.’

‘No, I’m not talking about that. Angela, she’s your fault.’

My mother’s face was pale, fragile under the slice of light from the kitchen, wispy, papery. She didn’t look well. It occurred to me she was ill and hadn’t told either of us.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ she said.

But I knew she did, we both did. ‘You destroyed her.’

‘Tom stop.’

Whatever it was holding me back had snapped. ‘You were horrible to her all through her childhood.’

She moved back into the shadow. ‘You have to stop this.’

‘The only reason you didn’t do it to me was because you needed me there backing you up. I became your little pawn, your sidekick, you had me doing everything for you. I don’t blame Angela hating the pair of us. I don’t blame her never wanting to see us ever again. I was a kid; I didn’t know what I was doing. You did though – you knew.’

My mother had drifted out of the shadow, her face a small moon hanging in the gloom, her little dark eyes enormous with shock. ‘You don’t know what you’re saying,’ she whispered.

‘I know exactly what I’m saying, and I know that what I’m saying is true – we both do.’

‘So you do hate me,’ she whispered. ‘You both do.’

I went over to the sofa and retrieved my scarf, winding it carefully round my neck, and tucking it inside my coat; it was cold out there. The wind whistled against the glass doors, buffeting the side of the building. I was calm, floating, like I’d swallowed a massive dose of tranquillizers as I glided up the narrow corridor towards the front door. I heard my mother coming after me.

‘Tom.’ She was a pale, frightened figure. ‘Does Kitty hate me too?’ she whispered.

I turned away. Kitty adored her Granny but I wasn’t going to tell her that. I reached for the catch, and was out into the cold dark landing, and down the stairs, taking them two at a time, only realising when I reached the bottom that

I'd been holding my breath all the way down. I went into the cold, gusty street, breaking into a fast walk, almost running, able to breathe again.

The unreal, light-headed but not tipsy feeling didn't leave me all the way home. When I got back to the house no one was around. Kitty was at school and would be going round to a friend's for tea. Magnus was working late as usual. I pottered around in the kitchen for a bit, doing routine stuff. It was around five by the time I made myself a large gin and tonic and settled down on the sofa in the little sitting room off the kitchen that looks out onto the garden. I wasn't there to mull over the recent visit to my mother, to mine bits and pieces of my past in support of my position, I simply wanted to rest and not have to think. It was a feeling of sweet exhaustion, release. Cut adrift, I was floating. The sofa was a raft and the dark vastness of the clear sky was my ocean. I had never experienced a feeling like it before, or only fleetingly on the edge of sleep. I was in a becalmed state of intense meditation, existing in the present moment of pure thoughtlessness.

A shaft of light from the corridor slanted across the room. Magnus was back. 'Tom, are you alright?' He didn't switch on the light and came and sat down beside me.

I reached out and took hold of his hand; it was cold from the outside. Specks of snow were sticking to the windows. 'You're cold,' I said.

'It's started to snow. We might have a white Christmas,' he said.

We sat in the darkness watching the snow swirling against the light, gathering in force, building in the corners of the windows. 'I went to see my mother today,' I said 'And?' he said at length.

It was the first time I had considered her since my return. I had a picture of her crushed against the cooker, her eyes big with shock, a tiny, shrunken

figure, reduced in scale at the wrong end of the telescope. ‘She knows about us.’ I was floating, my mother was still crushed at the end of the telescope. I wanted to keep it that way. ‘Angela must’ve told her,’ I said.

‘Tom, you mustn’t think this whole Kitty thing is because of us.’

‘I told her I thought it was.’

‘It’s Angela,’ he said. ‘They’re very entwined’.

‘But Kitty can’t be used to patch up her life.’

His hand tightened on mine. ‘I know,’ he said. ‘I know.’

We sat in silence staring out into dark. The snow was climbing up the windows; soon we wouldn’t be able to see out.

‘You did the right thing,’ he said. ‘It had to happen sometime.’

‘She thinks I hate her. She thinks you hate her – and Kitty – that we all do.’

He turned to me in the dark. ‘Tom – don’t – don’t. You mustn’t.’

I lay back against the cushions. From this position my view was all sky divest of cloud and full of snow. I was calm, holding onto Magnus’ hand, safe in my little raft. Magnus was right, it was a long time coming.

I slept like a baby that night, more deeply, more soundly than I had in a long time, my sleep unpunctuated with dreams. I drifted most of the next day, muffled, cocooned; by the mid-afternoon I could barely keep my eyes open, and fell into a deep, dark sleep at my desk. I was woken late in the afternoon, the telephone was ringing. My first thought was Kitty, she was staying the night at Imelda’s and had left something behind. I stumbled towards the door and grabbed for the receiver. It clattered to the floor. I picked it up expecting the dialling tone. I could hear the noises of an office, some sort of building; it sounded echoey and bustling, like a train station.

‘Kitty...’

‘Tom – Tom, is that you?’ It was Gwen. Gwen was my mother’s oldest friend. ‘Oh Tom.’ She sounded frightened. ‘I’m in St Thomas’.’

My mind froze. I couldn’t think where she was talking about.

‘The hospital. It’s Sylvia.’

My heart was very quiet. I sat down on the bottom of the stairs. ‘What’s happened?’ I said.

Chapter Six

Magnus

There is something that I should come clean about. For nearly fifteen years I was unhealthily obsessed with someone called Alex Cornwall. I never spoke to him, never touched him, not so much as shook his hand. The closest I ever came to him was sitting in the front row of the Wigmore Hall looking up at a cockeyed angle, his voice gripping hold of my heart and squeezing it so tight I could hardly breathe. I was transfixed, and remained transfixed for the next fifteen years. I found it impossible to talk about and every time I tried, I was consumed with shame. After all it was a textbook joke, I was in the grip of an obsession every bit as debilitating as any of my patients’.

Unlike most of my colleagues I have never actively pursued a career. My special talent has been to swim with the tide, paddling along. I have had colleagues who are equipped with far more aptitude, imagination than myself, who have gone shooting off down tributaries and have hit rocky ground. They get back out into the main stream eventually but mostly it is too late, and they lag behind going slower and slower, until they are miles behind without any hope of catching up. Nine times out of ten their excess of curiosity is down to careless pride. I have always had a clear-eyed view of my essential ordinariness. My older sister Pam, who ran away to Australia and then drifted slowly round the world, never thought that much of me.

I am increasingly convinced that a realistic assessment of oneself is the key to worldly success, or any sort of success for that matter. I sound so smug. I

want to punch myself. The urge to sock me in the jaw is something I brought out in certain males when I was alive, but I was taller than most of them, with a sinewy look that made them think twice. I used to wear heavy cable knit jumpers and loose jackets to disguise my puniness, and would stand back when there was something heavy to be moved. A standard upright piano has always had the power to terrify me. The lack of strength in my arms and back and legs was a source of shame, I would go to great lengths to disguise it. I ran obsessively.

* * *

Alex was on the cusp when I discovered him. He stole the show from a flabby tenor and a nervous mezzo-soprano. Slight and cunning, he knew he was good, and when he had finished his song, he stepped back, his hands folded with that look – a relaxed knowledge of his power, a deserved smugness. My heart did a backflip and that was it. I had never been an opera fan before then. A colleague at the hospital I was working in at the time had invited me. I knew he was a little bit in love with me and had flippantly accepted his invitation. He had bought the best seats in the middle of the front row.

It was a cold windy night and I was wearing a heavy Harris Tweed coat. I decided not to check it in and wore it into the auditorium, keeping it wrapped around me like a shy virgin as he pressed his knee against mine throughout the first act. I didn't accompany him to the bar at the interval, annoyed by the knee pressing. He was late coming back for the second act, bringing with him a waft of spirits. Dutch courage. I was prepared for him and had positioned my bag and scarf into a buffer between our seats. He stayed to his side for the first twenty minutes or so, although I was uncomfortably aware of a puffy breathing through his nose. When the flabby tenor lumbered into an aria, giving it his all, my friend grabbed my hand twisting my fingers into his moist warm palm. In the front row,

in full view of the cast, I sat stone-still staring into the middle distance, my gaze meeting the amused gaze of a slender man about the same age as myself. I was thirty at the time. It was a performed recital; the singers were in their everyday clothes. He wore black jeans, tight jumper, big boots. I hadn't noticed him till then, and assumed he had joined in the second act. He stepped forward, his head went back with that shy arrogance that I got to know so well, and he began to sing. I was shocked; the voice flew out of him, round and mellow, a female thing. I was unfamiliar with the countertenor voice. I thought at first it was a trick and that he was miming, and that one of the female singers would step out from behind him. With the voice came a glint of something inside his mouth, a gold-capped tooth, there for an instant, a secret, hidden thing that I didn't see for the rest of the performance. I pulled my trapped hand out of my friend's grasp and placed it under my chin. My heart was racing – where had this person come from? He reappeared at the end, holding one of the female singer's hands, modestly arrogant. I couldn't take my eyes off him. I scrambled out of my seat after the last enthusiastic clappers were drowned by the buzz of conversation. Light-headed and jittery, I lost my gloves and my scarf and had to go back and search for them under the seat. I couldn't look at my friend, let alone engage in conversation on the long walk up the aisle to the entrance of the auditorium. I made a feeble excuse about having to catch a train and fled.

The following week at work, I avoided my colleague, and he backed off, fearful that his knee rubbing and hand clasping had rattled me. A couple of years later, my unhealthy obsession fully bedded in, I was at the Wigmore Hall, Alex was featured in a recital with a couple of other singers, when I spotted my colleague eyeing me across the bar. I realised he must have been watching me for some time; I was there on my own. I always went alone. Neither of us made any

attempt to approach the other. Afterwards he was waiting for me near the entrance. It was his turn to be cruel this time. I waited for the punch to land; it came with a slippery half-whispered comment about the thrill of the countertenor if you liked that sort of thing. He chuckled, his gaze wobbling behind his glasses, his eyes like sad fish in a bowl – he was a tenor man himself. I fled, welcoming the bitter cold. Shame washed over me and wouldn't stop, wave after wave, unbearable inside the steamy carriage on the underground, unbearable as I lumbered up the clanking escalator at my stop. I reached my front door, my hands trembling. I dropped the key and, messing about in the dark, fumbling for it in a patch of shadow, I was close to tears. Inside the hall I stood with my back against the door. I could no more walk over to the sound system and put on one of the two CDs he had out at the time than leap over a cliff.

It took a couple of days to recover, to be able to return to my collection. Back in familiar waters again I had missed a vital opportunity to close it all down; instead I allowed myself to drown, my obsession fed by Alex's growing reputation. I followed him across Europe and the United States; in those fifteen years I missed five performances. I was Snow White sealed inside my glass coffin, gently breathing but not living. In this comatose, suspended state, I rose steadily. I moved hospitals three times, climbed the hierarchy, made a couple of unexpected leaps. I never went for principal, I was content with deputy. I wasn't a monk, I would go through active and fallow times, I started and ended relationships, I was disengaged and in control; not that I let it show. I was a nice person. I cared about the men that got a little bit close to me, I helped many of them, sorted their finances, saw them through tough periods, and when the waters calmed, slipped away. Some of them knew that I liked opera, that I had a favourite singer, but none of them had any idea what he meant to me. I would

have died rather than admit where I was going when I boarded a flight to Brussels, Amsterdam, New York, Chicago.

It went on for fifteen years, slowly draining me, sucking the colour out of my existence. I watched on as this other person walked about, talked, advised, solved things. Who was this stranger? I had become a joke to myself. On the weekends, which were increasingly spent alone, I was already drinking by eleven in the morning. I would get through two bottles of wine a day easily, and worried constantly that I gave off that sweet smell when the lid is lifted from a jar of pickled fruit. It was November again, close to the anniversary of that first concert nearly fifteen years ago, when Arnold the junior colleague at The Anderson and his squawky parrot of wife invited me to a barbecue in celebration of some Australian feast day. I went because I couldn't bear to glug down another bottle of white wine on my own. I would have gone to the zoo, a seething mall, an indoor swimming pool, a sports hall to play table tennis, badminton – anywhere. Tom, emerging out of cloud of sausage fumes brandishing the greasy, charred thing on the sagging paper plate, was my salvation, not that I recognised it at the time.

* * *

I am calm after that first visit to Tom's flat, not so restless and perhaps I don't drink so much, I can't remember. I know what is coming, and it is a good feeling, moored up in a sheltered bay off the open sea, a time of rest and anticipation. It is Christmas Eve and I have just come off the call to Tom. I shove my keys into my coat pocket, take my scarf and my hat and my gloves. It is starting to snow outside. I leave the thermostat turned down low, anticipating a freeze, and make the long journey out to the end of the Piccadilly line. By the time I arrive outside his block of flats, the snow is falling fast. The front entrance

is open. I bound up the stairs, clapping the snow off my gloves, shaking my hat, leaving a trail of water behind me. The smell of cooking wafts into the corridor. He is standing inside the door to his flat wearing a white apron with a pink and orange-coloured crab design across the middle; he is smiling, not a lot, just enough. He has a dishcloth draped over one arm that matches the apron, a last year's Christmas present from the mother, or the grumpy niece. I stop at the top of the stairs, I feel the world tilt and then slip back up into its right position. I am struck by his smallness. The man I remember from three weeks ago was round and slightly tubby. His face is thinner, I am struck by the boniness of his small hands and small feet, his legs and arms are skinny. Straight away I think of someone else and stop myself right there.

'Magnus,' he says as if he isn't quite sure and is testing my name. I say something stupid about the trains running slowly and the awfulness of the weather. This unexpected skinniness is a shock, not an unpleasant one. I wonder if he has been on a diet and hasn't wanted to make contact until he has reached his target. The wind is booming round the side of the building, something is rattling, he mentions the roof tiles and some flashing that has come loose. We are at a cocktail party making polite conversation, but it doesn't matter, it feels natural as breathing standing there passing the time of day outside his door in the cold corridor. He cuts me off in mid-flow about some aspect of the London transport system and walks back into the flat. The big French windows are misted from something boiling on the stove; there isn't any music, just the wind, and the flashing banging. I walk over to the window and stand looking out. The snow is a wavy white blanket, piling up fast against the cold glass like grain. Soon, I remember thinking, soon we won't be able to see out.

I stay there six days and six nights. My ordered home is warm when I get back, the heat turned down low, ticking over. I don't stop to remove my coat, my scarf, and my gloves, or my outdoor shoes. I go to the kitchen cupboard under the sink where I keep a supply of black plastic rubbish sacks. I start in the downstairs sitting room – out go the CDs, the postcards, the programmes from all over the world, all the church venues and recital rooms in university buildings, that only a devotee knows. I comb through every cranny, diligent in my determination. It takes me three hours of solid searching, and binning. The bags are knotted tight and put out for collection. The following morning I watch in the cold grey light as the bins are dragged over the pavement and upended, rattled into the jaws of the machine that eats everything, pulverised, gone forever – or so I think.

* * *

For two full years I am happy. Tom is happy, and Kitty starts on the road to happiness, all us clinging to this raft of family. We are a team. And I like that. A team is harmony, civilised interaction, home baking, low music in the background of our conversations, dressing the Christmas tree, walks on the heath in the rain with the dog.

Where did all this happiness go, how did it get away? Thoughts that later kept me awake at night for hours, scrabbling in the dirt with muddy fingers, the anxious 'what if', the endlessly forking paths. Our boat sprang a leak the moment I knocked on his door that Christmas Eve. Life is a leaky boat, that's how we grow old and die. But some leaks are bigger than others.

It was my suggestion that we throw in our lot together. Tom will sell his flat and move into my house, which is far too big for one person. He doesn't see

the need to rush and wants to wait for a year – next Christmas he says – we will know by then. I wear him down and within six months he is living with me in Blackheath. And six months after that Kitty has moved in. There is something deeply perverse in my nature; I know that the domestic idyll is paper-thin, that life with an unhappy, needy teenager might work for a week, a fortnight in a kindly avuncular sort of way, but for life, forever, is cloud cuckoo land. But still I push on, I am good at getting the exact opposite of what I want. I pull out all the stops and make Tom feel a shit for holding out on his niece.

We give her the attic, a big roomy space with views overlooking the heath and across the city in the hazy distance. Within days of her occupancy becoming official, the pair of them go out and buy a dog, a mangy flea-ridden mongrel with long, flowing, beard-like hair that it deposits everywhere. It is a mutual antipathy; slavishly devoted to Kitty, the creature growls softly whenever I enter the room. A jinn has come into our house, hiding inside the body of the ugly dog, and is plotting to eject me. I am told it would sense my return from the end of the road, and would rise from its basket, arthritic, stiff-legged, it isn't a young dog, and would clamber onto the window seat emitting a low, motorised growl. It looks like an old dog, but how do I know for sure, the rescue centre couldn't give us an age, it could be an ancient-looking two-year-old. I might have ten more years of this.

There is a coolness between myself and Kitty, to suggest that her dog should leave home would have met with a storm. And so I talk Tom into the kennel, I chip away at him, out of earshot of Kitty, she can't know until the purchase is a *fait accompli*. He insists on breaking the news to her, she takes it badly, and the following morning when the kennel arrives far too early and catches me half-awake in my dressing gown, she runs off with the dog. Tom is

beside himself. It isn't until late that afternoon that we get a call from his mother; Kitty is on her way home with Skinny. That night, the hairy dog is back in her basket beside the stove, and the kennel is boxed up ready to return to the supplier.

When Angela phones a few weeks later, she keeps it brief as she always does with me. She is in Calais about to board the ferry and wants to see Tom the following day. Out of the blue, without having to lift a finger, the answer to my prayers has arrived. I go through to the kitchen and make myself a cup of tea and forget all about her phone call. As far as I'm aware I'm not deliberately holding out on Tom, slyly setting him up, leaving him unprepared. When I walk in from work the following evening, I am caught off-guard. His angry accusation is more than justified, I can't defend myself; although when he tells me it has all been a storm in a teacup and that Angela has gone away empty-handed, I feel a sort of relief. Angela's reclamation of Kitty would have run us close to the edge, and I don't have the nerve for that – not quite yet.

It is about a week after Angela's visit. The house is in darkness. I know Kitty is staying over with a friend but I am surprised that Tom is out; we'd spoken on the phone less than an hour ago, and had planned an evening meal together. As I come through the front door I see a shape crouched at the bottom of the stairs. It is a moment before I realise it is Tom. Something has happened to Kitty. I am horribly frightened. Time slows and stops. It would be one of those moments that would never go away, that would jump out at me from the corners of sleep, a bus ride, a walk along the tow path. 'What's happened?' I whisper. I should go to him, sit down beside him and take his hand, but I am afraid he will see straight into my soul, and tell me that I am rid of her at last.

‘It’s mum,’ he says.

My heart thumps with relief. ‘What happened?’

He stands up, the dark shape of him swaying in the gloom. I watch him reach out like an ancient person and stumble, steadying himself against the bannister. I think for a moment he is drunk. My mother’s death was a confused mix of intense regret and a wild soaring relief. I was young when she died, just past twenty. I should have been devastated, she was my only parent. I was deeply loved, more than my two sisters. Tom’s dark shape shuffles away from me, oldmannish, crippled, everything I have spent my life running away from. In the gloom, standing inside the front door, I realise that he has been sent to bring me back to myself, mend the broken links, and it is up to me what I do with this.

Chapter Seven

Kitty

I have this dog called Skinny. We got her from the rescue home, she was the last one left apart from this big fat Labrador that stank. She's quite big, tall like a greyhound, and covered in this massive grey-black fur like a poodle. When she gets scared her legs go rigid, her fur puffs up, her lips curl back showing her gums and her long teeth. In the old house she had two baskets, one downstairs in the kitchen beside the Aga, and the other in my room at the top of the house, but normally she slept on the end of my bed. During the day while I was out at school or round at a friend's, she'd stay home with Tom. She'd found a place under his desk and would sneak in there and fall asleep, or sometimes just sit beside him looking out. He said she had a soothing atmosphere, and gave off calming vibes. But Magnus never really got used to her, he's not an animal person.

The only real issue with Skinny, apart from her general hostility towards strangers and other dogs, was the fur problem. I tried using a dog comb, but it was too weak for the tough hairs and Skinny would get fed up and would whine and howl, and bare her teeth. Tom went round with the Hoover to get rid of the worst of it, but it was a full-time job and after a bit he more or less gave up, and we got used to living in a hairy house and going around covered in dog fur. It didn't matter so much for us, I was in my horrible school clothes most of the time, and Tom was at home in a pair of old jeans. It was different for Magnus, he was pretty high up at the hospital and had to look smart, and if I'm trying to see

it from his point of view, dog hairs, even if they weren't white ones and didn't show too much, were sort of embarrassing. Magnus cares a lot about the way he looks with his clothes and suits and coats and things. That's just how he is.

So. I came home from Imelda's, I'd had a meal round there with her uptight mother and was looking forward to a good soak in the bath. Skinny would come in there with me. I used to talk a lot to my dog; I'd discuss the day and tell her things, like how Imelda's younger brother and his creepy little friend were always staring at me across the table at supper. It got to be really embarrassing: all the smirking and gross stuff I knew was going on in the brother's room. I couldn't talk to Imelda about it. I told Sheryl and she said she got so fed up she cornered the friend 'cos he's much smaller than the brother, and gave him a Chinese burn. Chinese burns are her specialty; she's really good at them. She grabs your wrist and gives a quick twist; it's incredibly painful. The pathetic little wimp screamed and went crying to Imelda's mum and Sheryl was banned from the house.

I was looking forward to discussing the latest awful supper round at Imelda's with Skinny at bath time. Sheryl had given me some apple blossom bath oil, which she said had an elderly smell, and wanted me to test it out. But the minute I got inside the house Tom was there waiting for me.

'Kitty.' He was all twitchy and wouldn't look at me properly. 'It's about Skinny.'

And straight away my heart was doing that twisty bad thing, the danger, danger signal that Sheryl's always talking about.

'I think she could do with her own space,' he said.

I couldn't bear the shifty look on his face. 'I don't get it,' I said. 'She's quite a big dog,' he said.

‘So?’

‘We’ve bought her a kennel.’

I wasn’t hearing this right. ‘What?’

‘It’s really very roomy, we thought it could go at the back of the bicycle shed.’

‘It’s a terrible idea,’ I said.

‘It doesn’t have to go there – it could go on the other side, at the end of the patio. It comes with a heater.’

‘Absolutely no way. I don’t understand how you could’ve thought such a thing. It’s beyond me – seriously.’

‘So you won’t even consider it?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘No I won’t. Not in a thousand years is Skinny going in some mouldy old kennel.’ I cut him off because I knew what was coming next. ‘And I don’t care how posh it is. Skinny will hate it. She won’t sleep. She’ll howl all night. She’s never been in a kennel in all her life. It’s cruelty.’ I was full of fury. He was letting me down badly. ‘Skinny stays with me on my bed – and that’s final.’

‘Kitty we have to talk about this.’ He sat down at the bottom of the stairs, staring mournfully ahead like he was at the funeral of a close friend. ‘We really do.’

‘You haven’t already bought this thing?’ I said.

‘We’ve ordered it online, it’s being delivered tomorrow.’

‘That is so disloyal. How could you ever think that I would allow Skinny to go in such a thing? It’s like putting her in prison, and locking her up. She’ll think she’s done something really wrong, it’ll break her heart.’

His gaze slid over my shoulder like a slippery fish. ‘She’s a dog, Kitty.’

‘I can’t believe you even said that.’

He laughed. ‘Kitty c’mon.’

But I wasn’t in the mood. ‘This is Magnus’ idea isn’t it? And you’re just going along with it. I know you never would’ve come up with this on your own. She sleeps under your table, you love her.’

‘Her kennel will be very warm with the electric pad.’

Something horrible had just occurred to me. ‘Are you saying she can’t come into the house at all, that she’s got to be out there all day as well as all night?’

‘A lot of dogs live in kennels.’

‘What?’ I shouted. ‘What? I can’t believe I’m hearing this. You want to throw her out. Chuck her away like an old sock. Leave her shivering out there in some hideous kennel thing behind the bike shed where the bins are. How can you be so callous – so cold-hearted?’

‘Kitty, we’ve got to think rationally about this.’

I couldn’t look at him, it was so transparent who was behind this. ‘Forget it,’ I said. ‘It’s not going to happen.’

He sighed like he was weighed down with all the problems of the world.

‘Kitty, I don’t think you understand, this isn’t negotiable.’

Sheryl’s twisty angry danger, danger thing was going off like a siren inside my head. ‘We don’t have to always do what Magnus wants.’

‘This is a joint decision,’ he said.

‘He hates Skinny, he always has.’ This was so unfair. ‘Why do you always have to side with him – why can’t you get a backbone for once in your life and stand up to him? I know you like Skinny being with you in your office during the day. You said so. You said she has a calming influence, that you get

more done when she's around.' I could feel this lump inside of me growing; I took in a deep breath to keep it down. 'I never thought you'd want to get rid of her.'

'Kitty.' He came over and I knew he wanted to put his arm around me.

I ducked away from him and dashed for the stairs. By the time I reached the landing, I had snot everywhere. My room was in on the top floor in the attic. I threw myself onto the bed. I was in my school coat, my rucksack must've been open, all this stuff went everywhere. Skinny was standing in the doorway, her head cocked to one side, watching me with a puzzled, worried look. I rolled round and made her lie down on the bed beside me, and got her to rest her head on the pillow next to mine. She wouldn't settle at first and kept getting up and turning round, but in the end she lay down. She can never stay awake for long, and fell asleep, making snorting doggy noises, snuffling and whispering to herself, her back leg ticking, dreaming of catching rabbits and things. It was dark outside and was starting to rain. I lay listening to the sound of the wind whistling round the chimney and under the roof, and thought of Tom and his storms. I wondered if he was on his computer downstairs in his study following isobars or whatever he does, and I felt sorry for him. I should've been angry with him, but instead I was sad for him, and it didn't really make sense. I must've fallen asleep trying to work it out.

The next day got worse, a lot worse. The horrible kennel arrived really early on the Saturday. It came in a big UPS van, and took three men to get it out. Magnus wouldn't let the delivery men go until they'd carried it through the side gate into the garden, which wasn't the deal, and really pissed one of them off. I was watching from the bathroom, which looks out onto the garden. Magnus was doing this thing he does, pointing and going – right a bit, left a bit – getting them

to drag it towards the worst place behind the bins. There was no way he was going to have it in full view of the house, messing up the look of his garden. One of the men started to get mad, but Magnus ignored him so they plonked the horrible thing down in the middle of the lawn and walked off. Magnus shouted after him but they weren't taking any more of his shit.

Tom told me that if it hadn't been for Magnus I never would've come to live with him. He was always reminding me. Magnus never did. I don't think he cared particularly. We didn't get on; not in a bad way, more in a not knowing what to say to each other sort of way. If, for instance, Magnus came to pick me up from school, which he only ever did a few times, I'd have to think up topics of conversation, which is something I never had to do with Tom. I felt bad for him in a way; but at the same time it was like he was deliberately making himself difficult to talk to, and didn't really want anything to do with me.

Watching from the bathroom, I felt an idiot. All my trying with Magnus was just a stupid waste of time. He didn't like Skinny any more than he liked me. But what was really getting to me was Tom. He had his hands thrust into his pockets with his knees slightly bent, that way he stands when something is going on that he doesn't agree with, but won't say. He loved Skinny and let her sleep under his desk when he was working. He spoke to her when he was in the kitchen cooking or making a cup of tea. He tried out his meteorological theories on her and sometimes read her bits of his book. I remembered that feeling I'd had before falling asleep the night when he'd told me about the kennel, the feeling of being sorry for him. But now that feeling had gone. I couldn't stand his sad, drooping look, his shrinking back and not standing up for me. I ran down the stairs with Skinny behind me. I was still in my school clothes. I found a pair of

trainers in the hall, and grabbed a hat. I was halfway down the street when it occurred to me that I could go to Granny's. But I had Skinny with me, and Granny made me put her out in the garden when I visited, plus travelling from Blackheath to Wimbledon would take forever. It was much easier to go to Imelda's round the corner. Her family, especially her mum, loved Skinny. But the brother and the thought of his creepy little friend put me off. So I kept on going past her road. There was a bus waiting at the stop. I jumped on just as it was moving and got a free ride all the way to the entrance of Wimbledon station.

It was still early when I arrived at Granny's. She lives about a two-minute walk from the station. I thought about finding a park and letting Skinny have a run about, but she wasn't really in the mood, so I did the selfish thing and went straight to Granny's block and rang the doorbell. It was eight fifty, not too early I hoped. When she didn't come to the door I knelt down and peered through the letterbox. I could see her shoes in the hall and her coat and her bag on the chair by the little table. She was definitely in. But she probably didn't want to be seen in her nightdress at nearly nine in the morning. I rang the bell again and she still didn't come. I whispered through the letterbox. 'Granny, it's me, Kitty. Let me in.' I heard a door open, and saw a shadow in the corridor. I could hear footsteps, the chain rattled, and the door sneaked open a crack.

Granny was in her pale blue dressing gown with her hair in these tiny little curlers and clips. 'Kitty,' she whispered like we were a couple of spies doing a secret drop. The door inched open a little further. Not wanting to be seen by a stray neighbour that might be around at that time, she reached out and pulled me in. Skinny squeezed in behind me and as the door closed it nipped her tail, and she yelped.

Granny noticed her for the first time. 'What's she doing here?'

I couldn't bear it if I was going to be told to lock her in the garden. I could feel the thing that I'd been trying to keep down, welling up. Granny looked so sweet in her little curler things and her fluffy blue dressing gown. A great big embarrassing noise came out of me. 'It's Skinny,' I wailed.

'What's going on?' She frowned, not behaving like the friendly old Granny you'd want in these circumstances.

Still, she was the only Granny that I had and she would have to do. She didn't tell me to remove my muddy shoes, or try to get Skinny off the sofa, or all the normal Granny-type things she usually does. She just stood there looking at me, like this wasn't any big surprise to her. 'So,' she said after a bit. 'I'll get us both a strong coffee.'

I don't even drink coffee. It's an old person's drink but I wasn't going to tell her that. She went off and started clattering about in the kitchen. I took off my shoes and put my coat as neatly as I could on the end of the sofa. It was grey and very still outside; there was no one around in the park. I could hear someone moving about in the flat upstairs, a toilet flushing, a door banged, and then quiet. It occurred to me, lying on Granny's sofa, looking out onto the park, that she might be lonely, and that maybe she'd been lonely for a long time, and had never told anyone, pretending to herself and everyone that it was okay.

She came back carrying coffee and biscuits on a tray, and pulled up a low table. 'So,' she said, 'do you want to talk about it?'

I sat up to take the wobbly little cup that she was holding out for me. There were two almond biscuits balanced on the saucer that looked exactly like the ones I had given her last Christmas. Skinny was being very good, sitting up very straight at the end of the sofa, her nose twitching with the smell of the

coffee. But she knew not to bother Granny and stayed twitching and trembling, and trying her utmost not to draw attention to herself.

I sniffed the frothy top of my coffee, my stomach lurched and I put the cup down. I was going to start crying again, I sucked in a deep breath. Granny was not one for tears, which was probably a good thing. ‘They want to put Skinny in a kennel,’ I said.

Granny shifted forward onto the edge of her seat and sat stirring her coffee. Her spoon clinked onto the saucer; everything was so quiet in her flat, every sound counted. ‘What do you mean – send her back to the dog’s home?’

I took in a shuddery breath. ‘They want her to live out in the garden, they’ve bought this kennel and put it up behind the bins. She’s going to have to live out there, even during the day.’

Granny went back to stirring her coffee. She was going to tell me that it wasn’t such a bad thing, that Skinny would get used to it, that it was probably for the best. Skinny was a big hairy dog; all the phony arguments Tom had used earlier.

Her spoon clinked back onto the saucer. ‘Whose idea was this?’
‘It was Magnus’.’ ‘And?’

she said.

‘Tom says it’s a good idea,’ I mumbled.

She sat back, sipping her coffee. She was being a little bit weird; she wasn’t acting like her normal self. ‘What do you think?’ she said.

‘How do you mean?’

‘You said it was Magnus’ idea.’

‘What difference does it make?’ I said.

‘I thought Tom was rather fond of Skinny.’ She went back to stirring her coffee. ‘So what do you think?’

I knew she was fishing, but I had to tell someone, not just Imelda and Sheryl. ‘He’ll do anything Magnus wants,’ I mumbled.

‘I’m surprised about that,’ Granny said. ‘Tom has always been one to know his own mind. He can be very stubborn when he wants to be. I wouldn’t have thought Magnus could make him do anything he doesn’t want to.’

‘That’s not how it is.’ It was like I was standing swaying on the edge of a tall cliff, looking down.

‘How is it?’ Granny said quietly.

I could feel her gaze boring into the side of my head. I looked up and met her dark little eyes. She must know, surely she knew. ‘Tom’s in love with him.’ Something popped inside my stomach, did a dancing lurch.

‘And what about Magnus?’ Granny said. ‘Is he in love with Tom?’

‘I don’t know,’ I mumbled. I had never looked at it like that before. ‘I think so,’ I said. But I didn’t sound very convinced.

Granny was silent for a long time. I stared out into the park. There was a man by the swings with a small white dog. He was sitting on the roundabout staring down at the ground, while the little dog ran about sniffing the ground. He looked hunched and sad like something bad had happened, and I thought about Tom, and wished I hadn’t said those things to Granny.

‘I see,’ she said.

I could feel her watching me.

Granny sighed and looked out of the window. ‘It makes sense,’ she said quietly, like she was talking to herself. ‘I wish he’d told me.’ She looked round. ‘What do you think about him?’

My mind was numb. 'Who?'

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'This isn't fair on you.'

No one had ever asked me the question before and the words were out before I could stop them. 'I don't like him very much,' I said.

She didn't say anything after that and we sat in silence looking out. The sad man with the little white dog had gone. Skinny, who had been very good until now, was beginning to get restless, and scrambled up onto Granny's white couch and lay with her head on my lap like she does when we're at home together. Granny, who is particular about outdoor shoes on carpets, and dogs on couches, didn't say anything, and got up and took the coffee things back to the kitchen.

A week later Angela turned up at the house. Granny must've got onto her more or less straight away, dragged her back from wherever she was. I don't know, maybe it didn't happen like that. She would've known that Angela wasn't going to fall for any of her homophobic shit. All I know is that what happened was my fault; maybe not totally, but mostly it was down to me. If I had never gone to visit Granny that day feeling so sore and mad, I don't think Angela's visit would've happened. And Tom wouldn't have gone off the deep end with Granny; and she wouldn't have stayed up all night, her eyes all red and swollen from crying, not looking where she was going. She wouldn't have tripped, her foot snagging the lifted-up pavement like an open lip, stubbing her toe, reaching out with nothing to stop her fall. Afterwards, when she was in the hospital, lying in that big old bed in that cubicle thing, all I was hoping was that she wouldn't get a chance to tell Tom what I'd done. There are not many people in my life that care about me like she did. I know there're Imelda and Sheryl and Tom of

course, and maybe my dad, but that's a whole other can of worms, which I am not prepared to open right now. There's only ever been Tom and Granny, and now Granny's gone, all I've got left is Tom, and if I lost him – I guess there'd still be Skinny.

Shit – all I can remember thinking when Tom told me she'd gone was relief she hadn't had a chance to tell him, which is pretty fucked up by anyone's standards.

Chapter Eight

Tom

Friends have described that moment when the hammer blow strikes and absorbing concerns evaporate, vaporised by the explosion that goes off inside your head. Everything was crisp and clear in the dark, like a super-real painting or a photograph, so carefully arranged.

‘What happened?’ Magnus whispered. He looked terrified.

My mother in hospital, incapacitated, unable to move, unable to speak, was as incomprehensible as the image of her circling around the moon in an astronaut’s suit. ‘My mother’s in hospital.’

‘Which hospital?’ Magnus looked odd, elongated, like a creature from another planet. His fingers were pinching into my arm. ‘Which hospital Tom?’ ‘Saint Thomas’. She hit her head. She tripped on a paving stone.’ ‘We’ll go now.’ He eased me towards the door.

‘You can’t come.’ I was panicking. ‘You can’t come in there.’

There was a noise above. I heard the attic door creak and Kitty calling softly for her dog.

‘I’ll drive you.’ Magnus’ voice was calm. He had stopped looking strange. ‘Kitty can go in with you.’

The hospital was airless with a soggy undercurrent of air conditioning; we squeaked up a bright blue corridor that led to an elevator at the far end, and stood

beside a very old man wrapped up in an Aertex blanket. The porter yanked him out onto the second floor; we followed them through a double set of doors and down another corridor towards a sign that directed us to the geriatric wards. The swing doors banged back as the porter shunted the old man through, too comatose to care. Inside the ward the air was thick and swampy. Frightened old people sat propped against pillows, wandering in feeble steps, clinging to the sides of their beds, tinkering with water jugs.

Ahead of me Kitty had stopped beside one of the beds, shrouded behind a disposable concertina curtain. I approached slowly, counting the steps. My mother lay on her back in the cave-like darkness, her eyes closed, her skin marbled and streaked with yellow.

Kitty tiptoed over to the bed. ‘Granny,’ she whispered. ‘It’s me, Kitty. I’ve got Tom with me.’

My mother reached for my hand. ‘Thomas.’ She pushed herself up against the pillows. ‘You came.’

Kitty pulled a couple of chairs round to the side of the bed and we sat down. My mother was watching me, not looking altogether friendly. There was a peculiar atmosphere emanating from her. I was painfully conscious of the last time we had met.

Kitty glanced at me nervously. ‘Granny – what happened?’

‘I don’t want to talk about it,’ she snapped. ‘Go and get me a drink.’ She waved a pale swollen hand. ‘One of the nurses will help you.’

Kitty stood up. ‘What do you want?’

‘Anything – just go.’

Kitty shot me a frightened glance; my mother had undergone a personality transplant.

After she had gone, my mother released my hand and lay back against the pillows, her mouth slack. Saliva dribbled down onto her gown.

I had rehearsed this moment, played it out a thousand times. I saw myself from a long way off, talking to my mother down a funnel; she was a tiny, pigmy picture, all bunched up at the far end.

She hitched herself up, wiping the saliva away with the back of her hand. 'Where's Magnus?' she said.

'Outside in the car park. He drove us here.'

'So he didn't want to come in?'

'He didn't think you'd want to see him.' We might have been discussing the weather.

'Angela told me,' she said.

My heart thumped. 'Mum, we don't need to talk about this.'

'It's important you know. We spent a nice day together. She seemed improved, not visually, but mentally. She wasn't so aggressive. We were in Liberty's in Regent Street.'

Angela in Liberty's made no sense; dusty, sweaty, her big pack knocking against elegant wives at the make-up counter. 'What were you doing there?' I said.

'Buying a cardigan for Kitty.'

'Mum, can we talk about this some other time?' I wanted our last meeting gone, magicked away like a bad dream.

'We were talking about the house. I said how pleased I was that you had this arrangement sharing with Magnus. How a house was much better for Kitty than a flat. We were talking about the dog – Skinny. You can't keep a dog in a flat.' She glanced towards the gap in the curtain, watching for Kitty. 'Angela said

something about Magnus calling the shots, and she wouldn't be surprised if the dog had to go. It didn't make a lot of sense at the time. But then Angela has never made much sense.' She reached across the blanket, her fingers pudgy, damp. 'And then the penny dropped.'

My mother's fingers were always cool and skinny; these were foreign fingers that didn't fit. My sister would justify her outing of me on grounds of openness and honesty. She was a self-righteous shit. She always had been. What was wrong with me? My mother was dying.

'You mustn't hold it against her.' Her hand slid away from me, back onto the blanket. 'Don't say anything.'

We didn't speak for a bit. 'How did you trip?' I said.

'It could've happened anywhere,' she replied. 'It's one of those things. The doctor told me that it is much more common than you would think; he told me that two thousand older people in this country alone trip on paving stones every year.'

I stared down at the Aertex blanket, weaving the squares into some kind of paving-stone pattern, tufts growing up between the cracks. I saw my mother distracted, unhappy after our fight the night before, anxiously scrabbling in her handbag, oblivious.

'I got off the tube at Wimbledon and was walking towards the common when I stepped on this wretched bit of half-finished paving. An awfully nice young man called an ambulance.' The dark, glittery look was gone. Her face was soft. 'Thomas. You do know how proud of you I am, I couldn't have hoped for a better son or a lovelier granddaughter. I'm going to leave her the flat. You and Angela will get my investments. I hope you don't mind.'

'Mum.' Goose pimples rippled under my shirt. I felt my insides crunch.

‘You’re not going to die.’

She released my hand. ‘Of course I’m not darling.’ She lay back on the pillows and closed her eyes.

Kitty was standing at the end of the bed; she was holding a carton of orange juice. ‘This was all I could find, the chief nurse is an old bitch.’ Her face froze. ‘Tom, what’s wrong with Granny?’ She crept over to the table and put the orange beside the water jug. ‘What’s wrong with her?’

‘There’s nothing wrong with her, she’s sleeping.’

She eyed me suspiciously, and craned forward to kiss my mother on the forehead. ‘See you later Granny,’ she whispered.

The dinner trolley arrived. A tall, stately nurse peered in and reminded us that it was time to go. We wandered out into the corridor, dodging another enfeebled inmate in a wheelchair being pushed by the same careless porter. As he wrenched the old lady round and propelled her through the swing doors, Kitty turned on him. ‘Watch what you’re doing, you’ll hurt her.’ But the door swung shut cutting off his response. We travelled in the clanky, smelly lift in silence and walked down the electric blue corridor back out into the sticky evening heat.

The stately nurse phoned the following day; my mother had passed away – that awful euphemism – around three that morning. I wondered why she had taken so long to make the phone call. I saw my mother alone, frightened, pressing the bell, and put the phone down on the nurse while she was still talking. She rang back almost straight away. I picked up the receiver and slammed it down. I stood over it watching it like it was living thing, waiting for it to start ringing again. I let two minutes pass, then three, I checked the clock, and just before five minutes was up, it started to ring. But the nurse had hung up by the

time I answered. I placed the receiver carefully into the cradle and walked through into the kitchen. Magnus had left for the hospital, Kitty was at school. I was alone in the house for the next few hours. I sat down at the breakfast island and didn't move until three in the afternoon, twelve hours after the time of my mother's death. I got down from the high stool, unsticking myself from the back of the chair. My legs felt stiff, drained of blood. I hobbled across the marble floor and stood at the sink staring into the garden. It was scrubby, disorganised – a shameful mess.

She was gone, really gone, not sulking, a little bit estranged, or in Wales with her other friend Janis. I had Gwynne's number somewhere; she could pass on the news to Janis. I felt sick, panicky. I shouldn't have slammed the phone down on the nurse. They had morgues in hospitals; was my mother already in there, tucked away in one of those filing cabinet-type things like you see on TV?

The kitchen was filled with bright sunlight. I pulled the glass doors open and walked out onto the dry lawn. There was a thin layer of shadow along the fence. I lay down on my back, shading my eyes against the sun. High above a plane moved through the cloudless blue sky, leaving a trail. I would lie here for a while longer before starting on the phone calls. I moved my hand away from my eyes and was filled with an orange light. It was cool here, comfortable. The grass rasped my back, I could feel insects crawling under my shirt; they could be biting ants for all I cared. I wasn't going to think, not for a bit. Gwynne could wait, I could wait, my mother in that filing cabinet that they had her stored in down in the temperature-controlled morgue, twenty-two degrees below the outside atmosphere, could wait. Would I need a scarf and hat when I went there – should I wear gloves? I wouldn't take Magnus. I would go on my own.

Magnus found me when he got back at seven that evening. He shook me awake and ordered me up to bed. I had come adrift, and in matter of hours had turned into a very old person like those ghosts in the ward where my mother died. He stayed home from work the following day and made all the necessary phone calls, compiling a list of friends and distant relations I never knew existed. I surfaced at three o'clock that afternoon – always that time, even though I knew it wasn't the real time – three o'clock is when everything stops for me. Magnus had contacted my mother's fifty-four friends and relatives. There was a plot in Wimbledon cemetery where she could join Janis' husband, with room for Janis to follow. Magnus showed me various coffins, I pointed at random and it was all done, the undertakers informed, and the date for the funeral fixed. I went back upstairs to bed and lay staring up at the ceiling, my mind empty. Kitty came by in the early evening and lay down beside me. The light had gone and the room was full of shadow; she stayed with me, holding my hand until it was dark. Magnus came in and turned on the bedside lamp, perching beside Kitty. I could hear Skinny rustling about somewhere. The two people I loved most in the world were with me; I had more than I could ever have hoped for. All that time spent burning bridges at university, and the years afterwards, convinced I'd drift forever, never finding an anchor, and here they were sitting on my bed. I pushed myself up against the pillows – I was blessed.

The days leading up to the funeral passed in a trance. I have barely any memory of the actual event; everything was vile, tasted vile, smelt vile, looked vile. I lost over two stone in weight. Magnus read the signs and took me in hand; I was fed pills, blue ones, large yellow ones, stripy ones, so many different types, uppers, downers, smoother-outers. It was Kitty's job to see that I took them all.

She bought me a pillbox and would inspect it twice a day. After three weeks I was taken off the big yellow pills, six weeks later I was being maintained on a single bright blue tablet a day. Magnus had arranged a talking cure with Susan, a sprightly CBT lady. Every Tuesday and Thursday, a taxi arrived and took me down to the local medical centre where I was coaxed through a series of tasks. Ten minutes venturing outside the house was extended to thirty, and then an hour. I was encouraged to talk to one stranger and then two the next the day. Over the following weeks, aided by helpful tips and strategies, I was patched up and stuck back together again, pretty much.

I did well with the CBT, and was able to go to the shops and ride on the tube after a couple of weeks. I began to plan a book. My appetite had returned, I was gaining weight, I would soon be back to my old self again, everyone seemed to agree, even Kitty; and I didn't want to be a bad egg, I didn't want to let them down. At the end of the course of CBT I was released. We shook hands; Susan was pleased. I was a diligent advocate of her method; she could close the door on me with a feeling of satisfaction, a job well done. I walked away up the leafy tree-lined street, dawdling on the ten-minute walk back to the tube station. I stopped at the top of the hill, weary from the climb in the intense early-evening heat, and sat down on a low wall. Looking back down the street I experienced a rush of vertigo. The feeling intensified when I got up; it was the rolling tipping feeling that lingers after a long boat ride or flight. By the time I reached the tube station, I was only just clinging on, afraid at any moment of being swept away by the hurricane roaring inside my head.

Chapter Nine

Tom

When Magnus told me he was switching jobs and was moving to Beechridge, a private hospital on the outskirts of London, it was a shock. He had worked at The Anderson for nearly twenty years. It is one of the very few maximum-security therapeutic hospitals in the country that specialised in treating offenders suffering from severe personality disorders. I had driven past it numerous times on the A10 coming into Woodford Green, a bleak breezeblock gaggle of buildings, partially shielded from the road by a tall wire mesh fence. I never got to visit it when Magnus worked there; it was closed down five years ago for budgetary reasons.

The new hospital Beechridge was the brainchild of Eric Nye, who'd made a name for himself with a couple of pop psychiatry pamphlets written in the early eighties. Magnus had come across him on the conference circuit a few years back, where he was touting his claim of a cure against all the odds with a ninety per cent non-reoffending rate. I remember Magnus telling me that he'd been approached by this nutter, Eric somebody or other, who had got his hands on some city money, some charity, to revamp an old Victorian-style asylum and work his magic on a bunch of hard-nut offenders; a couple had relocated there from The Anderson apparently. The place was closed down within a year, some sort of scandal. It was picked up in the press, I didn't see it at the time. Six months later, Eric was back in touch with Magnus. He had reopened Beechridge

as a swanky private mental hospital. I was surprised when Magnus told me he was considering Eric's offer. The first few weeks in the new post he was tense. I knew better than to intrude, and put his distance down to an uncomfortable settling-in period. It was more than understandable, The Anderson had taken up so much of his life. Besides, I couldn't see how the change was going to work: wealthy neurotics weren't his thing. But he needed a rest; we both did.

Over breakfast on a cold, damp morning in June, nearly a year after my mother's death, Magnus asked if I would like to ride out with him to the new hospital. We set off after the morning rush hour; it was his day off and we were in no particular hurry. Beechridge was situated on the South Downs, surrounded by rolling green farmland. The roads were unusually clear and we were on the M25 before ten. We reached the junction forty minutes later and turned off into a B road that wove through picture-postcard villages frozen in time. The sun was warm through the windscreen; I lay back against the headrest and sneaked a glance at Magnus. 'You never told me it was so far out,' I said. 'It's quite a drive.'

Twenty minutes or so later Magnus turned off the road onto a narrow lane. We drove through an avenue of poplars; the vista widened into damp, greyish wheat fields on either side. There was a church in the distance surrounded by a hamlet. We turned off the lane through a set of tall iron gates. Ahead of us, partially concealed behind a stone arch, was a white turreted building basking in the morning sunshine. We drove past a cottage into a forecourt shaded by a couple of ancient cedar trees. Magnus parked the car in a bay with his name painted on a little white sign. That this place had only recently been a maximum-security mental hospital for violent offenders was inconceivable; all visible security measures had been erased – fences, lights,

high-tech surveillance apparatus, or guards patrolling the premises. The hospital was a sprawling Tudor hotchpotch of towers and turrets, with the addition of a white stucco façade containing an imposing central portico flanked by narrow latticed windows.

I followed Magnus through a set of institutional wire mesh doors into a shady hall tiled with dark red slates. I stepped back, shocked. There was a painting above a huge polished table of Henry the Eighth; it looked like a Holbein. Magnus caught my eye and grinned. I went over to inspect the plaque while he made a call; the painting was by some artist whose name I didn't recognise. I heard footsteps approaching further down the hall. A small man in his late sixties entered from a corridor behind the wide staircase. His wire-framed glasses glinted in the gloomy light; as he drew nearer I noticed a neat, wellclipped beard. His clothes were elderly: grey golfing slacks and a dove grey jumper over an old-fashioned Viyella shirt. His gaze flitted in my direction. 'Tom, delighted to meet you at last.' His handshake was dry. 'You're a weather man I'm told.' His accent was North American; he had the atmosphere of a tetchy academic, a bad-tempered keeper of the rare books department in a university library.

It took me a moment to realise that this was Eric Nye, unrecognisable from his much younger, bearded self on the back cover of his first book.

Before I had a chance to reply he turned to Magnus. His hand hovered over his shoulder. 'We'd better get this sorted.'

Magnus looked strained. 'I'm happy to wait in the car,' I said.

He walked away from Eric's hovering hand. 'I'll see you later, this shouldn't take long.'

Eric glanced back at me, smug and cruel like the tiger in the Disney version of The Jungle Book. ‘Nice meeting you Tom.’

Halfway across the forecourt, I remembered that Magnus had the key to the car, and realised that I was locked out. It was a warm, comfortable morning; I decided to wander and explore. The ramshackle building with its white stucco front and turrets was an oddly beguiling place, more like an upmarket nursing home or a university faculty building than a mental hospital. I wandered along the front, past narrow latticed windows, and peered into an institutional kitchen. As I craned round to get a better look, I saw a shadow reflected in the glass behind me. A woman was standing a little way off, watching me. She was nice looking, carefully dressed in casual, feminine clothes. I put her in her late forties, early fifties; she had a lot of curly, slightly greying hair.

‘Are you hungry?’ she said.

Her joke was not malicious; I was, after all, peering into the hospital kitchens. ‘No, no,’ I said, at a loss to explain my snooping.

‘I can get you in there. I’m friends with the sous chef.’

‘I was curious,’ I said. ‘I was being nosy.’

‘Are you new?’

‘New?’

‘I haven’t see you around.’ Her voice was soft, pleasantly melodic.

‘No, no – I’m here with... a friend.’ I hesitated, unsure of how much Magnus’ private life was generally known.

She nodded, her large grey-brown eyes, slightly hooded, sizing me up. ‘I saw you with Doctor Hunt in an old grey car.’ The smile was back. ‘I thought doctors all drove Jags and Mercedes.’

‘He’s had the car a long time.’ I was starting to get the hang of this woman’s eccentric sensibility. ‘He’s grown attached to it.’

‘Poor Doctor Hunt,’ she said, the smile hovering. ‘I hope that nasty Eric Nye hasn’t jipped him and got him on the cheap.’ Her fingers fluttered through her long, curly hair. ‘He’s such a mean man, a cheapskate and a sadist. You don’t want to cross swords with the likes of him.’ She eyed me quickly. ‘I can show you around if you want.’ She didn’t wait for my reply and wandered off.

It was one of those threshold moments that often drift past unremarked. I could have made an excuse, Magnus was waiting, we had to get back, any number of little lies.

She glanced round, the coquettish smile back again. ‘So,’ she said. ‘Where would you like to go first?’

I ran to keep up with her. ‘I’ll leave that to you. You’re the expert.’

‘Worst luck,’ she said. ‘So you’re just visiting, you’re not a patient?’

‘I’m afraid not.’

‘Well then, we might as well start with the outside of the building.’ She swung round to face the fancy crenelated façade. ‘It’s all fake, fake towers, fake turrets, fake fancy windows. Inside, behind the fakery, they’ve got iron bars on all the rooms, and heavy-duty locks on the reinforced doors. It’s a posh shit hole.’ Her arm flew up, the delicate fingers wavered, a flash of red nails. ‘He’s done it up like a fancy five-star hotel for the relatives and the insurance companies. Everyone here is on insurance. As soon as the money stops they’re out on their ear. That’s Eric Nye for you. He loves money. Money is his god, he goes to the chapel at night and prays to it.’ She glanced at me. ‘I hope I haven’t offended you – you’re not a friend of his are you?’

‘Not at all,’ I said.

She walked off fast. 'If we can get out beyond the gatehouse, then I can show you something really interesting.' She looked round. 'Sometimes the nurses come after you, but there doesn't seem to be anyone about today. You have to keep up.'

I hurried after her. 'Where are you taking me?'

'You'll see.'

We passed the gatehouse and came out from under the stone arch into wide landscaped grounds, a sweeping stretch of manicured lawn, peppered with cedar trees. I followed her over to a bench under the shade of one of the trees. She sat down, wrapping her skirt over her knees. A slight breeze had got up. She crossed her arms to ward off the cold. 'You know Beechridge used to be Henry the Eighth's old hunting lodge. He bought it for Anne Boleyn.'

'Yes, I think Doctor Hunt told me on the drive up.'

'And then they ruined it, this earl in the nineteenth century, he plastered all this horrible white stucco over the red bricks. Eric Nye is having it restored. He wants to take it back to how it was originally in Henry the Eighth's time. He's spending an absolute fortune. That's where a lot of the money goes.'

'You don't like Eric Nye I take it?'

She looked at me, the smile gone, her face frightened. 'Are you sure you're not a friend of his?'

'Your secret is safe with me.'

'What about Doctor Hunt?'

'I don't have to tell Magnus.'

Her face softened. 'Is that his name, I wondered what the 'M' stood for. It suits him. I can't wait to tell Darsh.'

'Who's Darsh?'

‘He’s my friend, he’s a very devout Hindu.’ She lowered her voice. ‘He’s got a really bad crush on Doctor Hunt.’ She turned away, smiling. ‘Most of us have. He’s so handsome and he wears lovely shoes. Darsh calls him an elegant dresser, and he should know, his family ran this top haute couture place in Bombay. He was a designer once. Worked with Lagerfeld and all the others.’ She paused, looking out across the expanse of lawn. ‘I don’t think Darsh’s insurance company is going to pay out any more. Eric’s chucking him out at the end of the week.’ She kept her gaze fixed ahead, her hands tightening round her arms. ‘If I still had my little car, I’d come down this drive at hundred miles an hour and run him over.’ She turned to me. ‘Shall I tell you something?’

‘I’m not sure you should.’

‘You have to promise not to tell anyone. Darsh and I reported him to the RSPCA.’ She paused.

‘Why?’ I said.

She leaned towards me, lowering her voice. ‘He didn’t know it was us, but Darsh thinks he has a pretty good idea. He was murdering squirrels.’ Her red painted nails waved in the direction of the trees. ‘They live out there; they aren’t doing anyone any harm. He lured them down out of the trees and trapped them. And then when they were half dead, he drowned them one by one. He did it openly in front of people. He wasn’t the least bit ashamed. I don’t think he thought he was doing anything wrong.’ ‘That’s pretty horrible,’ I said.

‘And you know what? While he was drowning them, I bet he was thinking about us, especially the ones he doesn’t like. Me and Darsh for sure.’ She laughed, a merry, melodic, infectious laugh that made me want to join in. ‘I don’t suppose you believe me.’ She looked older and completely forlorn.

‘About what?’

‘The squirrels,’ she said, her face averted, proud and so sad.

‘Yes I do,’ I said.

She looked down at her lap. ‘You do,’ she said quietly.

‘I met Eric Nye for the first time today. I could believe he might drown squirrels.’

She looked up, her large, soft, brown eyes wary. ‘You could?’ she said.

‘Yes, I could,’ I said.

‘I ought to show you something,’ she said. ‘Something I don’t let many people see.’ The worried wariness was back. ‘I’ve had a very hard life you know. Do I look like someone who’s had a hard life, does it show in my face? Could you tell that about me straight away, the moment you met me? You can with some people. I don’t want to be like one of them.’

I was stumped for a moment. ‘You’re a very attractive woman,’ I said. ‘You have a nice atmosphere, you can tell you are a kind person.’

Her wary, fluttery gaze settled on me. ‘You’re a flatterer,’ she said. ‘My mother warned me about men like you.’

We sat in silence looking out across the green expanse of manicured lawn. A light breeze made me slightly uncomfortable.

‘I think you probably have a story. You don’t have to tell me.’ She turned away. ‘Doctor Hunt is lucky to have a friend like you. We all need a good friend.’

‘Thank you,’ I said.

‘I’m a good judge of character; sometimes I get it wrong and that can be disastrous,’ she said. ‘But I have a feeling with you that you’re someone I can trust.’

I met her pale brown gaze, the hooded eyes blinked, and I realised how exhausted this woman was. I wanted to take hold of one of her thin fluttery hands but I wasn't sure how she would take it. 'What do you want to tell me?' I said. 'There are things,' she said. 'Things... that I don't tell many people.' 'What things?' I said.

'If I told you, you'd think I was a madwoman.'

I followed her gaze across the gravel driveway; there was nothing there, only big bushy plants, and the scraggy entrance to a wood. There was momentary glimmer of gold as a shaft of sunlight illuminated a narrow path into the undergrowth.

'An old boy put me onto it,' she said, keeping her gaze fixed on the spot. 'Lovely old fellow, I met him here. He was my friend, and then he started having troubles with his insurance company. Eric told him he was being chucked out, he got in terrible rage, and that night, the night before he was meant to go, he had a heart attack. They kept it all hush-hush, and bundled the body out of the back, through the old entrance; they didn't want any of the relatives seeing. I was very low after that; I had a few bad episodes. My mother said I couldn't come back. They give out shock treatment like pills at this place. Eric the squirrel man – that's what me and Darsh call him – he's the one who does it, turns the dial right up and fries your brain. The more he hates you, the higher he goes. He destroyed my memory, wiped it. I hardly knew who I was for a couple of days. It comes back, but not all of it. I can't read anymore, the words jump around on the page.' She stopped. 'Am I getting boring?' 'No, no – not at all,' I said.

'I started coming here, to this spot; it's where me and the old fellow came. He said he talked to his wife here. She died a few years ago; she came out of the woods over there.' She pointed in the direction of the path. 'He said

through there, inside the woods, was the entrance to the underworld. He said there are other entrances; this isn't the only one. They pop up all over the place, you just have to know where to find them, where to look. Some people have a hidden talent; they can see these things.' She stopped. 'I can see I'm making you uncomfortable.'

'I'm, okay,' I said.

'It's a way of contacting the dead. That's what my friend said; he said you find one of these places and you go in,' she pointed. 'He told me his wife would appear at the entrance to the wood over there, and he'd go over, but he never had the guts to go in. These entrances open up and close down again, you get very little time. If you don't make the decision right away, you have to wait until it opens again. Sometimes you have to wait quite a long time – weeks.'

We stared across the drive at the entrance to the woods. A strip of sunlight blinked on and off like a beacon. I felt her hand on my arm. 'I'm waiting for my dad. I've got quite a lot of things I want to say to him, and not all of it good.' She turned to me. 'I can see I've freaked you out a bit.'

I stood up. 'I'd better get back.' I felt bad dropping her like this.

Her face fell. 'It's true, I have freaked you out.'

'No you haven't.' I couldn't lie. 'Maybe a bit.'

She stood up, wrapping her hands round her arms. 'I'm sorry, I'm too intense. I take things too seriously.'

'No you don't, you're just fine as you are.'

'My family doesn't think so.' She looked away, her face wounded. 'I wish I'd never been born this way,' she whispered.

I put my hand on her arm and squeezed her through her fluffy jumper.

'We need people like you.'

She wiped her face. 'My mother doesn't think so.'

I leaned toward her and whispered, 'Fuck your mother.'

She grinned, delighted. 'You know I think that's the best thing anyone's said to me in months.' She held out a delicate, pale hand. 'My name's Annie by the way.'

I took her cold hand and held it. 'I'm Tom,' I said. 'Nice to meet you Tom, and let's hope we don't meet again.' 'Or in happier circumstances,' I said.

She let go of my hand. 'You go. The last thing you want is to get trapped in this place.' She pushed me away. 'Go – go before Eric gets his claws into you.'

I walked back towards the hospital, reluctant to leave her on her own, but at the same time relieved to be away. As I went past the gatehouse, I spotted Magnus and Eric Nye, both of them deep in conversation. Eric, trussed up in a tight, moss-green jacket, looked up, shielding his eyes against the afternoon light. He waved. 'Tom, I didn't see you there.'

Magnus looked sheepish, both hands jammed into the pockets of his long coat, his shoulders hunched against the breeze.

Eric's gaze hovered over my shoulder. 'I'm sorry to hear about your mother,' he said.

I looked to Magnus; I wished he hadn't told him.

'My condolences,' Eric said, his pale eyes behind the glasses watching me.

'Thanks,' I muttered.

'It can be very hard losing a parent at whatever age,' Eric persisted.

‘Magnus tells me it was quite a blow.’

‘It was.’ I wanted this conversation over. I moved away, heading back towards the house. The pair of them fell in beside me. We walked in silence for a bit.

‘Magnus tells me you’ve been considering a move to the countryside,’ Eric said. ‘It’s often a good idea at times of stress to make a life change.’

I kept on walking. ‘We ought to be getting back,’ I said to Magnus.

Eric’s hand was on my arm. ‘I hope you don’t mind taking a detour. I’ve recommended a charming little place, actually not so little, that’s just come on the market.’ He turned to Magnus. ‘You were interested in taking a look.’ ‘It might be worth checking out,’ Magnus said.

Eric smiled. ‘I’ve been trying to persuade him to move out this way. It’s beautiful countryside round here, the air is fresh, a ten-minute commute to work through cornfields and woodland. What more could a man ask for?’ He beamed at me. ‘Think about it.’

Back in the car Magnus was silent. We were traveling east along a country lane with high hedges; a burst of late-afternoon sun cast long, dark shadows. Eric had given us sketchy directions; the cottage was a couple of miles away, the other side of the next village, across the valley on the edge of woodland.

‘So you met Annie?’ Magnus said.

‘Yes, she’s nice.’

‘Quite a character,’ he said. The edge was there; he didn’t like her.

I wasn’t in the mood for this conversation; a mean and niggardly feeling had got a grip on me. Magnus had never, in all the time he worked there, invited

me out to The Anderson – so why now – why Beechridge, when he'd only been there a couple of months? I stared out through a gap in the hedge into a bleached field full of flattened corn.

'Tom – what is it?'

'I don't understand why you'd want to work at that place.'

'We've been through this.'

We hadn't, not really. But perhaps we had, and I had been too sick, too destabilised to remember. My heart did a twisty leap. I was on rocky ground. 'I don't think we have.'

His tone was weary, exasperated. 'I've wanted out of The Anderson for years.'

Had he? I didn't remember; he'd never told me.

We drove in silence. 'Maybe you don't remember,' he said.

I didn't have the conviction to push it. I stared out at the wasted corn. The image of the fragile woman I'd just met, her proud, angry face turned away from me, came back in a dark warning cloud. 'You never invited me out to The Anderson,' I said. 'You've hardly been at Beechridge a month.'

The car slowed. 'What're you getting at Tom?'

'It's just odd, that's all'

'Odd – I wouldn't say it was odd, wanting to share a part of my life with you.'

I was miserable, spoiling for a fight. 'But you never wanted to share it before.'

'I couldn't take anyone to that place, least of all you,' he said.

'Why me?'

‘Tom, you would’ve hated it – it would’ve terrified you.’

So now it was coming out.

‘I thought you’d like Beechridge.’

‘It was more my sort of place?’

‘Tom, The Anderson was full of seriously disturbed characters.’

That word again – characters – why not people? I felt a furious spurt of hatred towards him. ‘I just can’t understand what you’re doing working for that man. He’s a crook.’

‘That’s a pretty serious accusation.’

‘It beams off him.’

‘What beams off him?’

‘Crookedness.’

He laughed. ‘Tom, he might be a little eccentric. He’s not a crook.’

‘How did he get the funds to set up that place?’

He pulled off the lane into a layby. We were parked right up against a dry, flaky hedge. He turned off the engine. ‘What’s going on?’

My heart was heavy, sodden with a bitter, satisfying unhappiness. ‘I think you brought me out here so that we could visit this cottage place that Eric was talking about.’

Magnus turned to me. ‘So that’s what this is all about.’ He sounded relieved. ‘Why didn’t you come out with it straight away?’

In the dim end of the afternoon, his face was bathed in a soft light. I turned away; Magnus’ beauty always had the power to defeat me. ‘Can we leave it?’

‘You think that’s the only reason I got you out here?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘But it does, if that’s what you think.’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘Eric only mentioned it after we got there.’

I forced myself to face him. The light had faded, the softness gone; in the grey shadow, his features were sharp, hawkish. ‘This is about leaving London isn’t it?’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘Magnus, please.’

‘We’ve been talking about this for some time, I don’t get why you’re acting like I’ve committed some sort of crime.’

‘So it is what this is all about.’ My heart was thumping inside my coat.

‘Admit it.’

‘Admit what? This is stupid. We spend practically every weekend visiting places.’

‘Not seriously.’

‘What do you mean not seriously?’ His eyes were dark in the shadow, nearly black. ‘What do you mean not seriously?’

I held my breath; we were swimming in deep waters, and I wasn’t sure how good I was at keeping afloat.

He leant back into his seat. ‘So you weren’t serious?’

‘That’s not what I said.’

‘What then?’

I stared out through the side window. Everywhere in this place was soaked, sodden, swollen, bloated, rancid. A sour smell permeated the air. ‘This is an awful place,’ I whispered.

‘Tom, for God’s sake, I’m not asking you to move into the middle of a soggy cornfield.’

‘You want to move to be near your work.’

His voice rose in exasperation. ‘It was an idea.’

‘It was more than that.’

‘Why’re you turning this into some sort of drama?’

I sneaked a glance at him, fighting the habitual default mechanism to capitulate. ‘Maybe we should talk about this some other time,’ I muttered. ‘No,’ he said. ‘No, I want to talk about this now. If you don’t want to move to the countryside, you have to tell me.’ He was staring ahead, his bony profile picked out in the dim light like a stencil drawing, an instantly recognisable character, Disney’s Captain Hook, Sinbad, Jafar. He looked round, feeling me watching him, and I saw the turban fastened with a jewel at the front, the handkerchief knotted, long stringy hair, the odour of the sea, saltwater, the four-cornered hat, the earring, the crooked teeth. Who was this man, who was he really? ‘That’s why you took this job isn’t it. So we would move to the countryside,’ I said.

‘You make it sound like such a crime,’ he said.

My heart was thudding, a little frightened tattoo baa-boom baa-boom, the way hearts do, signalling to me the thing I didn’t want to see. I closed my eyes, drawing in my breath, and held it there. We could come down and live in this place: not here in the mouldy cornfield, somewhere calm, remote, quiet. I could buy a telescope, build a little observatory, watch the night sky. I’d breed bees, get a hive, make honey, I could do all those things. I was still holding my breath, deep down under water, if I let go now, I’d drown. A distant, squeaky voice was signalling to me – what about Kitty – what about Kitty? I continued to hold my

breath, squeezing my eyes shut – there had to be a way to hang on to both of them.

Chapter Ten

Kitty

Granny was no fool. I think she knew all along about Magnus and Tom. It was cool with her as long as it stayed inside the box. But I'd forced the lid, and taken Granny by the scruff of the neck and made her see the thing she didn't want to. And once she'd seen it, she had to take action, 'cos that's how Granny thinks. But then again, maybe not; maybe her contacting Angela was not related to my visit, maybe I've blown the whole up inside my head. After all, Angela didn't want me any more than I wanted her, and the visit had been a duty thing to placate Granny.

After Angela's visit I kept a low profile, staying round at Imelda's for a couple of nights, and then another couple with Sheryl in the new flat when her parents were out at some festival, or wherever they went in those days. By the end of that week, I thought the whole thing had blown over, and like a lot of things in this family, whatever it was that had got out of that box was going right back inside with the lid screwed on tight.

When Tom told me that he was going round to see Granny that Friday morning at breakfast, I spent the whole day at school feeling sick as a dog. When I went to the toilets at break and looked in the mirror, I had this greenish tinge: I looked like a corpse. That evening when I got home Tom was sitting at the kitchen table reading the newspaper; he didn't look up when I came in. He normally asks about my day and other stuff. My stomach was doing all these complicated loop-de-loop somersaults. 'How's Granny?'

‘I don’t want to talk about Granny right now’ he said.

‘Why?’

‘Because I just don’t.’

‘What’s she done?’

‘What hasn’t she done,’ he muttered. ‘I don’t think I’ll be seeing Granny for a bit.’

‘Have you had a fight?’

‘You could say that. I told her a lot of stuff that I should’ve done years ago.’

‘I hope you manage to work it out,’ I said. The twisty-knotted feeling that had turned me green in the toilets at school had gone. Tom had given Granny a roasting for getting Angela round, and probably for being homophobic. I felt a rush of gratitude towards her for keeping me out of it, and hoped he wouldn’t be too hard on her.

I went to bed that night becalmed, which is Sheryl’s word for when bad things happen, but you’ve reached the stage when you’re over the worst, and you can relax a little. The next day was a Saturday. It was early in the evening; the phone rang. Tom answered. It was a short call. I was up in my room, I was supposed to be staying the night at Imelda’s, but her brother and his friend were getting seriously weird and I’d made an excuse and had come home early. I heard the front door open. Magnus was back; he sometimes works on a Saturday. I heard him say something to Tom and Tom say something to him. They didn’t move off into the kitchen, they stayed in the hall for a really long time not talking. And I stayed in my room, because I knew, like you know these things, that something was terribly, horribly, badly wrong.

That time Granny was in the hospital, the day before she died, all I could think was that I wanted to seal a deal with her. I wasn't thinking about how much pain she was in, or if she was going to pull through, all the normal stuff. My brain had shrunk down into this shrivelled sneaky thing that just had one thought on its mind, which was to get Granny on her own so that I could extract a promise from her that she wouldn't tell Tom that it was me that had told her about him and Magnus. It was totally irrational, my visit was the last thing on her mind. She was dying for Christ's sake; when was she ever going to tell Tom? And then she died, and it shouldn't have mattered anymore; all I should've felt was shame at my own selfishness. But something was happening to Tom, something really bad. Whatever had started with Granny tripping on the paving stone hadn't stopped, it had gone on moving like a wave coming into shore, and it had caught hold of Tom, and was drowning him. I could see it clear as day because I was in the exact same place myself, but for him it was a lot worse.

I went away and hid, told myself all sorts of stupid lies. He wasn't my dad, I didn't owe him anything, I couldn't wait to get away from this whole stupid family and build my own separate life. I developed a crush on this idiot boy, a complete arsehole in my fencing team who was lodging with my coach Len in Camden. Sheryl and Imelda thought I'd completely lost it. Back at the house everything was falling apart. Magnus took care of all the funeral stuff, the choice of coffin, the order of service, the clearing out of Granny's flat, the CBT lady for Tom, talks with my teachers about sixth forms, all the running of the house stuff that Tom normally took care of. I slid away and spent more and more time staying over at Imelda's mostly and sometimes Sheryl's. Tom didn't seem to notice, and as for Magnus, I guess my fading away suited him just fine.

A few months down the line, Tom was on the mend and was just about functioning. He sounded the same, talked the same, looked more or less the same, but there was something spookily changed about him, like an alien presence had climbed in under his skin and had taken over. Imelda and Sheryl, Sheryl mostly, had noticed it. I took to avoiding him, keeping out of his way, even when the CBT had finished and he was supposed to be back to his old self again. In my darkest moments I thought about contacting Angela. I thought of it more than a few times; she knew him better than anyone now that Granny was gone. She'd know if the real Tom, the proper Tom, the Tom before his mum died, was ever going to come back.

There was talk of selling up and moving out to the countryside. That night Tom came back from the visit to Magnus' new hospital, and told me they'd seen a cottage nearby and were thinking of moving there – I was relieved, it felt as if a weight had been lifted off me. I suggested staying with Len; all I could think about was that stupid boy. I'd be in the same house as him; my heart did a little leap at the thought of my new life.

Chapter Eleven

Magnus

Tom's collapse provides a ready excuse and rather than back off and wait until he is well enough to have the conversation, I haul him out to Beechridge and drop the bombshell on him, knowing in the darkest part of me that I can run rings around him, that he'll capitulate. It is a mean trick. I know what I'm doing and just how wrong it is. There is no excuse, except perhaps my own desperation. I had suffered a loss of nerve in my last year at The Anderson, sparked by a stressful run-in with a clever, high-functioning psychopath that had left me bruised, flattened; I never really recovered. I soldiered on for a while, but the prolonged engagement with the hospital was exacerbating my symptoms. I knew what was happening to me but was powerless to take action. If I had witnessed a similar collapse in a colleague, I would have stepped in and ordered immediate rest, a break, a sabbatical. It has never been my habit to unburden myself. Perhaps it was once; I must have talked to my mother and my sisters.

By the time I meet Tom, the habit for secrecy, a sort of walled-up self-dependency, is ingrained and I don't have the means to break out. The run-in with the troublesome patient happened six months previously; I am on the road to a recovery, I tell myself, I'm not about to risk denting our happiness. There is an element of pride in my resistance. Of the two of us, I have the edge when it comes to stability; besides, I'm not used to doing the telling. I'm the listener, the fixer, the one who mends things. I am full of hope that the newness of this different life with Tom, the sheer pleasure of having a friend, a confidant as far

as I am able, will change everything. I keep the hospital out of our lives; I make a fuss about patient confidentiality, data protection, all that sort of stuff. Tom teases me – I am a spy working for MI5. The Anderson, the big old concrete building that we pass on our way out of London on the South Circular, is off limits. He is sensitive to my resistance, he doesn't press; he seems to understand.

My secrecy, looking back, must have been hurtful. Tom tells me everything about himself; he holds the door wide open and lets me in. I try to compensate by telling him about my Greek childhood, but it is all stories, a blind. I'm not prepared to let him into what is going on at the centre of my life. I am used to prising the door open and taking a long, dark look at the pain of others. This ability in the black arts has made me cautious. It is best for a person in my line of work to wear their profession lightly, camouflaged under something else; to cultivate a wry sense of humour, a bumbling eccentricity, grumpiness, a bad temper, keeping the steely bloodlessness, necessary to survive well hidden.

Eric Nye has never shared these scruples. Whatever life throws at him, he bounces back unchanged like an unassailable cartoon character. There are many irksome, downright fraudulent things about Eric Nye, but disguise isn't one of them. The Eric you see is the Eric you get: the iron coat, the sheet of ice, aren't outdated, old-fashioned affectations with Eric, they are an expression of what he truly is. To hide his essential self, to pretend for the sake of others' ease, is unthinkable for that man. His arrogance, his refusal to compromise, was a blast of fresh air, having spent the entirety of my working life keeping company with others who, like myself, kept so much concealed.

* * *

I nearly didn't go to the conference in Vermont; it was expensive, too long, and outside my expertise. It was cutting into my leave. I had one small

paper to deliver; it was one of those events that would have been easy to get out of. Eric Nye was one of the keynote speakers, a last-minute replacement for someone else. If I'd known beforehand, I probably would have pulled out. Eric's credentials were outdated; he'd written a couple of radical anti-psychiatry, early-career publications. His most famous book, *The Unquiet Self*, caused quite a stir. It did away with clinical labels and saw the patient as the voice of reason crying in the wilderness: the causes of mental illness were not biological or psychological, but a result of social violence and exclusion. This was followed by his second book, *The Quietened Self*, in which he claimed that normal people differed from people with mental illness only in degree and not in kind. He coined the phrase 'normal neurotics' for symptom-free citizens, advocating the now commonplace idea that everybody is a little bit mad.

Eric is Canadian. He'd tipped up in the UK touting extravagant claims based on his work as a junior doctor under Elliot Barker at the famous maximum-security mental hospital Penetang, Oak Ridge, Ontario. The hospital, a brutal Alcatraz-type place, where once a patient was incarcerated they had very little chance of ever getting out, sprang to fame in the late sixties when as a young doctor, Barker, author of a weird little book called *The Insane Criminal as Therapist*, was given charge over his own unit with the remit to cure the incurable. In Barker's social therapy unit, the patient-therapist ruled in a brutal regime where therapeutic encounter methods were used to break down the patients' defences, forcing them into a programme focused on personality reconstruction. The nursing staff eventually rebelled and the unit was disbanded in the mid seventies. Interestingly, despite the apparent failure of Barker's experiment, inmates who had languished for years, written off as lost causes, were released and very few of these re-offended.

Eric only ever wrote the two books, both of which are still in print with a specialist publisher. After his early success, he slipped off the radar, moving from institution to institution, on a downward trajectory with dismal reoffending rates. But Eric never gave up trying. Forty years on from Oak Ridge, he was determined to revive his mentor Elliot Barker's famous social therapy unit. By a piece of fluke, he attracted the attention of city money in the UK, and worked his way into a charity designed to mop up the tax-deductible income of the superrich. Eric's wild, Frankenstein-like claim that he could transform base ugly metal into gold was an intriguing offer, and the board took up his challenge with relish. He would take the worst offenders, those diagnosed as primary psychopaths, and mould them into civilised, responsible citizens, psychologically incapable of ever offending again. He managed to persuade the board to agree a staggering sixty million to purchase Beechridge Park estate in West Sussex and pay for its renovation and refurbishment. Given unlimited resources and the freedom to preside over his very own forensic therapeutic institution for dangerous offenders, Eric was in clover. He rewarded his benefactors for their lavish support with promises of reinstating the eighteenth-century sport of visiting the insane; those that had contributed a hundred thousand received a pass and were invited into the grounds on unofficial open days, and got to sneak in close to some of the country's most terrifying offenders.

Beechridge Park had previously been a long-stay mental asylum; by the time Eric took possession of the place, most of the inmates had been shipped off to some sort of care in the community, although at the height of its capacity in the early seventies, it had catered for nearly two thousand patients, and a system of numbered villas had been built to incorporate the overflow. These villas were quaintly assigned for different categories of patient; there were the villas for the

‘quiet and harmless’, the ‘senile and infirm’ and ‘semi-convalescent males’. The main house is an enormous sixteenth-century redbrick hunting lodge. The original Elizabethan building with its exquisite herringbone brickwork had been plastered over with a stucco façade in the early nineteenth century when Gothic Revival was at its height. Eric, awash with city cash, started on lavish renovations to restore the building to its Tudor origins. The main building housed the administrative block, the gymnasium and the therapy rooms, along with Eric’s extensive private apartment. It was a lot of money to spend for just over fifty inmates, but these guys were special, psychometrically tested up to the eyeballs, certified primary psychopaths. Many had been in institutions for years, and were considered beyond help – all of them were murderers.

Oak Ridge, with its armed guards and brutal enforcement measures, was Eric’s model for his new hospital. He hand-picked thirty young males, hardcore, untreatable cases, who had no say in whether they wanted to join the programme – free choice, any sort of autonomy, was out of the question. Turning his back on his former idealism, he promoted the brutal labelling administered by the famous psychometric Hare PCL–R test. This, together with medical records, psychology files, home officer dossiers etc., damned countless prisoners as psychopaths. The test was designed to measure a range of unquantifiable attributes, such as ‘inflated sense of self-importance’, ‘tells lies’, ‘manipulates others’ (key indicators of a psychopathic personality type), besides the more obvious ‘extreme unpredictable acts of violence’. For Eric, the test was just the ticket: it fed him the helpless fodder that he needed for his brutal experimentation. Like Barker before him, Eric’s argument was simple: he had the key to curing the incurable; he alone could turn around these damned souls and put them back together as socially responsible individuals. Mental illness according to Elliot

Barker was lodged deep within the patient's psyche; buried behind a façade of normality, it was inaccessible and therefore untreatable. Eric's mission was to drive the sickness to the surface so that it could be re-experienced in full bloom, making it available for treatment.

The traditional type of therapeutic work carried out at most maximum security hospitals is focused on learning methods of containment and control; this was the kiss of death as far as Eric was concerned – the more control and burial there was, the more inaccessible the patient's madness. Eric's methods were extreme; adopting Barker's motto from the sixties, he insisted that 'a healthy ward is a sick ward'. A gruelling schedule that started at seven thirty in the morning and went on until ten thirty at night, in which fellow patients would lay into each other in small encounter groups, was the first line of attack. The therapeutic onslaught was relentless and geared towards breaking the patient down, exposing their pathology and reconstructing them as properly functioning human beings, ready to be released safely back into society. In Barker's day the lack of resources encouraged him to nominate patients as teachers and therapists. Eric, on the other hand, had a much more generous budget at his disposal. He could have called on a large team of psychiatric nurses had he wanted, but instead he chose to implement Barker's criminal-as-therapist committees.

Eric's band of patient-therapists were top-notch psychopaths, clever, cunning guys, in charge of the new boys on the block – their methods were similar to the fagging system endured by these mainly public school-educated backers – a crazy, fucked-up underbelly echo of their privileged schooling days. And there was, perhaps, a tacit understanding amongst some of these board members that the scruffy men in the ragged trainers and hoodies shown in Eric's elaborate brochures were not so many degrees separated from themselves; the

anticipated encounter produced a frisson – there but for the grace of God, class, education, capital – go I.

Eric was forthcoming with his hedge fund backers about his controversial methods. His slogan, ‘maximum therapy maximum security’, taken from Elliot Barker, was both titillating and reassuring. In order to realise the full benefits of his radical therapy programme the patients would be pushed beyond their normal limits. The charming, often deferential murderer that one of these visitors had shaken hands with the other week was to be encouraged into a direct confrontation with his mad fantasies, his homicidal or suicidal tendencies, his cruelty, his sexuality. Eric’s brand of extreme therapy necessitated a regime of maximum security. His diversion of considerable monies towards a top-notch private security firm made perfect sense; the last thing his backers wanted was an embarrassing leak – a nasty scandal, which was just what happened. Less than a year into his programme, history ended up repeating itself, and there was an insurrection by a demoralised, intimidated nursing staff. A patient’s attempted suicide led to an external investigation that exposed Eric’s extreme brand of rehabilitation to public scrutiny. There were rumours at the time of a regime of brutal experimentation on powerless inmates who had had all autonomy removed from them. Eric Nye and his deputy stood accused of gross misconduct and were dismissed from their posts. The hospital was closed down; there was no mention of it reopening any time soon.

If Eric’s story had ended at this point, his career all smashed up, he wouldn’t have popped up as a keynote speaker at the conference in Vermont. But he is slippery, a born survivor, and able to turn himself around with extraordinary agility. In less than six months Beechridge was reopened with Eric at the helm.

The hospital was refurbished, the corridors carpeted, chandeliers installed in place of strip lighting, and room service on the menu, with softly-spoken nurses in hotel-type attire. The ambience was muted: no one ran or shrieked, or raised their voice; there was no ghostly howling, mad screeching. The residents, not patients, drowning in a mind-numbing cocktail of antipsychotic, antidepressive, anti-dispiriting drugs, drifted down plush corridors in a trance of melancholy. Electroconvulsive shock treatment, banned in all but a few outdated hospitals, was liberally dispensed. Careful stewards discreetly locked the gothic shaped doors to spacious rooms with pretty print curtains, matching bedspreads, low lighting. The dining hall was five star, smoked salmon in avocado pouches, canapés of sauté potatoes, crème caramel, sorbets, a delicate array blinking behind the glass-fronted counters beckoned to residents, too far gone to care what the hell they put into their mouths.

In the twinkling of an eye Eric had ditched his convictions, his antipathy to drug therapy and all the deadly accoutrements that accompanied it. He became the darling of the drug companies and grateful relatives. Drugged to the eyeballs, injected with slow-release narcotics, he kept their offspring, their spouses, manageable, becalmed, benumbed, a fraction of their former selves, still angry as hell and furiously mad. A state of being that Eric until recently would have hailed as the height of enlightenment was consigned to the dustbin, the former Eric Nye and his *Unquiet Self* – pulped. And why not? Beechridge was flourishing, the money was rolling in, there was talk of branching out, building a chain of Beechridges across the country and beyond into Europe. News spread that Eric was on the lookout. He needed a deputy superintendent for his new venture. I was just the candidate, with a long career in a famous well-respected hospital; my credentials were impeccable. It was the type of post to sink a career, a

psychiatric hospital funded by dubious city money. No one in my position would have considered it unless something was up. Eric had done his homework; he had got wind of my troubles and knew I was in free fall. He wouldn't let up; his approach was direct and very persistent. He had judged his prey correctly: I was ill at ease with a shaky nerve; I was looking for a way out, although not in the shape of Eric Nye and Beechridge. I had talked about leaving The Anderson to Tom on a number of occasions, without of course letting him know the reason why; there was talk of taking early retirement, moving to the countryside and setting up a therapeutic venture for unthreatening neurotics, a pipe dream that neither of us took too seriously. We made a few excursions, keeping to the South East, more as a way of spending some time together on our own, away from the house, the hospital, Kitty. A way of relaxing, lifting a bit of the pressure. Eric Nye wasn't even a whisper on the horizon back then.

* * *

Desperate to be free of The Anderson, I fall into Eric's clutches; little do I realise that troubles of an entirely different nature, troubles that I have no idea even existed, are about to begin. I hesitate in accepting the job. Beechridge is everything I hold in contempt. The soporific, muted ambience of the place is, at first, close to intolerable. I can scarcely bring myself to talk to my deadwood colleagues beyond purely work-related matters. They are sensitive to my standoffishness and maintain a respectful distance. But all too soon the cossetted environment starts to kick in, and I become as pliant as the residents. To my shame I turn a blind eye to the drug regimes, the rounds of injections. I never go near the room where they administer the electroconvulsive shock treatment. I keep to my remit, in charge of one of the pavilions, a mix of male and female bipolar patients who have been rendered pliable with slow-release injections and

bouts of ECT, none of which is my concern. My contact with the patients is squeezed into a daily two-hour group therapy session, a futile exercise with half the group restless and wandering, and the other half reading, knitting, texting. My ineffectiveness doesn't overly bother me; there is very little harm I can do to these flattened, damaged people, some of them in far deeper waters than the patients I treated at The Anderson.

I tell myself this is an interim measure, a resting place before launching my own therapeutic venture. The notion of a therapeutic community has always intrigued me. At medical school in a history of psychiatry class I came across William Tuke, who, motivated by his Quaker faith, set up the famous York Retreat in the late eighteenth century. Unlike the terrifying asylums of the time where the mentally ill languished in dungeon-like conditions, chained to the walls in squalid cells, Tuke's establishment provided a quiet rural environment, where people crushed by life, broken, and sometimes unmendable, were given the space and time to breathe. Since Tuke's inception, the therapeutic community has found expression in a variety of guises, from religious retreats with a focus on prayer and contemplation, to hardcore encounter group methods that gained notoriety with RD Laing and his Philadelphia Association housed at Kingsley Hall in East London in the sixties. My ambitions are lowly. I'm not out to make a name for myself; what I dream of is a quiet retreat, an escape from the relentless pressure of The Anderson.

Tom has insisted we stay close to London, so our search is narrowed to the South East. We spend the odd weekend researching suitable locations, and have drawn up a list of suitable properties. There are a couple of possibilities, but we never really find what we are looking for; there is always a glitch: not enough

land, the garden is too small, the ceilings too low, planning permission will be a nightmare. It isn't as if either of us takes the venture very seriously; as far as I am concerned it is a pleasant fantasy, a delusional space that makes it easier for me to bear the locked room that was my work at the time.

My duties at Beechridge are minimal. Besides the two group therapy sessions every afternoon in Villa Ten, I have little contact with the residents: the bulk of the work is carried out by a well-trained nursing staff. As the weeks slip by I grow used to arriving late, sleepwalking through the afternoon sessions, and idling the tail end of the afternoons in my office, interrupted by the occasional appointment with a resident which the diligent nursing staff do everything in their power to discourage.

Annie is a regular of my Tuesday group therapy sessions: a sweet, gentle woman, who positions herself on the edge of the circle and knits. Her friend often accompanies her, an enormously obese man from India, a Hindu, he informs me, named Darsh. It is his task to take charge of Annie's wool and feed it to her as she knits. Anne has a sly, kittenish way about her that is more than slightly flirtatious, and sometimes menacingly provocative. She is apt to glance up from her knitting, apparently completely disengaged with the session, and proffer an opinion that can be deadly accurate or way off beam. Darsh will nod and chorus her remark, commenting on her special ability to see beyond the normal. They are a convincing double act, both of them closely guarded, protected with a sly, self-deprecating charm that makes them unreachable. I give up trying, and allow Annie to continue with her knitting, and Darsh to feed her balls of wool out of a Tesco bag. They inform me they are knitting me a winter scarf, and that when Annie has finished it she is going to try her skills on some

mittens. In their varying ways the other members of the group are as unreachable as Darsh and Annie. I soon give up on them, and the sessions become a chance to relax. Simple board games, the solution provided by a previous therapist, are introduced. Monopoly becomes the favourite, monitored by a twitchy obsessive called Frank who notes the exact amounts of cash and properties each player has accumulated as a marker for the following day.

I am idling in my office after a group therapy session when I am roused by a tentative tap on the door.

Annie peers round. 'Can I have a quick word? If they see me, they'll yank me away,' she whispers. 'Can I come in?'

It isn't protocol to be with a patient inside a room behind a closed door. I retreat behind the desk as she takes a seat opposite and leans across, scattering papers. A book drops to the ground; I want to retrieve it, but her wide brown gaze hems me in.

'My mother's signed this piece of paper, giving them permissions do whatever they like with me,' she says.

I sit back, easing away from her. I am used to these sorts of approaches, the intense paranoia, the palpable fear. 'No one's going to harm you,' I say. 'The permission is a formality, a precaution.'

Her face clouds. 'What do you mean – a precaution?'

I tilt the chair back from the desk. 'It's something that they make everyone sign – even people who come for a short stay. It's nothing to worry about.'

The anxious look darkens. 'You don't understand,' she says.

'What don't I understand?'

‘I hope I can trust you?’

‘Annie, what’s this all about?’

‘There was an incident.’ She glances over at the door. ‘I had a visit from my mother.’

‘Is Doctor Lamb looking after you?’

She shoots back from the desk, scraping her chair against the floor. ‘She’s got him under her spell. The man’s an idiot. You know he’s got a serious alcohol problem, you can smell it on his breath in the afternoon – whisky and lime.’

I have to stifle a smile.

‘You’ve smelt it too.’

‘You should really be talking to him,’ I say.

‘You doctors, you all stick together.’ She sits watching me with large, hooded, pale brown eyes. ‘Darsh said you’d help. He thinks you’re different from the others, but it’s probably just because you’re new and haven’t got used to the rules yet. In a month from now you’ll be all smoothed out and just like them. It’s what this place does to people. I’ve been here long enough to know.’

‘How long have you been here?’

She gathers up her bag and her scarf. ‘I’m not telling you.’

‘Tell me about this incident,’ I say.

‘So you can tell Lamb?’

‘I won’t talk to him if you don’t want me to.’

‘I thought you couldn’t talk to me.’

‘I can if you want me to.’

‘I got to you, didn’t I, about turning into one of them.’ She rummages in the voluminous bag. ‘Darsh has got a crush on you; quite a few of them have.’

She tugs the zip shut. 'I thought you should know.' 'Tell me about this incident,' I say.

'I suppose you doctors are used to having your patients falling in love with you; it's water off a duck's back, all in a day's work.' She hitches the oversized bag onto her shoulder and stands up.

'What happened?' I say.

'I tried to kill her,' she says.

I am used to this. 'What do you mean?' I say.

'I put my hands round her throat and squeezed. I'm strong when I want to be. I took her by surprise. She wasn't expecting it. She fought me off, she's very muscly.' She grins. 'I should've exerted more pressure. I think you're shocked doctor.'

'Were any of the nursing staff involved?'

'She pressed the panic button. The fat one with the big bum and the hairy arms got hold of me and pulled me into a headlock. They paged Doctor Lamb and shut me in my room. I heard him outside talking to my mother.'

'What happened after that?'

The defiance evaporates. 'Nothing,' she says. 'No one came to talk to you?' She shakes her head.

'When was this?' I say.

'Two days ago.'

This hasn't come up in the last two group therapy sessions. I am perversely miffed. 'Why're you telling me now?' I say.

'I wasn't going to say anything in front of those people.'

'Maybe you should've done, they might've reassured you.'

‘Reassured me about what?’

‘That whatever you fear the hospital has got planned for you – won’t happen.’

‘They’ve booked me in.’

‘Booked you in?’

‘For ECT.’

‘I think that’s very unlikely.’
Her face clouds. ‘Why?’

‘There are quite complicated procedures you have to go through for that to happen.’

‘Not in this place,’ she says.

‘I think you’ll find there are,’ I say.

‘Doctor Hunt,’ she smiles. ‘You are such an innocent, you don’t have a clue what goes on here.’ She isn’t quite ready to leave; a silence settles. We stare out into the golden light of the dying afternoon.

‘Darsh swore at his uncle when he came to visit him, called him a fat cunt. Three days later they shipped him off and fried his brain.’ Her voice wobbles. ‘Poor man.’

I am filled with an unprofessional desire to put my arms around her. My younger sister’s unhappy, fearful face comes swimming back, reminding me that she is the entire reason I have landed up in this most miserable of professions.

‘Annie,’ I say, ‘that isn’t going to happen to you.’

She gazes at me, her soft brown eyes large with tears. ‘But it is,’ she whispers. ‘It is.’ Her gaze floats back out of the window. ‘You have a good view from here.’ She points. ‘You can just see it. Beyond the gate, is the entrance.’ She glances round. ‘Are you looking?’

‘The entrance to the hospital?’ I say.

‘No – no – look more closely. Do you see a wood? There’s a gap, a break in the hedge, it’s usually lit up by sunlight even on a dull day. It’s not lit up now, you have to wait.’

She is pointing beyond the gatehouse to a small patch of woodland. I noticed it on the way in. The gap in the hedge looks almost man-made but is tangled with nettles; there isn’t a gate, although some attempt has been made to clear an opening. The raggedy lack of decision seems out of kilter with the precision neatness of the rest of the grounds.

She leans towards the window, her breath misting the glass. ‘It’s not a good day for it, I don’t think it’s going to happen.’ She turns round, watching the door. ‘I’m sorry about that.’

‘What goes on in there?’ I say.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ she mumbles. ‘It was nice talking to you, I’m sorry you can’t help.’

‘Do you want me to speak to Doctor Lamb?’

She edges past me towards the door. ‘It wouldn’t do any good, he’s an idiot.’

‘I can try.’

She brushes her hand against her face. Her voice wobbles. ‘I’d better go before I say something stupid.’

‘You’re not stupid Annie.’

‘You’re a very kind man.’

‘I’m not being kind.’

‘My family, the family I was born into, think I’m stupid. It’s the only family I’ve got, and I hate it. I wish I’d managed to make one of my own.’ ‘Life is tough,’ I say.

‘I know. I’m not going to cry in front of you.’ Her hand brushes her face. ‘Look,’ she points. ‘Look, it’s happened, you can see the entrance. Look Doctor Hunt, quick before it goes.’

I turn round, following the line of her pointing finger, and through the wonky criss-cross panes, a glint of yellow light sparkles.

‘Look, look, it’s there, you can see the entrance. Don’t miss it.’

I go over to the window, altering my line of vision. In the distance, beyond the gatehouse, barely visible, is a bright patch of yellow sunlight illuminating the gap in the hedge like the entrance to a cave. The surrounding scenery is dull and grey, drained of colour.

She watches over my shoulder. ‘I told you it would happen.’

The narrow rectangle of sunlight is fading fast. ‘What is it?’ I say.

‘The entrance to the underworld,’ she whispers, ‘the old boy showed me.’

‘What old boy?’

‘He’s dead now. You have to be shown by someone. He showed me. And once you’re shown then you start seeing them everywhere.’

The light is nearly gone. ‘There’s more than one?’

‘There are hundreds, thousands, they’re all over the world.’ She retreats to the door. ‘If Doctor Lamb has his way and I don’t pull through, I’ll be waiting for you over there – you and Darsh, if he’s still here.’ A smile hovers. She checks the coast is clear and slips away.

I try and contact Lamb, but he doesn't reply to my email. I follow with a telephone call and leave a brief message, but don't hear back. The following day Annie is absent from the group. She reappears weeks later, pale, ghostly, clinging to Darsh, and sits huddled on the edge of the circle, not saying a word.

Chapter Twelve

Tom

It was one of those summers that flowers early, baking hot in April and May, full of heavy June showers and grey skies in July. It was too cold to sit out. I spent most of my time in my study, a tiny room that looked out onto the garden. In the mornings I'd manage a few emails, by the afternoons my focus was gone. A few days after the visit to Beechridge I'd spoken to Kitty about the move to the countryside. I'd been expecting the worst, and was surprised when she suggested that she stay at Len's, her fencing coach, for her GCSE year. Apparently I'd been worrying about nothing; Magnus was right, she was ready to move on, I was the one who was gutted. I didn't mention my conversation with Kitty to Magnus; three weeks had gone by since our visit to the cottage and neither of us had talked about the move.

The day it came to a head started out bright and hot with a clear blue sky that turned dark and thundery by the afternoon. The rain came in fat drops, splatting down like frogs. The heavens opened and we were in the middle of a monsoon, thundering on the glass roof of the conservatory. I sat snug and dry as a bone in my tiny study, watching out of the porthole-shaped window as the garden turned into a small lake. For a brief interlude a watery rainbow looped over the rooftops, disappearing as the sliver of sunlight was swallowed up in dark cloud cover.

Magnus didn't come back until late that evening. He was usually home by seven, and I was starting to worry that the trains had stopped running in the bad weather. Kit was out, staying over at Imelda's; she was there most nights. I'd cooked a fish pie. I had just finished the last of the little blue pills and was celebrating with a couple of beers when Magnus arrived, splashing across the marble floor, his shoes squeaky. He was abstracted and cut-off during the meal; he didn't notice the beer or appreciate the reasons for my celebration, or comment on the fish pie.

The meal over, I poured another beer, and we sat in silence watching the rain. 'Has something happened at work?' I said. He didn't seem to have heard me, so I tried again. 'Magnus – what is it?'

He avoided meeting my eye. 'I want us to move to the cottage.'

We sat staring out into the waterlogged garden until the last of the light had faded. I got up to fetch my laptop. Jessica, the estate agent from Tyler's, had emailed the details for the cottage not long after our visit, a few weeks back. Situated in the foothills of the South Downs, surrounded by woodland with views across the Arun valley, it was five miles from Beechridge: I'd measured the distance by satellite. On my way back across the kitchen, I glanced towards the French windows, my gaze drawn to the end wall of the garden, near the incinerator we used for burning leaves. The first time it arrived, it was a slithery wisp of nothingness, the least of my worries. Susan, with her box of tricks and answers for almost everything, wasn't overly concerned when I told her; it was a free-floating fragment, nothing to worry about, she said. It would pop up, on the stairs in the dark, before I entered a room and switched on the light. I was able to put it away and almost forget, until it returned again. I wasn't scared of it. Susan had convinced me that with rest and recuperation and the proper attitude these

visitations would soon be gone. Like a spate of troubling dreams, I'd accustomed myself to these occasional appearances, and knew not to panic. I'd caught one of these visitations on the track leading to Lane End that first time we had visited. The overgrown garden was full of potential hiding places for these fragments, as I had come to think of them. Susan's helpful labelling had disinfected something that might've had the power to terrify. I hadn't had an encounter with one of these fragments since the visit to the cottage and was quietly hopeful. But here it was, back again, lurking in the corner against the high wall, at the back of the incinerator. Disobeying Susan's advice, I decided to take a closer look. I slid the heavy door back, pulling it closed behind me, so as not to alert Magnus with a draught, and picked my way across the gravel path. The garden was small, the light from the kitchen illuminated nearly all of it. I edged behind the incinerator and stepped into the dark patch of shadow. I stretched my hand and touched the wall, feeling the roughness of the bricks against my palm. I knelt down and continued my exploration. I crawled on all fours and pressed my fingers into the corner. There was a break in the wall, the tiniest crack. I got down onto my stomach and pulled myself as close as I could to the wall. The crack was a little larger than I had first realised; where there had been only darkness, a pale light appeared. I pressed my ear against the wall and heard breathing, nothing more, no other sounds, no voices, just the rise and fall of the shallowest breath.

'Tom – what's going on?' Magnus was standing at the open door.

I scrambled up, brushing the dirt from my trousers. 'I'm sorry, I said.

'What were you doing?'

'Looking for something.'

'Looking for what?'

His face was sliced into two parts, one half shadow, the other half pale in the light, like a carnival mask. ‘It’s a good idea,’ I said

‘What’s a good idea?’

‘The cottage,’ I said. ‘The move, let’s do it.’

‘I thought you didn’t want this?’

‘Yes I do. I’m totally serious.’

He didn’t reply and walked back towards the house.

‘I am, I promise. It’s the best solution,’ I called after him.

Looking back now, it’s strange that we didn’t go back to Lane End one more time, just to check. It was an easy, effortless purchase: there was no chain their end, and the first people who looked at the Blackheath house put in an offer that matched the asking price. We could have got more if we had entered into a price war but Magnus was impatient to get moving. By the end of September we were ready to go. Kitty had departed two weeks earlier; she’d cleared the attic and decamped to Len’s place in Camden with Skinny. It was an awkward, clumsy farewell. I blame myself; my rattly, disconnected self unnerved her, and even though she had been glad to get away, I should have put up more of a fight. I don’t know how I let her go so easily.

We decided to put the contents of our home into storage and only take as much as we could fit in the back of the Volvo. Magnus had been in constant contact with Jessica since June. For a fee she had sorted all the necessary planning permissions and had arranged for her son’s team of builders to start work by mid September. On an overcast Saturday afternoon we loaded our stuff into the car and posted the key back into the house. As we drove off I watched the house recede from view in the wing mirror with a feeling of dread. I glanced

at Magnus, his profile chilly in the thundery light. He was gripping the steering wheel, willing me not to speak.

By the time we reached the motorway it was raining heavily. Cars had stopped on the hard shoulder and a speed limit of 30mph was imposed. We turned off the motorway at Horsham onto the A24 heading towards Bognor Regis. The rain had eased so that by the time we left the main road and entered Bedham woods a watery sunlight had broken through. The track to the cottage had been cleared of the worst of the undergrowth since our last visit, and some of the potholes had been filled in. I glimpsed a stringy spiral of smoke through a gap in the trees. An acrid smell of burning filled the car as a plume of dark smoke billowed across the track. By the time we emerged from the woods the smoke had cleared and we could see the cottage ahead of us. We slithered to a halt alongside the hedge. The windscreen was coated with gritty flecks of ash. Magnus pressed the spray and turned on the wipers. The creaky, rhythmic squeak whispered, ‘Go home, go home.’ I glanced at him – surely he could hear it?

He squeezed my hand. ‘Are you okay?’

It was typical of him; he’d backed me into a corner and then in some shaft of self-insight had realised what he’d done. I stared down at his round, square palm and delicate fingers. I felt my heart swell. Sometimes I wished I could isolate a part of his physicality and find something misshapen, ugly.

‘We’ll be happy here won’t we?’ He leaned towards me and stroked my chin.

I moved away and opened the car door, letting in a damp breeze. ‘Let’s see if we can get the key to work.’

The house had been cleaned up. The pale chalky mess of bird droppings in the front room had been washed away and there was only the faintest trace of

the smell at the end of the corridor near the kitchen. We found a jam jar of wild flowers on the kitchen table, with a note from Jessica welcoming us to our new home along with a half-bottle of champagne. In the fading light on that overcast afternoon, we made a tour of the house. I went upstairs to the master bedroom and found Magnus standing at the window looking out.

As I went up behind him he jumped. ‘Tom.’ He pulled me to him. Dark smoke from a nearby bonfire drifted in an oily streak across the gloomy sky, specks of ash clung to the window frame. I leaned across him and ran my fingers along the sill, collecting the sticky ash.

‘Tom, don’t,’ he muttered.

We stood staring out across the valley. The sky was clearing under the filmy haze and patches of blue had broken through. There was a farmhouse down by the edge of the river and a few similar-sized houses dotted about in the hills beyond. And there was us. The smell of burning was still strong. I leaned across and tugged at the top window. It snapped shut with a sharp clack.

‘We’ve stumbled into a Grimms’ story,’ I said, wishing I hadn’t spoken.

Magnus tightened his arm around my shoulders pulling me into his familiar smell. ‘You hate it,’ he murmured under his breath, so quietly I wasn’t sure I had heard him.

Warned in advance by Jessica that the electricity supply had been turned off, we arrived well equipped with candles and a camping stove. I moved our stuff in from the car while there was still enough light, and set up the large lilo in the bedroom. I knew I should be downstairs helping Magnus prepare our supper, and that my laziness was unfair when he had done all the driving. In the gathering darkness with only the flame of the candle to see by, the shadows

fluttered against the pale walls, illuminating a clump of fungi on the ceiling. I could hear Magnus moving around downstairs accompanied by the tinny noise of the little battery-operated radio we had brought with us from the old house. I lay listening for those bogeyman fears that had got me on that previous visit in June. I released my breath and waited. I pulled myself up and sat on the edge of the bed. I had to be sure. I went over to the window. The charcoal sky was streaked with a band of gold along the horizon; a breeze had got up, something was banging outside. It was a metallic hammering sound, I couldn't make out where it was coming from; it was unlikely that someone would be working at this hour. I gripped hold of the window catch, feeling the cold against my palm, in the pale moonlight and I could see the shape of a washing line; a piece of fixing had come loose and was flapping against the metal pole.

The kitchen was lit by candles. There was a fire in the grate and a stew bubbling on the camper stove. An open bottle of wine sat on the table beside the jam jar of wild flowers along with Jessica's champagne. Magnus was absorbed in slicing something into the pan. I felt my chest tighten as my heart expanded and I knew that I would crumple up and die if anything ever came between us. I went over to him and pulled him to me.

'What's brought this on Tom?'

'I'm sorry I've been such a flake.'

He eased himself out of my sticky bear hug and reached for the champagne. 'I was going to save this for after supper.'

The cork bounced against the window frame and knocked one of the candles into the sink. The room darkened.

'Tom you're trembling.'

I took the bottle from him. 'I'm sorry.' I forced myself to gulp back the champagne; it tasted bitter, sour. I wanted to spit it out.

Jessica arrived just as we sat down to supper. She introduced us to her son Ernie, a big hairy edition of herself, with a thick blonde ponytail. They didn't stay more than fifteen minutes. Ernie wanted to check that we were okay for the building work to commence at the start of the following week. It was the first time I had actually looked at the plans for the house. He explained that most of it would be gutted and that we would be living at the bottom of the garden in a caravan for up to three months. There would be one for us and another for his crew who were arriving from Lithuania at the weekend. He would bring them over with the caravans on the Monday morning.

I got up from the table as they pored over the plans for the house, and went out onto the dark, slippery terrace at the back of the house. The wind had died down and the night was free of cloud cover and full of stars. Under the light of the moon the garden gleamed like steel. The smell of the bonfire was strong, the sickly-sweet smell of charred animal carcasses wafted across the garden. Figuring I would have more protection from the smoke at the back of the house, I picked my way around the terrace and found a sheltered spot beside the brickbuilt privy. I had a packet of Camels in my pocket. I lit up, comforted by the crackle and tangy scent of tobacco. The first few drags went to my head; I was woozy and starting to feel the cold. Something banged. I could see the washing line from where I was standing, but the flapping piece of fixing wasn't moving. As I strained for signs of movement in the dark garden my stupid heart slowed. It was so quiet here; we needed this solitude, this calm still place. I retraced my

steps and went back round the side of the house. The light from the kitchen spilled out onto the terrace. Safe near the window, I stood enjoying the cigarette. This wasn't a mistake, it had been the right decision.

The back door rattled and Magnus appeared before I had chance to get rid of the cigarette. 'Tom, you promised.' He came up behind me and took the cigarette out of my hand.

I watched it sail up against the darkness and plunge into the long grass.

'Come in, say goodbye to Jessica and Ernie,' he said.

After the half-bottle of champagne and a bottle of wine between us, we fell onto the lilo and slept like babies. I must have woken around dawn. The moon was very bright, I could see around the room as clearly as if a dim electric light had been switched on. Magnus lay on his back snoring softly. I was careful not to wake him as he is prone to insomnia and rarely gets through an entire night. I am usually the one who sleeps like a log, but that morning I was wide awake with none of the usual grogginess of sleep. I went out onto the landing and peered over the bannisters into the corridor below, and saw a dark mass the size of a small rubbish sack pressed against the wall. Susan was at my side, her quiet hand on my arm. 'Thomas, don't,' she whispered. I forced myself down the stairs and stopped halfway, struck by a sour, rancid smell. The thing swung round and I found myself face-to-face with a single raggedy eye, a gleaming mother of pearl button. My panicky heart quietened, it was a black cat. I went down the rest of the stairs and crawled towards the scraggy creature. It was puffed up to the size of a small dog, with its neck shrunk and its legs stiff with fright. I held out my hand, it sniffed my fingers and let me stroke its back. It was skin and bones under the inflated display. I put a finger under its chin to look

more closely at its face. Its one eye was very large and rather beautiful, the other was an empty socket under matted, sour-smelling fur. The crack in the wall in the dark place behind the incinerator at the old house came into my mind. I forced it back, and picked up the cat, worried it would take fright, but it lay passively in my arms as I carried it back up the stairs into our bedroom. I put it on one of my jumpers in the corner of the room and climbed into bed, but it was restless and wouldn't settle. I got up and carried it over to the bed. Magnus had turned away from me onto his side and it crept into the gap between us.

We slept right through till half past nine. I woke a couple of minutes before Magnus, feeling a warmth across my head. In my half-dream state I thought I was back in our bed in Blackheath, that it was the middle of summer and a patch of warm sunlight was shining through the open window onto my face. But when I opened my eyes I realised that it was the cat: it had moved up the bed onto the pillow so that its furry belly was pressed against my head.

The cat followed me down to the kitchen and hovered inside the door. If Kitty were here now I knew she would want to keep him. This wasn't a creature to plead; its hard-eyed stare defied me – it was my call. I reached into my dressing gown pocket for my phone and brought up Kitty's number and then remembered the non-existent signal. I was on my own with the creature. I searched for remnants of last night's meal and found a fish skin wrapped in an oily bit of newspaper. I cut it carefully into pieces and laid it on a plate and carried it over to him, but he didn't show much interest and nibbled the edge without enthusiasm.

Magnus came down from upstairs. He was wearing the pyjamas I had bought him last Christmas. He padded over to me. 'Tom – I woke up and this

thing was on your head.’ He knelt down and attempted to stroke the ugly cat under its chin. ‘He’s a hideous beast,’ he whispered.

The cat raised a paw and struck out.

Magnus sprang back, his finger bloody. ‘The bastard clawed me.’ The cat stood stiff-legged and puffed-up.

‘It hates me. Look at it, it loathes me Tom. What’s wrong with it?’ He went over to the sink and washed his hand under the tap. He wiped his hand with a grubby tea towel. ‘It’s riddled with fleas and God knows what else – we’ll have to change the bedsheets.’ He scratched the back of his neck. ‘It’s given me something.’

The creature sat very upright, like Anubis guarding his master’s tomb, its unnaturally long tail stretched in a straight line along the floor. It inclined its head and gave me a slow eye blink.

‘He wants to stay,’ I said.

Magnus turned round. ‘It stinks, we’ll get shingles.’

‘You can’t catch shingles from a cat,’ I said. ‘I’ll take it to the vet.’

He walked over and stood looking at it. ‘Do we even know if it’s a he or a she? We can’t have it in the caravan. We don’t even know if it’s housetrained?’ He wandered back to the sink and stood looking out into the garden.

‘He can live outside, you can make him a little kennel thing.’

‘I’m taking him to the vet’s,’ I said and lifted him into a cardboard box used for the groceries. He peered out with his one eye; he was surprisingly docile.

Magnus looked round. ‘He loves you,’ he said. ‘And hates me. I hope he isn’t going to come between us.’

Chapter Thirteen

Magnus

I should come clean; there is something I haven't mentioned. I made contact with Alex Cornwall a few days before we left London, a short message sent to his Twitter account. I feel dirty afterwards, treacherous. I take some comfort in the thought that it is highly unlikely that he will read it. I tell myself it was an impulse thing, a blip.

The new owners of our London house are due to move in at the start of October. The cottage is already vacant, it has been for months; our books, our clothes, everything but the last remaining bits are boxed up and ready to go. I have dealt with the water, the gas, the council tax people. It is our last night together before Kitty moves off to Len's the following evening; Tom and I will stay on a couple more days before driving out to the cottage on the weekend. I have a dread of the three of us sitting in sticky silence in some restaurant whilst I make all the running. I scour the local papers, there is a 'pop up' musical event at a small church fifteen minutes down the road. There aren't any details but the fact we can walk there clinches it. I ring a number and get a young girl who sounds the same age as Kitty. She tells me that there has been a recent cancellation and that I can have three seats in the third row. When I ask for a price, she informs me that I don't have to pay. I am in two minds; a free performance in a draughty church hall doesn't bode well. I think of ringing back and cancelling, but don't have the energy to make alternative arrangements.

We arrive ten minutes early. The church is set back in a scrubby piece of wasteland; a yellow, friendly light spills out from the open door into the misty autumn evening. I don't know why, Annie comes to mind. I recall her visit to my office the other week, standing behind me, looking out across the wide lawn, her voice tinged with amusement, telling me these apertures into the underworld can appear at any place or time, you just have to know where to look. As we approach the church the noise of instruments tuning floats out. The place is packed. It is a shock to recognise people from my opera-going days, mixed with others who looked like they've stumbled on the event.

'What's going on?' Kitty whispers. 'Have we come to the right place?'

Tom hangs back. 'Is this someone's funeral?'

A girl with green-tinged hair rolled into tight plaits grabs Kitty's arm.

'What're you doing here?'

Kitty squeals, 'Imelda, what is this place?'

The girl rolls her eyes and groans. 'My mum's boring opera thingy, she's got me doing the tickets.' She glances in my direction. 'Hi Doctor Hunt, we spoke on the telephone.' She smirks at Kitty. 'This way please.'

The pair of them scramble ahead, giggling. I take hold of Tom's arm and steer him along the crowded central aisle. We haven't gone far when he tugs at his scarf and starts to unbutton his coat.

A large woman in a red jacket standing behind us is fanning herself with a newspaper. 'It's very hot in here,' she smiles at Tom.

He pulls his jumper up over his head. His face emerges flushed and frightened. 'Magnus, I can't breathe, I have to get out of here.'

'It's okay.' I hook my hand under his arm and propel him down the aisle.

The woman behind has picked up his scarf and jumper. 'Is your friend alright?'

Kitty's friend Imelda is waiting for us; her eyes grow round with alarm. 'Is Tom okay Doctor Hunt?'

The woman in red hands me his scarf and jumper. 'You need to get him home,' she says.

I tug him along the row, trampling feet and bags.

Kitty sits waiting for us. 'Tom, what's wrong?'

I steer him into the seat between us. 'He's okay Kitty, don't fuss.' The orchestra is tuning, people are settling, the buzz of conversation drops. We are moments from the start of the performance.

'Magnus,' Kitty whispers. 'Tom's not okay. We need to get him home.'

I take hold of his hand. 'Do you think you can manage to stay till the interval?'

His palm is hot and slippery. His fingers dig into me. The lights dim. 'I can't feel the floor,' he whispers.

A woman in front turns round and glowers at us.

Kitty leans across. 'Magnus, we have to get him out.'

The orchestra starts to play. I realise I have no idea what is about to be performed. I place my arm round Tom's shoulder. 'Hang on, we'll get you out at the interval.'

'He can't wait that long,' Kitty hisses.

The woman in front spins round. 'Shush.'

'My father's having a panic attack,' Kitty growls.

'I'm okay,' Tom whispers. 'I can hang on.'

'No you can't,' Kitty says.

Another member of the audience glances round.

‘I can manage,’ Tom whispers.

Kitty skids back in her chair, arms crossed, scowling. ‘These people make me sick.’

In the dimness figures are moving about near the altar area. No attempt has been made to create a stage. I tighten my arm around Tom’s shoulder. ‘It’s okay,’ I whisper.

As the lights creep up I am able to make out a group of women with their heads bowed; they look like they are praying. One by one they stand up, joined in song. A male figure appears for a moment and is gone. The women finish their song and stand waiting. A voice comes from nowhere, a howl of lament, awful, not fully human. Members of the audience gasp. The voice soars higher and higher until it cracks and seems to split. There are more gasps. The lights creep up just enough to illuminate the makeshift stage area. The women remain with their heads bowed, huddled together. The owner of the voice, still hidden from view, continues singing, the cracked high note steadies and slows. The women begin to sing, swaying like corn in the wind. The awful lament returns, the one word, Eurydice, starting low and rising until it cracks and splits again. I look round the darkened church, all of them rapt, listening. In the first row is the back of a head I recognise, the long wavy hair pulled back in the distinctive rose clip. The women are singing again, repeating the one word, Eurydice, Eurydice, Eurydice. I stare at the familiar back of the head, willing her to turn round so that I will know. These entrances, she said, can appear anywhere, you just have to know how to look. But I am innocent. I glance at Kitty and Tom. I insisted, I went out of my way to find this place, and now it is too late to get out of this cave of the dead. Doesn’t she know I’m not ready yet? The women have finished

singing, they back off the stage, their heads bowed, and the famous song ‘Objet de mon amour’, the awful drawn-out howl, Orpheus singing for his lost love Eurydice, starts. In the semi-darkness, scarcely visible, is an immediately familiar figure. He steps into the middle of the stage area. This frayed, hollowed out, desperately unhappy man, who is not my responsibility, settles into the lament, quieter and lucid now, a lullaby. I am down in the cave amongst the dead. I lean forward, gripping onto the back of the chair in front. The floor is coming towards me, swaying and then draining away like water down a plughole. I can feel Tom watching me in the darkness, Kitty has noticed too.

‘Magnus, are you okay?’ Tom whispers. ‘Do you need to get out?’

I press my sweaty hands down onto the sides of the cold metal edges of the chair. ‘I’ll be okay.’

The beautiful song continues. He stands with his head bowed, staring down at the floor, his arms crossed like he is waiting, bored at a bus stop. His voice begins to rise, and this time before it splits, he stops. A female figure appears behind him and starts to sing. She is playing Cupid, telling him that there is hope, down there in the cave, this place of the dead. She stands waiting for his reply. The church is hushed. People are murmuring, shifting, a chair scrapes. He raises his hands, his palms facing us in an attitude of pleading, his face wet with tears. Someone gasps.

‘What’s going on?’ Kitty mutters.

The murmur of voices grow into a loud buzz, everyone is talking. Cupid comes towards him, her hand outstretched, but he is away, out of her reach and off the stage, walking fast up the aisle, heading towards the door.

The ground is still swaying. I reach out, grabbing at chairs, and push my way along the row, treading on bags, feet, impervious to the grumbles of protest.

Out in the entrance area the main door is open, letting in a cold draught. I step out into the forecourt; the mist is thicker than when we arrived. He could have gone off in any direction. I leave the path and scramble into the graveyard, mistaking the headstone of a cloaked angel guarding a tomb for him. A cigarette sparks close by. I tramp across the wet grass and see him sitting on a low wall, a dark shape against the pale sky.

‘Alex.’

He stands up, so slight, nearly nothing of him. He steps up onto the wall and runs along it. The glowing end of the cigarette spins up into the mist like a miniature Catherine wheel and plummet, sizzling in the grass.

‘Alex,’ I shout after him.

He glances round and jumps down, his head and shoulders bobbing above the edge, and is gone.

‘Magnus,’ Kitty’s worried voice calls out. ‘Magnus, where are you?’

I stop behind a tall headstone and watch them coming down the path, clinging together like an old couple.

‘Magnus,’ Tom shouts.

That night I message Alex on Twitter. I don’t agonise. I make it simple. I have found out that he has a growth on his voice box, it is benign, papillomatosis, but it means he will never sing again, they say there is no cure. I want him to know I am legitimate, that I am qualified, that I’m not some crazy person harbouring an impossible infatuation, my concern is professional, maybe a little bit more, maybe a lot more, but not dangerously, crazily so. I slam the laptop closed and sit staring into the dark. I am in the kitchen. It is late, past midnight; Tom has gone to bed over an hour ago, Kitty is up in the attic. It is her last night

with us in the Blackheath house. I sit watching the bushes sending shadows across the tiny garden. Ten minutes is a long time when you are waiting. He doesn't get back. I wait another ten minutes.

I force myself up to bed, and check once again. Fifteen minutes has elapsed, it is nearly one. I switch out the light and lie beside Tom, listening to the drone of traffic, voices in the street, the wind against the side of the house. Tom is sleeping noisily with his back to me. I nudge him gently, he grunts and his breathing settles. I turn over and wrap my arms around him, but he is restless and pushes me away.

Fighting with the bedclothes, he sits up, still asleep. 'What time is it?'

'Nearly two. Go back to sleep,' I tell him.

He lies back down and is soon snoring again. I get up and creep across the room; I open the laptop, the glow ghostly cold in the dark, and check my account.

I check again at six and again just before waking Tom at eight. I check intermittently throughout the day, and again just before I leave for home. I have given up seriously expecting a reply. By the time I return home that evening, with Kitty already gone, and so many last-minute loose ends to attend to, I don't check again until I get into bed around midnight.

The removal company bangs at the door around seven. I make a final tour round the empty house, boomy without the furniture and rugs. Letting go of my life for the last twenty-odd years isn't so hard. I expect pangs of regret, but instead it feels strangely impartial, bland, no longer connected to me. I know I will never return, this part of my life is gone with very little left to show, a few photos, recent snaps of the last couple of Christmases with Tom and Kitty; our lives evaporate, grow over, so quickly erased.

Two days later Tom and I set off for the cottage. We dawdle along the way, stopping off for a long pub lunch. We arrive around seven, with just enough light to see by on a late September evening. I park up by the hedge. It is chilly outside after the warm fug of the car. With the light nearly gone, the cottage is a dark hump against the hillside, the lattice windows on the first floor glinting against the low rays. I go ahead, shivering in my thin jacket. I stop halfway down the slope and wait for Tom to catch up with me, a hunched silhouette against the orange sky. He trips and starts to fall, I run forward and catch him. He is off the pills, patched up, so nearly back to his old self. Susan has done a good job. Fumbling for the latch to the creaky hee-haw gate, I go ahead down the couple of steps leading to the front door. The key fits easily; someone has oiled the lock. The door swings open without a murmur. The smell has gone. The floor has been washed and swept. Jessica the estate agent warned me that the electricity was off. Guided by the light from the torch on Tom's phone we find the kitchen. There is a stout candle and a box of matches beside a vase of wild flowers and a halfbottle of champagne. I light the candle and Tom kills the torch on his phone. Our elongated shadows waver across the ceiling as we walk over to the window and stand looking out into the dark garden. The trees and the high hedge are silhouetted against the pale sky, the deep orange gone with the setting sun.

Tom stands out of reach. 'Come here.' I go over and feel for his hand, it is warm and slightly sticky. 'The smell's gone,' I say.

He eases his hand out of mine, and nods.

'The flowers are a nice touch.'

'Yes they are,' he says.

I glance at him, his profile stony in the dim light, and it hits me that we are here on our own, just us two, no Kitty, no Skinny. I fix my gaze on a high bit of tree wagging in the breeze, like a giant, lazy dog's tail. What have I done?

Chapter Fourteen

Tom

We were woken around six on Monday morning by the arrival of Ernie and his crew. Magnus went down in his pyjamas whilst I watched from the bedroom window. A low-loader was parked at a perilous angle outside the cottage with a caravan strapped to the back. Ernie hopped out of an old-fashioned Land Rover. He looked misshapen as if he had a hump on his back, until I realised it was a papoose with a small baby inside. He wanted the Volvo moved so that he could bring the caravan in. Magnus looked hopelessly vulnerable as he scrambled into the car and backed it out of the way. Two men in their mid forties jumped down from the cab of the low-loader, a younger man joined them from the passenger side. Ernie, who had been striding about, shouting instructions, stood at a distance on his mobile phone. His men stared at the cottage, their expressions closed.

We hid away in the kitchen as they unloaded the caravan. It was a difficult job and took all day. An opening in the hedge on the lane side had to be cleared so that they could move the caravan down into the garden. One of the men, the dark-haired younger one, was given the task of cutting down the long grass, while the others started on the hedge. Ernie knocked on the kitchen window; he pointed at his watch and held up five fingers indicating that he would be back in the late afternoon.

We were alone with his crew, who were tearing up the garden with a frightening speed. Petrol fumes from their buzz saws filled the air with a blue haze. They worked without a break for two hours. By then half of the garden had been stripped of the long grass so that we were able to see right down to the bank at the bottom.

Magnus prowled round the kitchen, hovering by the window. Every time the builders looked our way he stepped back, reluctant to be seen. He went to the stove. 'I'll make them a cup of tea. We should make contact.'

'They're not that friendly,' I said. The younger man had rebuffed my efforts to communicate with a cold stare.

'Tom we can't just stay here hiding away.' He loaded the tea things onto a breadboard that we used as a makeshift tray. 'Can you go?'

I glanced out of the window at the three men sitting on the bank sharing sandwiches. 'Why don't we both go?'

'I'm in my socks.'

I picked up the tray and went out onto the slippery terrace. Shaved of its mystery the garden looked shrunken and diminished. The three men watched as I approached. The youngest one said something to the others and sauntered over. He was good looking in a chiselled, nondescript sort of way. A peculiar arrogance emanated from him. He took the tray from me. 'Tea,' he shouted out to his friends. 'From England.'

'I should introduce myself,' I said. 'I'm Tom.' I decided against holding out my hand.

He was about to turn his back on me then changed his mind. 'Carl,' he said but didn't smile. His eyes were an unusual blue. The contrast with his dark hair was striking.

The other two men strolled over, they were both in their mid forties. One of them held out his hand. ‘Andréas,’ he said.

I felt none of the prickly hostility from either of them. We stood awkwardly extending our goodwill. I turned and walked back up the garden acutely conscious of Carl’s gaze boring into my back. Magnus was watching from the kitchen, but by the time I waved he had turned away.

I found the cat waiting for me on the terrace. I picked him up and carried him into the house, knowing I was breaking our agreement that he should stay outside. Magnus had set up camp in the front room and had made it clear he didn’t want to be disturbed. I decided to work in the bedroom and settled the cat on the bed. It was surprising how quickly the medicines had taken effect; now that he was free from fleas and worms, he was a pleasant companion. I looked up from my laptop and caught his raggedy eye watching me with a look of tender fondness – Magnus never looked at me like that anymore. I was overwhelmed with sadness and felt a sudden urge to ring Kitty, but she was probably in the middle of training and wouldn’t want to be disturbed.

Unable to focus, I went downstairs around three in the afternoon. Magnus was still shut in the front room. I wandered into the kitchen and looked out into the garden. A large section of the hedge had been removed so that I had a clear view down to the stream at the bottom. There was no sign of the men, giving me the opportunity to retrieve the tea things. The cat followed me out onto the terrace. I picked him up, and as I stepped down into the garden he started to squirm, his claw grazed my hand and I was forced to drop him. The urge to phone Kitty was back again. I climbed the bank where I thought I had the best chance of getting a signal, but when I tried her number the connection died on

me. I stood staring down into the stream. There was a clump of yellow archangel near the water's edge. I clambered down and was in half a mind to take a cutting, when something made me look round. Carl was standing at the top of the bank. He was holding the large claw trap that Magnus had found on our first visit.

‘What’re you going to do with that thing?’ I had meant to be friendly.

‘It’s good.’ He inspected the rusty iron teeth. ‘Very good, well made.’ He came down the bank and beckoned. ‘You should see this. Come.’ A stippled lateafternoon light rolled across what was left of the tall grasses; long tendrils of bramble waved in the breeze. He burrowed under a bush and brought out a nearly dead grey squirrel. It lay face-downwards, twitching slightly. ‘We found it over there.’ He pointed to the overgrown, untouched side of the garden. ‘You should be careful, ‘ he said, the ghost of a smile hovering.

I looked down at the dying squirrel; Annie, the woman I’d met at Magnus’ hospital was back, her soft voice amused, quietly triumphant. ‘He drowned them one by one. He did it openly in front of people. He wasn’t the least bit ashamed. I don’t think he thought he was doing anything wrong.’ The squirrel lay on its side, seeping blood and mucus into the grass.

‘What’re you going to do? Are you going to leave it like that?’ I said.

He smiled. ‘We can drown it. It is easy. You want to try?’ he said looking over at the stream.

Our brief attempt at communication was over. The man was unbearable. I turned and walked back up to the house. Susan was at my side. ‘Tom, there is always a perfectly logical explanation for everything.’

Ernie returned around five to direct the unloading of the second caravan. Magnus and I hovered in the cold watching his crew winching it down the hill

and into position at the bottom of the garden. I insisted that the two caravans were a decent space apart. I knew that Magnus shared my feelings but he stood back, leaving me to appear the pernickety, unfriendly one.

Just before the light faded the builders' caravan was maneuvered into position down by the stream, ten yards away from us. Our caravan had been kitted out with a sink, a chemical toilet and a wood-burning stove. The double bed was situated on a raised sleeping platform with a long thin window above it that gave a partial view up the garden. In the gathering darkness we decanted our few possessions from the house. It was well past ten in the evening by the time that we'd settled in. Through the kitchen window I glimpsed the other caravan; it looked like it had come from some defunct campsite and I felt a pang of guilt at the thought of the three of them crammed inside.

The meal was a bit of a disaster; in the end we gave up on the flimsy camper stove and retired to bed. A wind had got up and it had started to rain. Magnus was restless and unable to settle. He rolled over onto his back and stared up at the low ceiling. 'Tell me we've done the right thing.' 'It's growing on me,' I lied.

We lay listening to the rain. 'Someone's been laying traps in the garden,' I said. 'I think it's the builders.'

'Those traps were here before we arrived,' he said.

'It's not safe. They shouldn't be using them,' I said.

'It's always like this. Just as we start to relax, you find something to fret about.'

We moved apart. A high-pitched whine warbled under the wind. I sat up. 'What's that?'

'Tom stop it.'

‘You must be able to hear it.’ I clambered down off the high bed. ‘It’s the cat.’

‘For Christ’s sake Tom, it can take care of itself.’ He turned his back and pulled the pillow over his head.

I went to the window. The cloud cover had cleared, the garden was lit by moonlight. I crept over to the door and inched it open. Through the hedge that separated us from the builders, I could see a faint glow coming from their caravan. The noise of the wind in the trees was deafening. Using the torch on my phone, I went out into the freezing cold and called for the cat. I thought that he might be near the house and had almost reached the terrace when I caught a glint of his button eye. I knelt down so that I was close to his level and crawled towards him. He lay on his side trembling in the wet grass. I ran my hand along his spine and encountered cold metal. My palm was covered in blood, and I realised that his tail was caught in a trap. Above the roar of the wind I heard Magnus calling my name. A rectangle of light spilled into the darkness, and I saw his silhouette wavering in the doorway of the caravan. I stood up struggling to keep my balance. In a trance of fury I hurried round towards the builders’ caravan. I had to get there before Magnus stopped me. Half-hidden by a tree, a light glowed through the branches. There was just about enough illumination for me to see my way. I knocked on the door. ‘Carl I need to talk to you now.’ There were sounds of movement inside. A shape went past the window and the door opened. Carl was barefoot, wearing tracksuit bottoms and a t-shirt. He stood with one hand on the doorframe dangling a cigarette.

The man’s slouching nonchalance momentarily kicked me back. ‘One of your traps injured my cat.’ The words growled in the back of my throat, barely audible above the roar of the stream.

He took a drag on his cigarette and let the smoke trickle out through his nostrils, the worst way of smoking. I hoped it would kill him.

‘How many times must I tell you, it is not one my traps.’ He flicked the cigarette in my direction. ‘Perhaps you are stupid, perhaps you don’t understand what people tell you.’

He was about to close the door. I lunged and tugged it back. My voice rose to a banshee-like screech. ‘Your trap could’ve killed him.’

He laughed, an odd cackle that didn’t seem like it belonged to him. ‘Why you care so much about an ugly old cat.’ He gestured to his head. ‘You are mental.’

One of the men looked out of the window and drew the curtain.

I felt a rush of vertigo. I’d started something ugly. ‘Fuck you.’

‘And fuck you too.’ He wrenched the door shut, tearing the skin on my hand.

I hammered against the door, my bloody hand slippery on the cold metal.

‘Tom.’ Magnus’ lanky silhouette lolloped out of the darkness. ‘What’ve you done? Is someone hurt?’

I held up my injured hand. ‘It got shut in the door.’

Magnus wiped the dark cloud of blood away with his sleeve. ‘What the hell?’ He grabbed at my arm. ‘Tom.’

Our gazes locked in the dark. ‘I never wanted to come here,’ I whispered. ‘It always has to be about you.’

‘You never tell me what you want, it all has to come from me, and when you don’t like it – you do this.’ His face was twisted with fury; for once he was ugly.

‘He tried to kill the cat,’ I shouted at him.

‘What’re you talking about?’

I pushed him hard in the chest and wrenched my arm away from him. My foot slammed into something. In the darkness I made out the raggedy edge of the trap. Terrified I'd trampled on the cat, I knelt down in the wet grass. 'It's all my fault,' I whispered. 'He's going to die.'

Magnus' hand was tender on the cat's matted back. 'He's a tough old thing – aren't you...'

The creature's glassy eye drooped. He didn't appear to be breathing.

'He's dying,' I wailed. 'He's dying Magnus – he's dying and it's all my fault.'

Magnus' hand was on my shoulder. 'Tom – listen to me.'

I tried to get away but he held on tight.

'You are innocent. You are innocent. Do you hear me? You are innocent.'

His words were so strangely disconnected, so bizarre, that for a moment my panic stalled, a gap opened up, and I was calm. The panic would come later.

Chapter Fifteen

Tom

The cat slid into a limp coma, barely breathing. We carried him back to the caravan with the trap still attached to his tail. I watched him through the night, and in the early morning we lifted him into the back of the car and drove him down to the vet's on an emergency visit. Laid out on the cold metal table, his matted fur clinging to his skinny frame, he was reduced to practically nothing. I left the room at the point the vet set to work, easing the trap open with two pairs of pliers. Half an hour later Magnus emerged with the cat cradled in his arms, his tail stump swathed in a large white bandage. It went without saying that he would be staying with us in the caravan while he recuperated. I made a nest for him out of socks and old shirts. I was jumpy as a mother with her newborn and had to check every hour that he was still breathing.

The rest of the day was overcast and wet. Magnus went off to work, leaving me on my own. Pottering amongst our things I found an old copy of *The Day of the Triffids* tucked into a *Beano* annual and carried it back to bed with a cup of tea. Ever since Magnus had told me that Lane End Cottage was Wyndham's inspiration for the Sussex farmhouse, my curiosity was roused. I searched through the book and found a description of the cottage in an early chapter. I dozed off and slipped into a nightmare scenario in which I was the only one who knew about an imminent triffid attack; Magnus ignored my warning and joined forces with Carl, both of them mocking my paranoid imaginings.

The cat had scarcely stirred since we got him back. He lay still as a stone in his nest beside the stove, curled up tight with his head tucked under his bandaged tail. By the late afternoon I was restless and crept out. Not intending to be gone for long, I shoved a pair of loose trousers and a jumper over my pyjamas. I found a coat and wrapped a scarf round my neck. I glanced over at the builders' caravan, fighting an irrational urge to go down and wipe the bloodstain off the door, as if its removal would rub out last night like it had never happened. Braving the high-pitched screech of an angle grinder, conscious of being watched from the roof of the house, I hurried up the garden and clambered onto the terrace where I knew I would be shielded from view. I settled on a bench, my back pressed against the wall, sheltered from the wind in a warm bubble of sunshine. I had a view of the garden: on one side were the two caravans parked down by the stream in the recently shorn part of the lawn, whilst the other side was overgrown, festering, a swarm of insects hovered near to the edge. I saw myself blind in there, the grasses towering overhead, tripping and falling, facedown, ear to the damp earth, feeling the ground tearing apart, moving up the garden under cover of the long grass, burrowing beneath the house, disrupting the foundations.

I surfaced with a jolt, sucking in damp air. I stood up and shook the wet off my coat. The smell of burning was strong; my hands were pitted with dark pinpricks of gluey ash. A trickle of smoke snaked from inside the wood, a tantalising invitation. I glanced back at the caravan, guilty as a flighty mother, and set off briskly, my hands dug into the deep pockets of Magnus' coat. A sticky breeze whistled down under my collar. I looked back at the house, chiselled against the skyline. Without its roof, it was scalped of character, its

rustic charm all gone. I glanced at my watch, it was nearly five. Ernie and his men would be packing up in under an hour.

Set back from the lane was a gate into the woods, five-barred, slimy with mould and clammy to the touch. The ground around the gate was lined with straw and doused in industrial disinfectant. I pulled back the metal rod, letting the gate judder shut behind me. Sweating inside the overcoat, I tramped through the shadowy undergrowth, slithering along a narrow path, thick with mud and leafmould. I stopped to get my bearings, and was engulfed in a gritty cloud. Barely able to see more than a short distance in front of my face, my eyes streaming, I inched my way along the muddy path until the smoke thinned, sucked up into the trees.

Illuminated in a shaft of winter sunlight in a field the other side of the wood was a dark shape, the size of a small building. I left the path, slithering down towards the edge of the wood and saw a vast blackened pyre, smoking in the wet, the fire extinguished by recent rainfall. The scorched smell caught in the back of my throat, making me cough. Burned carcasses were piled high like children's toys, bundled together and set alight in an act of malicious cruelty. I hung back inside the trees. A breeze rustled through the branches; it could whip round at any moment and blow in my direction. I started back up the hill, scrambling with bare hands, the dark soil blackening my nails. Disease, the stench of it was everywhere, seeping up from under the earth, hairline cracks, gradually widening, sucked up into the atmosphere, drawn by the sun's heat, poisoning our animals.

Out of breath and sweating in Magnus' coat, I stopped to look back at the pyre, a dark devilish thing against the grey skyline. I could hear the rumble of traffic in the distance, and something else that sounded like a sigh, a grunt, a

human noise. I couldn't make sense of it at first. A pale balloon-like thing, halfhidden behind a large beech tree, reformed into a man crouched close to the ground, defecating, his trousers round his knees, the skin on his back and buttocks luminous in the gloom. As he stood up I realised with a shock that it was Carl.

I stumbled back down the hill, in my haste tripped and lost my balance. As I grabbed for a branch I saw a rusty piece of metal partially hidden in the leaves. A large grey rabbit was caught in the jaws of a vicious-looking trap. Its long white belly was panting, one of its hind legs started to hammer. I was mesmerised, unable to act. If I couldn't rescue it from the trap, then I must put it out of its misery, dash it over the head with a stone. The leg wouldn't stop. I fumbled in the undergrowth and picked up a rock. I lifted it, ready to strike, but my nerve deserted me. If I hadn't been so focused I would have spotted him sooner coming down the slope, his hands jammed into his jacket pockets. Terrified he had seen me earlier I backed away as he sauntered over and picked up the trap, inspecting the half-dead creature before dropping it back on the ground.

A sour smell of alcohol leached out of him. 'How's the cat?' 'Stop laying traps in our garden,' I muttered.

'Why would I do that?' He laughed. 'Did you see me? How do you know?'

I stared down at the ground, watching an earthworm twisting slowly through the leafmould.

'You make false accusations, you should watch what you say.' His tone was amicable, like he was explaining something to a child. He prodded the rabbit

with the toe of his boot, its hind leg started to judder. 'I didn't put traps in the garden. In the woods, yes, but not in the garden.'

I stared into his small blue eyes and had a snapshot of what he would look like as an old man. 'What are you going to do with it?' I said.

He bent down and eased the dying animal out of the trap. He looked at me almost pleadingly as he took hold of its back legs, and with his free hand put his thumb and two fingers round its neck, and tugged. There was a sharp crack like he had trodden on a shell. It happened so fast I scarcely registered it. The dead animal dangled gracefully by its hind legs. He ran his fingers along its back. 'Now you hate me,' he mumbled.

A cloud of ashy fumes engulfed us. He was a ghostly figure behind a veil of smoke.

'If I find one more of your traps in the garden or out here,' I started to cough. 'You have to leave.' I turned my back on him and continued up the slope, struggling in the long coat. As I reached the gate, I heard footsteps behind me, and braced myself for an ugly confrontation. He was holding the rabbit by its back legs; a bloody paw brushed against my coat as he leaned across me and put his hand on the gate, blocking my way. 'Why do you hate me?' he said. 'Why you make problems?'

We were sheltered from view by the trees. I tugged at the gate, my breath ragged. 'I want you to go.' I heard Annie's soft, amused voice, her laugh, and Eric Nye appeared, deft and careful, his sleeves rolled up, so as not to get them wet as he held the struggling creature down under the water. I yanked the gate hard; there was a crack as it swung back. A waft of disinfectant curdled in the sweet smell of burning. I stumbled into the lane, doubled over, coughing. As I stood up I saw the other two men up on the roof of the house watching. I glanced

round at Carl; he had his elbows resting on the top bar of the gate, the rabbit dangling over the side. 'I did not put any traps in the garden. Ernie, he believes me, your fellow believes me.'

Now that I was out in the lane in full view of the house, I was courageous. 'I want you gone,' I growled.

He stood back from the gate. 'No one listens to you. I take my orders from the other one, your friend, the doctor. Not you.'

I felt a blackness mass around my soul. I wanted to stop it. 'I'm getting rid of you,' I said. 'I'm telling you now, you have to go.'

He laughed. 'Why – what have I done – what is your accusation?

'I'm telling you, if you're not gone by tonight...' my voice cracked. I stopped.

He laughed. 'What will you do?'

The day had turned dark and sour. 'I don't know,' I whispered.

He looked across at his friends on the roof and gestured, twisting his fingers against the side of his head.

I made my way up the track to the house and down through the wet grass across the garden, the caravans receding like a pale mirage. I resisted the impulse to hurry, conscious of the long sweeping coat, a madman's attire. The strength in my legs was nearly gone. I was dripping with sweat. I heard him coming after me and scrambled on, taking flight like a child.

'Tom – Tom – can I have a word?' It was Ernie, minus the baby on his back. 'What's going on?'

I wished I wasn't wearing the madman's coat. 'You need to sort those guys, they've been putting traps in the garden,' I panted.

‘Look, I’m sorry about the cat.’ He glanced back at the men on the roof.
‘But if you want to see this thing through, you’ve got to be more careful. Magnus isn’t going to thank you.’ He stood stolid against the vivid green of the high hedge. I was incomprehensible to him.

‘Tell them to get rid of the traps,’ I mumbled.

‘They’re doing this whole build for a very decent price, they’re not living in the easiest of conditions, cut them a bit of slack.’

We stood in awkward silence, and all I could wish was that I hadn’t come out looking so strange.

‘I am sorry about your cat. I don’t want to be harsh.’ He made a stab at a grin. ‘We’re cool – okay.’ He didn’t wait for my response and walked away.

‘I want him to go,’ I shouted after him.

He slowed his pace, stopping for a moment, about to turn round, but thinking better of it, he continued up towards the house.

Chapter Sixteen

Magnus

I haven't checked for messages from Alex once since the move. He reappeared briefly, and now he is gone; the feeling of relief is as fresh and clear as the new air I am breathing. The first few days at the cottage pass in a demented scramble. We move to a caravan at the bottom of the garden as the house is demolished around us in a storm of dusty fumes and endless noise. Tom is a worry; he still isn't healed. He spends his days drifting in his dressing gown, worn like a shield over his daytime clothes. He carries the ugly one-eyed cat about with him everywhere, oblivious to his strangeness. Every night he niggles and complains about Carl and the other men; he talks about the traps endlessly. I have only ever seen the one that we found when we first viewed the property, but there are others apparently, hidden in the long grass, on the edge of the woods.

On the morning of our third week at the cottage I receive a text message from Edna, the secretary at The Anderson informing me that Adam, the troublesome ex-patient, has moved on from the hospital and is lodging a complaint for invasive therapeutic intervention. It has been a long time coming and in a way it is a relief. I am formally accused of malpractice and will have to answer to a tribunal. That this communication has managed to sneak through under the radar of the patchy satellite connection assumes a troubling significance. It is early, before eight; the message was probably sent the night before, and has spent the last few hours struggling to get through. I stare out of the cramped caravan window coated with insects and dust. Most of the roof on

the house is gone, the pale rafters exposed to the sky. Dark clouds roll in over the Downs to the south; the garden is in deep, cave-like shadow. Tom is snoring softly up in the high bed. I am usually gone before eight and leave him to sleep on. Time slips, it is eight fifteen, eight sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, and I'm not moving. At twenty-seven minutes past, I let myself out, careful not to wake him, and set off up the dark garden. The grass soaks my shoes; a slight mist hangs around the sides of the house, clinging to the brickwork, pushing up under the eaves. I pick my way across the slippery terrace, my face stinging in the cold. I reach the gate and push it open with my foot, not wanting to touch the freezing metal. The creak is loud against the quiet. The car is parked up against the hedge, a dark coffin in the mist. I stop, my heart still. Someone is sitting in the front passenger seat. He is looking straight at me, neutral, impassive; he turns away with that impatient flick that I know so well. He is wearing the gold brocade jacket, an outfit I remember from years back. He looks recovered, fitter, fuller in the face, more alert. I push the gate closed, check the latch and walk purposefully up the grassy slope towards the car. He is reading a newspaper, a score or something. I am a few feet from the car; he doesn't seem to have seen me. As I reach for the door, feeling the cold brush of the handle, he is gone.

I am calm and relatively steady as I edge the car down the stony track. I drive onto the main road into watery winter sunlight. The mist has lifted, it is a bright, crisp day, dripping, glistening against a pale sun. The hospital appears at the end of the long drive, a vast ridiculous wedding cake with its crenelated turrets and fussy gothic extravagances. Eric's secretary, Alice, is waiting for me in the hall, all sympathy. News travels fast. There is no blame, her look says to

me; Beechridge with its ample resources is at my disposal to help in any way it can, my wellbeing, my functioning, to be preserved at all costs.

That night I walk back across the car park in the dusk. Everyone has left for the night. I drive home sedately and get back around eight. I pick my way across the garden towards our caravan, guided by the light from the back window. Tom is cooking. He is wearing a striped apron over the dressing gown, and is draining the spaghetti into the sink. He glances round as I come in. 'Thank God, Magnus,' he says as if he was expecting someone else. He puts the colander down, preciously balanced in a saucepan, and stands wiping his hands on the apron.

My phone bleeps with another message from The Anderson. A day for a tribunal has been set for just over a month's time. It is a shock seeing the date, the 26th November glowing in the steamy kitchen.

Tom is watching me, the wooden spoon poised.

'You're dripping fat,' I tell him.

He wipes the spoon absently across the front of his apron and goes back to his cooking.

I feel a spike, a pinprick, and remember what it is about him that has attached itself to me. Alex wouldn't have wiped the spoon across the front of the apron; he would have been too careful, too fastidious, like me.

I sit down. The Adam story is a filing cabinet, two filing cabinets, endless sheaves of paperwork, correspondence, reports. The emails, telephone calls, records of telephone calls, transcripts of emails, will start up all over again.

Tom is watching me, the dripping spoon wagging. 'What is it?'
'I'm tired,' I say.

‘I thought that place was supposed to be a break.’

‘It will be once I get used to it.’

‘Who was that on the telephone?’

‘Work,’ I lie. ‘Alice’

‘Alice?’

‘Eric’s secretary.’

‘First I’ve heard of her,’ he says, his back turned.

‘She’s been there for years. Eric inherited her.’

‘You never asked me about my day,’ he says, and starts on a long elaborate story about Carl, his insinuating atmosphere, his barely concealed homophobia.

I am scarcely listening. I am back there. Horrible, horrible, the awfulness of it, the drive to A&E in the ambulance, Adam curled on the gurney, screaming like a devil, the inhuman strength of him, the near escape as we draw into the forecourt, the rasping breaths like a death rattle. I pray he is dying. I want him dead. His eyes open in the darkness before they lift him out, pleading with me. They pump him full of stuff, and he comes back furiously angry, livid, foul and so full of hatred, a dark, sticky river of the blackest bile. It comes as no surprise when I open my inbox the following Monday and find the emails from colleagues, embarrassed, apologetic at first. As the week goes on accusations of maltreatment, bullying, gross misconduct begin clogging my mail. Eric gets me out of there just in time. Beechridge becomes my refuge, my piece of rock, and I cling to it like a drowning man for six months, seven months, close to a year, waiting for the summons, and now it has come.

That night we go to bed early and sleep back to back, scarcely touching, Tom is wrapped in the dressing gown over his day clothes, a bulky,

unapproachable bundle. I've had a couple of large whiskies at supper and am soon asleep. I am woken a few hours later in the pitch black, a draught whistling through the room. The door is wide open, a shaft of moonlight giving me just enough light to see by. Tom is gone from the bed. I sit up shivering, Alex has been sitting beside me in my dream, so solid, so vitally present, it is a few moments before he seeps away and I realise that Tom is gone from the bed. I climb down and go to the door. I step out into the wet cold grass in my bare feet. Tom is a dark shape, silhouetted against the tiny window of the builders' caravan. As he turns the light catches the side of his face, his expression is smooth and unruffled, and I realise he is sleep walking.

I should go to him, help him back into the caravan, God knows he is suffering, but instead I slide away, and climb back into the high bed. He might go out into the woods, glide down the lane in his dark clothes, ghostlike, into the middle of the road, picked up by oncoming headlamps only moments before impact. I lie listening for the click of the door. He is down below in the kitchen, I hear a tap turn, water running, other sounds. He comes to bed eventually, careful not to touch me. I feel the outside chill of him, and with half an eye I see he has changed his clothes. The wind is up, swirling along the roof of the caravan, rattling a loose catch. I think of contacting Susan but I know what she will say – sleepwalking and night terrors are symptomatic, bring him back immediately – don't leave him there. Eric on the other hand, Eric will understand.

Chapter Seventeen

Tom

I don't remember exactly when I found out about Alex. Strangely I have only ever felt a mild interest in him, like leafing through an old photo album of Magnus' past life, snapshots of his mother and sisters on a beach on one of the Greek islands, under an awning in a café. Magnus, gawky at sixteen, shading his eyes against the glare of a strong sun. His sisters, skinny like him, lanky, pale with the same large eyes and pointed features. Their mother, untidy, a little bit stressed. Alex was part of that past life; he came after the Greek island, the transit to Canada and the return to England, fitting in somewhere between The Anderson and our first meeting at the barbecue. I didn't resent him or fear him; he had never been a threat. At the concert that last evening with Kitty, it wasn't until I felt Magnus' hand, wet and slippery in mine, that I knew the person out there on the dark stage was him.

I liked it that Magnus kept part of himself back from me. I accepted his secrecy. I became adept at intuiting things, reading the signs, piecing him together from the little bits he told me. When I stumbled across Alex he was a fragmented, not fully composite picture that was only completed at the concert in the church that night. The slight unhappy man with the cracked voice was not a rival, just the missing pieces pushed into place. And if I think of Magnus, that's how I saw him, a half-completed picture with so much missing.

When my mother died I went to pieces, blind to more or less everything except the noise going on inside my head. I became frightened of myself and

frightened of Magnus, frightened of the pair of us. What I had once found intriguing, exciting, was baffling. I had become mistrustful and suspicious; resentments, splintery bits of the past reappeared and nagged at me. It wasn't that I couldn't forgive him for Alex. I didn't mind Alex, I liked Alex instinctively; I sensed a sympathy.

I am adept at 'synthesising my fears', Susan calls it. I had synthesised Alex into long and complex scenarios, a ménage à trois, the three of us living in the cottage, visited occasionally by Kitty. In these scenarios I would remove myself to the spare room, probably the ground floor in respect of their privacy. After a few months I would decamp to one of the chalets, built by this time, out in the garden. During the day while Magnus was at work at the hospital, Alex, who was often resting between tours, would accompany me on trips to the superstore on the ring road. He suggested we buy some bee-hives and taught me how to make honey. On a long summer afternoon we would take a couple of deckchairs to the lawn at the back of the house, and tuck ourselves inside the shelter of the high terrace, Alex going over a score, while I reworked the final chapter of my cloud book. I would doze and wake to find Alex standing over me, blocking the sun, a spiky silhouette, holding a tray of tea things, a pot of honey from his hives. And dragging our deckchairs into the shadow for greater comfort, the rickety wooden table leg wedged against a stone, we sat sipping tea from large fine bone china mugs, munching on Alex's scones, inching crablike towards the topic that united us like a favourite child – Magnus and his troubles at the hospital, our concern for his health, the strains of overwork, plans to spirit him away against his will on a winter break to Wales or Berlin. I was happy to stay behind and keep watch over the house, a trusted confidant, housekeeper, a

valued, well-worn retainer. I had found my niche, liberated from the stresses and strains of ego.

Sometimes the scenarios would shift and the future Alex would materialise as the present Alex, tipping up on our doorstep with his neat little suitcase, seeking rest and recuperation – Magnus' first patient. In one of these scenarios it is a miserable wet winter's evening, I am wrapped in my coat and scarf over my pyjamas, sitting on the bench at the back of the house watching the faint glow of Carl's caravan through the trees, when Alex arrives beside me, shivering in his too-thin clothes. He asks if I mind him joining me and I give him my scarf; he winds it around his neck so that he has a high-collared nineteenthcentury look, a young Napoleon in profile. He tells me about the first time his voice gave out on him in a concert in Berlin. And I tell him about Carl and the encounter in the woods and the argument with Magnus afterwards.

I'd wanted to tell Magnus about Carl and the traps in the wood that night. I had been waiting impatiently for his return. 'You never asked me about my day,' I said. 'I caught Carl with a trap.'

But he was preoccupied with his phone. 'Tom can we leave this?'

'You can't just block it out.'

He tucked his phone into his pocket. 'You're not going to stop are you?'

'He's the one that's been laying the traps in the garden.'

'One trap, we don't even know it was him.'

'And you think that's okay?'

'We don't have any proof.'

'I caught him with a rabbit in the woods this afternoon?'

'He's not going to admit to the garden.'

‘So you think he’s responsible for the traps in the garden?’

‘Tom, the traps were here before any of us got here.’

‘I don’t understand why you’re shutting me down. You shut me down, every time I try to tell you something.’ I was full of the recent scenario with Alex, his silent acceptance, the porous, breathing part of him absorbing me.

‘What do you want me to say?’

Alex was there in the corner of the room, a dim shape through the cooking fumes, so deft and careful to demand nothing of either us. ‘It doesn’t matter,’ I said.

‘But it does matter,’ he said, feeling in his pocket for his phone.

We struggled through an uncomfortable meal, talking about practical things. Having exhausted our supply of smalltalk, Magnus started to clear away. I stared out of the window into the darkness. A bright moon illuminated the garden, a silvery light flickered through the trees; it should have been magical, perfect. I got up from the table surprised to find myself close to tears.

Magnus turned round from the sink, balancing a plate on the flimsy rack. ‘I can’t bear to see you unhappy. What is it?’ he said, wiping his hands on a towel.

I rested my head against his shoulder and said nothing. It was always at these times of maximum untruth, that he would tell me he loved me, and I would bite my tongue and bend to his will. I pulled away from him. ‘I told Carl I wanted him to go.’

‘It’s okay, Ernie smoothed it over, the last thing we want is for these guys to walk on us,’ he said.

I felt my heart jump. ‘What’ve you been saying to him?’

‘Ernie?’

‘Carl.’

‘I haven’t talked to Carl.’

‘He told me I had a screw loose.’

‘He was upset. You upset him Tom. Last night didn’t help matters.’

‘I want him to go.’

‘Tom be reasonable,’ he muttered.

‘Why’re you on his side? He’s a psycho.’

‘Carl is erratic, aggressive, but he is not remotely psychopathic.’

The dream drifted back, an evil little fragment of it, Magnus and Carl joining forces, laughing in my face. ‘Don’t be so fucking pompous,’ I muttered.

‘Level with me for once in your life.’

‘I am levelling with you Tom.’

‘No you’re not, you never do. You slide around, avoiding me all the time. That man,’ my voice was all over the place, letting me down. ‘That man tried to kill my cat.’

‘Tom, you’re upset.’

‘You don’t believe me.’

‘I believe you.’ He sounded bored.

‘Then why won’t you look at me?’

‘Because you are behaving irrationally, you’re not helping yourself; you’re not helping anyone. If you go on like this, the whole project will go under.’

‘He has to go,’ I muttered

‘Tom – stop.’

I felt myself swaying. The sensation of vertigo was back again, I was looking down from a great distance, the moment stretched. I grabbed hold of his hand. I wanted him to come outside, to kneel down in the long grass and press his ear against the earth. If he could just listen, he would hear it too, the tearing apart, the cracks opening under us, under the caravan, the house. I let go of his hand, my head full of noise, tiny splinters. It was my word against Carl's. I stared out into the garden, beyond the high hedge into the night sky and found the brightest star – Sirius. I kinked my head round to take a closer look and felt Magnus' hand on my shoulder. 'Tom, talk to me.' 'I

can't,' I whispered.

'Why?'

My thoughts were flying around, giving off low underground sounds. If he came too close he would hear them. 'Tom,' he said. 'What's going on?' 'I'm sorry,' I whispered.

'What is it?'

'Carl has to go,' I said.

That night, up in the high bed, we lay with the cat and his bandaged tail wedged between us. Unable to sleep, I tapped the pane and dislodged a bundle of sooty ash that had collected in the corner of the frame; it clung to the glass and blew away in tiny chunks. Is this how it was from now on, tiptoeing round the cracks, terrified of falling in? Magnus had started to snore grunting snuffing sounds. The wind battered the walls of the caravan, rattling at the windows. Something crashed into the sink. Magnus' snoring settled into a rhythmic pattern. It seemed impossible to me that he could sleep through this; in the Blackheath house the slightest disturbance worried him. Kit's hamster had driven him to

distraction. Even when he was asleep he would hear the telltale squeak of its wheel; up in our bedroom the tiniest slither, not more than a whisper, was enough to drive him berserk.

Half-dreaming I was back in our old home, it was a blue-grey morning; I was in the kitchen, shivering in my flimsy dressing gown. Magnus walked into the room. I said his name but he didn't hear me. He walked across the room, picked up the hamster cage and went out into the garden heading for the incinerator that he had bought the other week to burn the November leaves. A trickle of smoke from the previous night wafted into the grey sky. In a leap of intuition I knew what was going to happen, as he swung the cage in a swift swoop and tipped the contents into the smoking incinerator.

Magnus stirred beside me and muttered my name in his sleep.

A branch scratched the roof of the caravan, tapping out a nervous Morse code. 'Don't tell him, don't tell him, don't, don't.' I rolled over and wrapped my arms around his chest. There was a shift in rhythm. 'He's not to be trusted, remember the hamster, remember the hamster.' It didn't sound like a normal branch from a nearby tree, more like a stick being tapped by a human hand. 'It's only a branch,' Susan whispered. 'It sounds like a stick but it's just a branch.' The tattoo changed and the words were gone, and all I could hear was an annoying scratching. Pressed up against Magnus' back, feeling the rhythmic pattern of his breathing, I hovered on the edge of sleep, wondering if the hamster's wheel had been talking to him, telling him something he couldn't bear to hear? The evidence would still be there. If I went back to the Blackheath house, and dug around under the autumn mulch behind the bush, I was sure that I would unearth the telltale fragments of skeleton.

I drifted back to sleep and was woken by a thud and a rubbing sound like someone running their hands along the side of the caravan. Magnus turned over and grunted. I waited for him to settle before climbing down out of the bed into the kitchen area. That's when I remembered the cat. I tugged on a pair of trousers over my pyjamas and found a coat on the back of the sofa. It was a relief to be out in the damp misty cold. Through the hedge I could see into the wood; the lights were on in the builders' caravan. It was close to dawn, a sliver of gold glowed against the dark outline of the Downs. Whispering for the cat, I went round the back of the caravan. I stepped into a clump of uncut grass. A dark stain appeared along the bottoms of my pyjamas; as I bent down to wipe it my hand came away smeared with a streaky blackness. I brought it to my mouth and tasted blood. At first I thought I had cut myself; I inspected my feet but there was no sign of any injury. I knelt down in the grass, feeling my way carefully, crawling on my hands and knees.

Back inside the caravan I glanced at the clock on the wall. I had been gone just over five minutes. I stood in the cramped toilet contemplating my reflection. My red-rimmed puffy eyes wheezed back at me. A little bit of blood can go a long way; it was all over my sleeves, the legs of my pyjamas, and my chin. I couldn't bear the thought of Magnus waking and finding me like this. I climbed out of the bloodied pyjamas and took them into the kitchen where I stuffed them behind the bin. I returned to the bathroom and splashed my face with water. I inspected my teeth. My gums looked raw, exposed. Back in the kitchen I sat staring out. I had a partial view of the builders' caravan; it was dark inside with no signs of life. I kept up my vigil as the first signs of light rolled in, filling the valley with the timid grey flecks of morning. The cat wasn't coming back.

A car rumbled in the lane, a door slammed. I heard Ernie whistling a Bob Marley tune. ‘Don’t worry, be happy.’ Normality was returning; I wanted to go out and make contact with it. I could report my suspicions about Carl, I could take Ernie to the spot, show him the blood, insist we search for the cat. I could tell him about the trapped rabbit in the wood. But instead I stayed hidden, watching from behind the curtain. I went through to the kitchen and made some coffee. I carried both cups up to the bed and shook Magnus awake. Ernie was still whistling. He sounded happy this was how the day was going to pan out: relaxed, normal – no shades. I peered out. It would only take a few minutes to wash the bloody handprints off the sides of the caravan. If I went now while Magnus was still in bed, he would never know. All it needed was a bucket of soapy water.

Ernie had stopped whistling and was walking with springy, short steps towards the caravan. I waited for the knock on the door and was relieved when Magnus said he’d go. Ernie wanted to show him something. I heard the door click and their voices fade as they walked away up the garden. I held my breath and started to count down from one hundred because it would take that, longer if they had to go far. I knew, you see. I knew, like you know these things. I reached the hundred mark and kept on going. By the time I’d counted another thirty Magnus was back. He stayed below in the kitchen and I went on counting, listening to the sounds of him, wondering when he was going to tell me. ‘What did Ernie want?’ I said.

‘Nothing,’ he replied. ‘Just something about some roof tiles – it’s not important. I’m making coffee, do you want some?’

As I climbed down off the bed I felt the vertigo returning. I lost my footing and tilted towards him. He stepped back leaving me to grab onto the table. ‘What were you talking about with Ernie?’ I said. ‘What did he want?’

‘I told you, it was about the roof tiles.’ He carried the saucepan to the sink, draining off the water; a thick sweaty plume of condensation filled the tiny space. He had his back to me, his shoulders pulled into that hunched look he gets. ‘I think it might be an idea to talk to someone,’ he said. ‘Not me.’

I felt a sudden slip, it sometimes happens on the edge of sleep. ‘I’m not going back to Susan,’ I said.

‘I’m not suggesting Susan,’ he said. His voice was calm, careful.

‘Who?’ I said.

‘Tom I hate to see you this distressed.’

‘What do you mean?’ I said.

‘You’re upset most of the time.’

‘What’re you saying?’

‘I’m not saying anything. I just think it might be an idea to talk it through with someone.’

‘I think Carl should go,’ I said.

‘Think about it,’ he said.

Alex, our guardian angel, had slipped away, leaving us on our own. I heard the door of the caravan click.

‘I can have a word with Eric if you like; we could get an appointment for you at the hospital.’

My heart stood still. I was holding my breath underwater, counting backwards from ten, backwards from twenty, until I bumped against the bottom.

My breath burst out of me as I flew to the surface. Hold on, hold on, Susan was nearby – hold on. ‘When were you going to tell me?’ I said.

‘What’re you talking about?’

I meant the cat but something midway changed. ‘Alex.’ I was struggling to keep myself from screaming.

He turned his back on me, so I wouldn’t see his face. ‘This is ridiculous.’

‘So what if it is.’

He walked away from the stove, pulling on his coat and scarf.

‘Where are you going?’

He pushed the door, letting in a gust of wind. ‘We’ve never spoken about him – ever,’ I said.

‘This is such a cheap trick Tom.’

‘It’s not a trick.’

‘I’m not talking about this now,’ he said.

‘When were you ever going to talk about it?’

‘There’s nothing to talk about.’

‘I think there is. What happened in the church – we haven’t talked about that. Don’t you think we should?’

‘I wish you wouldn’t do this.’ He pushed me away and went out into the rain.

‘Magnus.’ I scrambled after him. It would be so easy chicken out, back off, all my instincts were to walk away from this. ‘Are you still in love with him?’

‘No,’ he said.

‘Are you sure?’ I said, thinking of his thudding heart, sweaty palms.
Some people can cheat the lie detector machine, there are spies trained by
operatives to slip in under the radar.

‘Yes I’m sure.’

‘So what happened in the church that night?’ I said.

‘I don’t want to talk about it, now,’ he said. ‘Not like this.’

‘Did you contact him afterwards?’

‘Yes. But he didn’t get back.’

‘Did you try again?’

‘No’

‘Will you try again?’

‘No Tom. No, I won’t.’

‘Will this ever go away?’

He didn’t answer and I didn’t press him.

Chapter Eighteen

Magnus

It is a relief to escape. I drive to the hospital in a dream, gliding past lorries and cars, overtaking on blind corners. I am normally a careful, conscientious driver. I skid in behind the tall, dark wall of a foreign lorry. A loose fastening flaps; flecks of straw escape and cling to the windscreen. Had I known before we made the move, needlessly tearing Tom away from Kitty, knowing he wasn't well enough to leave? Or had it come to me last night, wanting to put my arms around him, touched by his vulnerability, his openness, whilst a splinter of me watched from the end of the bed? Or is it only since this morning, standing staring into the blue flame of the tiny cooker, afraid to tell him that his cat is dead, and suggesting that he might like to visit the hospital, talk things through with someone?

I turn off onto a minor road lined by low hedges coated in dust from the surrounding fields. The white turrets of the hospital peep up above tall beech trees in the distance. As I pull into my parking spot Eric appears at the front door. 'Magnus,' he shouts and hops back into the warmth.

Tom has found the cat. He's rung the hospital, screamed down the phone and wept before I've had a chance to explain. I wish that Ernie hadn't insisted on showing me the dark bundle on the verge, curled on its side like an autumn leaf, returned to childhood, a scraggy old kitten half-grown, the grass streaked with watery bloodstains.

Eric is waiting at the wire mesh security door. He stands back, letting me go ahead, his hands clamped under his arms; he never touches door handles, window frames, coffee cups, anything where other people's fingers have been. He overtakes me in the corridor, pulling the sleeve of his jumper over his hand to manage the handle to his office. Sucked down into his bony, uncomfortable armchair, I float off round the gloomy, chintzy room, coming to rest on an old-fashioned print of a hunting scene. A huntsman with his back to the viewer in a red jacket is holding the carcass of a bloodied fox. Was now the time to ask Eric about Tom? How would I phrase it – not an assessment exactly, a chat, a visit to talk things through, get another opinion?

He is sitting on his consulting couch staring down at the floor like someone braving themselves to dive into a pool on a chilly day. He looks up, catching me watching him, his gaze cold. 'I have a problem, not dissimilar to yours.' His foot is tapping. 'A patient here has launched a formal complaint against me. Gross negligence, misconduct, cruelty, duplicity. You know the sort of thing. You probably know who I'm talking about. She came to see you last week apparently. She's a member of your two p.m. Tuesday therapy group.'

He is talking about Annie, crumpled broken Annie, clinging to the tall Indian man's arm, whose name escapes me.

The tapping stops. 'I asked her to visit. I said you'd be here. She seems to like you.'

Our gazes meet across the wintry expanse. 'I'm not sure what I can do,' I say.

'Just talk to her.' He stands up.

The door inches open, a nurse peers round. 'Are you ready for us Doctor Nye?'

Annie is thinner than I remember her, held together in a dark pink jumper over a frail skirt. She is wearing sandals, her toenails are painted a dark pink to match her jumper. She stands in the doorway, holding onto the handle. ‘Doctor Hunt – you’re here.’ She glances round at Roberta. ‘You can go now,’ she says.

The nurse looks to Eric. ‘Is that okay with you Doctor Nye?’

‘Don’t ask him,’ Annie says. ‘I’m not here to see him.’ Her gaze flickers in Eric’s direction and shoots back to me. ‘Tell them to go Doctor Hunt – both of them. I’m not talking to anyone one but you.’

‘It’s okay nurse,’ Eric says. ‘We can leave Annie with Doctor Hunt.’ He scuttles round the side of the desk and out of the door with such speed that I realise this has been pre-planned.

Annie settles on the arm of one of the lumpy chairs. ‘I don’t know how you can stand that man,’ she says, crossing her bare feet in the delicate sandals. ‘He’s the type that sits up at night going through his spreadsheets gloating.’ I get up and go over to Eric’s desk.

She swivels round. ‘I suppose you feel safer over there with the desk between us. That’s why doctors have desks, it’s a barricade between them and the patients, especially the mad ones.’

‘Being here doesn’t mean you’re mad,’ I say.

‘I think it does doctor.’

‘Not to me it doesn’t’.

‘That’s why I like you. You say beautiful things. Your problem, doctor, is that you’re powerless.’ She leans towards me. ‘That little creep that I just managed to get out of the room, he’s the one in control. But I don’t have to tell you that.’ She sits contemplating me, in two minds. ‘I don’t think you tried very hard to stop Doctor Lamb giving me ECT,’ she says eventually. ‘I think you

wrote him an email, left a message on his machine and he didn't get back because he was pissed on his whisky and you forgot about me.' 'That's what you think?' I say.

'It is what I think, and I think you were shocked when I turned up to the therapy session with Darsh the way I did. I was a wreck.'

'You're not a wreck Annie.'

'No, not now I'm not, but I'm not strong.' She is about to say something then withdraws. 'I don't care whether I live or die,' she says.

I am used to this.

'You think I don't mean it. But I do doctor. Ask Darsh, he'll tell you. If I was found dead in my room, Eric would be struck off and he wouldn't be able to ruin any more innocent lives.'

'But you didn't kill yourself,' I say.

She shoots me a look of triumph. 'I nearly did. I would've done if Roberta hadn't found me.'

'You tried to kill yourself?' The weariness is overwhelming. 'When?'

'Two days ago.' Her gaze narrows. 'He didn't tell you did he?' He knew you wouldn't talk to me, once you knew what hot water he was in. He's tricked you.'

I am pressed down into Eric's chair, shrunken like him.

'You don't know what to say do you doctor?' she is smiling kindly. 'We could both file a complaint against him, get him disbarred.' She brings her feet up onto the seat of the chair and sits crouched on the arm, pixie-like. 'Did he tell you that I already have ten signatures, and that by the end of today I'll probably have twenty? Darsh is helping me. Everyone hates him.' 'How can I help you?' I say.

Her face falls. 'I don't know,' she says. 'Do you think I'm doing the right thing? I trust you doctor. Tell me what I should do.' She is watching me closely. What was I really thinking?

'You don't have to decide straight away,' I say.

'Perhaps you're right. What's the rush?' Her eyes haven't left me. 'And if people come to me wanting to sign the petition, I don't suppose I have to turn them away. After all, it's their decision.'

I stand up, I need to walk about, stretch.

'You can go now Doctor Hunt. I'm not going to do anything stupid.' She slides off the chair. 'You've got cramp, what you have to do is rise slowly onto your toes and down again.' She demonstrates, wobbling in her flimsy sandals. 'You have to do it at least ten times and the feeling will go.' She stands back and watches me. 'Now walk around, up and down,' she commands.

I hobble across the creaky floor a few times; the cramp isn't easing.

'What you need to do is go for a walk,' she says. 'I'll come with you.' She dives behind the desk and tugs at a narrow door. 'The exercise will do you good.'

A mist lies low over the wet ground, pushing up against the sides of the building, the glow of electric lights pinpricking through.

'It's beautiful when it's like this,' she says.

For a moment I'm not in Eric's hospital, standing on his manicured lawn; the cold wet soaking up through my shoes comes from the sea, and the distant traffic from the motorway is the noise of waves, and this hand pressing on my arm is my younger sister, the one I've left behind, my older sister, the one who fled round the world, my mother. I stop.

'What is it?' she says.

‘I think we ought to go back. I should tell Roberta.’

Her hand tightens on my arm. ‘Can’t I show you something? It won’t take long, just few minutes of your time doctor.’

We are in the middle of the lawn. Ahead of us is the tall, grey shape of a cedar tree.

‘Don’t worry nothing bad is going to happen.’ She lets go of my arm and walks ahead of me into the mist. ‘Doctor Hunt – over here.’ She is waiting for me; beads of moisture coat the tip of her nose, her eyebrows. ‘You have to learn to trust me. I just want you to see this one thing, and then we can go back.’

The mist has lifted slightly. I can see my car, Eric’s car, the entrance with the decorative iron gates. I think I hear someone calling for Annie, but our footsteps are loud against the gravel. Her hand is tight on my arm as we walk across the car park. We reach the verge, the long grass soaking my trousers up to the knees as she pulls me along after her, branches swinging into my face. I am soaked through as if I had been caught in a rainstorm. Ahead of us I can see the gate, and the opening behind it leading into the wood.

‘Look Doctor Hunt, look.’ She points. ‘Doctor Hunt you have to look.’

There is a something behind the gate. It could’ve been a branch, a part of a tree; the mist makes it look human.

Someone is shouting, feet on the gavel, shapes in the mist, Roberta a dark wedge towering above Eric’s skinniness, and someone else, another nurse.

‘Annie – are you there?’ Roberta shouts.

Eric is with her. ‘Magnus have you got Annie?’

‘I only wanted to show you. I haven’t done anything wrong.’ She backs away from me. ‘You don’t understand Doctor Hunt. You don’t understand, if he gets hold of me, he’ll do it again. No one can stop him. He does what he wants.’

He punishes people.’

Eric is calling. ‘Magnus – have you got her?’

Her face is white as a moon sheet, terrified. ‘You can’t stop him,’ she shouts. ‘No one can.’ She comes towards me, her shoulder rubs against mine as she speeds past, a streak in the mist, tripping on the gravel in the flimsy sandals, her dark pink cardigan glowing against the grey, the robust form of the nurse, circling her, melting into her.

‘Magnus,’ the voice is quiet, as if the person is standing beside me.

I turn round. Like a conjurer’s veil drawn back, the mist clears for an instant, the shape behind the gate is detached from the tree trunk and I see a tall, skinny man wearing that distinctive short jacket with the patchwork decoration on the sleeves. It is a moment before I realise what I’m seeing. ‘Adam.’ The mist closes and he slides away, back inside the trunk of the tree.

‘What the hell were you thinking of?’ A male nurse pants up to me, holding his side, his breath rasping. He isn’t fit, an old man, he shouldn’t be doing this job. ‘What the fuck were you thinking?’

I walk away across the car park, fumbling for my keys, the pocket lining clinging to my hand. I can feel myself trembling, the strength seeping out of me. He has escaped, done a runner before the tribunal. Did Eric invite him?

‘Magnus.’ A wiry figure pops out of the mist.

I shove the key into the lock, but it won’t turn.

Eric’s footsteps crunch across the gravel. ‘Magnus, where’re you going?’ His hand is on my arm. ‘I didn’t tell you. Adam committed suicide last night. They found him this morning.’

A tremendous weariness surges through me. I steady myself against the roof of the car.

Eric is crisp and clear, close-up, his glasses dripping with pinpricks of moisture. 'I'm sorry, I should've told you sooner. I was preoccupied.' His eyes blink. 'You're off the hook,' he says.

I am off the hook. There will be accusations that might rumble on for a bit, but without a key witness nothing will stick. A spatter of letters, emails, phone calls, and the case will be shelved, along with Adam and his troublesome, unhappy self. They'll probably cremate him. I drive sedately on the short journey back to the cottage, headlamps bouncing against the mist, travelling at twenty miles per hour along straight stretches of road, slowing to fifteen at the bends. A white sign flags the entrance to the woods; as I turn onto the track I notice specks of snow sticking to the windscreen. I glimpse a dark sky through the canopy of trees, and think of Tom and his barometers and measurers, and wonder if he is feeling it too, the odd, yellowy light. I pull over onto the verge. Wrapped up in the warm, sweaty atmosphere, I kill the headlamps and put on the interior lights for company.

There is something I haven't mentioned: Alex replied to my message two days ago. It is the day before the bank holiday, the hospital is operating on a skeleton staff. I retreat to my study and sit idling at my desk, in no particular hurry to pack up and take advantage of the free afternoon like most of my colleagues. I check my emails a few times and, finding nothing new, not thinking, I go to my Twitter account. A message is waiting for me. *Maybe you can help.* He hasn't signed his name. I don't reply.

Chapter Nineteen

Tom

I had things to do, practical things that needed seeing to, housekeeping things that had to be out of the way before Magnus got back from the hospital. I clambered down off the high bed, taking the sheets and duvet with me, all in a heap on the kitchen floor. I could see the bloody sleeve of my grey sweatshirt sticking out from behind the stove. I went over and shovelled the clothes, stiff with dried blood from last night, into a carrier bag. I put Magnus' long coat on over my pyjamas, and forced my bare feet into a pair of wellington boots. Wrapping a scarf round my neck, over my chin, I went out, feeling into the pockets, my fingers hitting the gritty seams after the door clicked. No key. In the too-big boots I trudged through the wet grass, my heels rubbing, a clumping sucking sound, Gogol's nose in the long overcoat, flapping round my ankles like a dark tent, a madman, getting a little bit madder. See if I cared. I reached the edge of the garden, and squeezed through a gap in the hedge, little claws drawing blood. I wiped my face with the palm of my hand, a pink smear. I looked back at the house, end-of-the-world weather, nothing moving. I stood listening for sounds of them, hidden away in there taking a break. It didn't matter if I was seen. I went down the lane, the too-loose boots slippery on the stony track. The gate was ajar. I slipped through, letting it bump closed behind me. The handle of the carrier bag containing the clothes twisted round and was slicing into my palm. I put the bag down and shoved my hands under my coat, warming them

between my legs, a movement that tilted me forward as if trying to restrain my bladder, the madman doing something very strange.

I walked for a while, the sound enormous inside the wood. The path curved close to the edge of a steep bank leading down to the stream. A smoking mound of animal parts, a hoof, a leg, horns, was smouldering in a nearby field. I sat down on a tree stump and scraped at the ground with the heel of my boot. The soil underneath was black and soft, but I hadn't come with a spade and would have to dig with my hands. I went down the bank, sliding in the leaves, hanging on to branches, the carrier bag looped round my wrist, the plastic cutting into thin skin. The familiar stench of burning flesh caught in the back of my throat. I could see the pyre clearly now, the vast size of it, bizarre decorations of animal parts, black against the dull sky, a wheezy plume of smoke. I reached the bottom of the bank and pushed my way out of the wood. I emptied the bag of clothes onto the muddy ground. How easily would they burn? Would charred remnants of them remain – what if Magnus found them – he rarely walked in the woods, but what if he did? I picked up the bloodiest item, the grey sweatshirt, and flung it towards the pyre. It went in, not far enough to burn. I searched around for a stick and pulled my scarf up over my face to protect me from the heat, and leaned into the fire. I managed to hook the shirt by the hood, dangling like a bloody flag, and dropped it onto the ground beside me. Someone was watching; the feeling was so strong that I didn't want to turn round to look. I shovelled the shirt with the other clothes back inside the carrier bag and tucked it away inside my coat.

'Hello'.

I scrambled back towards the woods; I would've crawled there on my hand and knees.

‘You don’t have to run away. This is stupid, I am not your enemy.’ He was in shirtsleeves; his jacket was on the ground nearby. He was holding a black plastic sack, an industrial type, not very big, a half size. His right hand was wrapped in a grubby bandage, a stringy piece of flesh-coloured tape fluttered like a loose flap of skin. He opened the sack and reached inside with his bandaged hand. He brought it out holding what looked like a sock, a piece of old cloth. He dropped the sack onto the ground, the bandaged hand round the cat’s neck, its tail stiff like a badly made children’s toy. He swung his arm back and tossed him into the pyre. A wisp of smoke coiled up from his tail as the heat got through to him and he started to burn. He folded the sack neatly into four squares with his good hand and pushed it into the back pocket of his jeans. It was only when he bent down to pick up his jacket that I saw the trap, the same one that had awaited us on our first visit to the cottage. He turned round, hooking his jacket over his shoulder. He was smiling. ‘Don’t look so solemn. Why the bad face?’ ‘You didn’t have to do that,’ I said.

‘Ernie, he said to get rid of it. Magnus, your fellow, he knows about this.’

‘I know,’ I said.

‘So if you know, why are you so angry?’ He was smiling and smiling.

I felt nothing, my feet light and lifted from the ground, talking to him from the other side of a dream. ‘You shouldn’t have done that.’

‘Something is not right with you, something is very wrong, perhaps you should see a doctor, but Magnus he’s a doctor, he should know,’ he chuckled.

A piece of ember landed between us like an omen. A thin spiral of smoke shot up from inside a bright flame. The cat’s tail had ignited; the flame flared and gobbled him up in a matter of seconds.

‘My mother died six months ago, she left me eighty thousand pounds.’

I'm the one paying for this,' I said.

The grin faded. 'So?'

'I can get rid of you.'

His eyes were mean. 'I don't think so.'

'We'll see.' I said, from the other side of my dream. As I turned to go I felt his hand on my arm.

'You stay out of this.' His face was ruddy in the low light, large open pores dotting his cheeks and chin. 'You think this is easy for me, for any of us in that miserable tin box, you think we choose this? All we ever think of is home, we hate it here.' He let go of my arm. 'You people are so cold. You have no fun in your souls. You don't know how to drink. You sit sipping your beer like it was poison, everyone is so serious.'

The sarcasm was gone, replaced with something else I couldn't quite read, didn't trust.

'You people hear only what you want to hear, and maybe I don't blame you. I think about this a lot, and I think if I was in your position I would probably be the same. Everyone, they look out for number one, it is natural, how we are built, it is animal thing.' He had his back half-turned to me, talking into the fire.

In my dream state I felt a flare of sympathy for him. He was my enemy and I loathed him, but he was after all holding out an olive branch. 'You don't believe me,' he said.

'Believe what?'

'That this is a mistake, this business with the cat.' 'My cat,' I said.

He shrugged. 'Okay your cat. It was a mistake okay.'

'It was right outside our caravan.'

‘Yes I know, it should’ve been there. I told you, it was a mistake.’

‘That really doesn’t explain anything. If it wasn’t for my cat, it must’ve been meant for someone. The trap was set.’

‘It was a mistake.’

‘You mean it wasn’t meant to be set, is that what you mean?’

He met my eye. ‘You should believe me.’

‘I would appreciate being told the truth.’ I was turning into all the things my sister hated about me. ‘I understand your grievances,’ I said. ‘It can’t be easy for you, I appreciate that.’ There it was that word again, I could hear my sister screaming in frustration. ‘But I think in the circumstances you owe it to me to tell the truth.’

He was digging around in the mud with the toe of his boot. His head shot up, his dark eyes wary. How much could he trust me? ‘What if it wasn’t a mistake?’ he said.

‘You’re saying it was deliberate?’

He went back to prodding the ground.

‘Is that what you’re saying?’

He glanced up. ‘You want to get rid of me. Get us the sack. That’s up to you.’

‘I’ll have to think about it,’ I said.

‘What is it you do?’ ‘What

do you mean?’ ‘

‘You must do something?’ ‘You

mean what job do I have?’ He

nodded.

‘I’m a meteorologist,’ I said. ‘I predict weather patterns.’

‘I know what that is. A good job, you must be clever.’

‘Not especially.’

‘You have a lot of education.’

‘A bit, not as much as I’d like.’ I wanted out of this conversation.

‘How did you meet your man – Magnus?’

He had killed my cat out of homophobic spite. My heart was shrivelled to the size of a walnut. ‘I have to go,’ I said. He turned away. ‘You do what you want.’

‘I will,’ I said.

He swung round. ‘You think I killed your cat because you are a homosexual, you think that is it?’ ‘Yes I do,’ I said.

‘So you are never going to forgive me?’ Our

gazes locked.

‘You say you will think about it, but you have already made up your mind.’

‘I don’t know,’ I said.

‘You lie.’

I turned to go, sliding in the mud, my legs weak. I hadn’t been frightened up till now.

He came after me and grabbed my arm. ‘You do this, you make a big mistake.’

I tugged away from him, and in the struggle Magnus’ too big coat slid off me like a shroud. The bag of bloody clothes lay scattered between us in the mud.

‘What have you done?’ he said.

‘I haven’t done anything.’

‘Then why hide them. If you haven’t done anything wrong, then why you snake around like this and bring them down here to burn?’

‘I was clearing up after you.’

He stepped back, laughing to himself. ‘I think you killed the cat, I think you set the trap, I think you did these things to get rid of us, because you are a spiteful racist. That is what I think. You bring the clothes down here to get rid of the evidence. You find me and try to shift the blame.’

A sort of ticking noise like a dripping, which I sometimes get inside my head when I’m out walking, started up, even though I was standing perfectly still. I am not normally nimble or the slightest bit quick; if anything my clumsiness verges on dyspraxia. But now I was a fox, a fast-moving, low-to-the-ground thing; quick as a snake, pumped full of instinct, I ducked away from him, twisted past and reached for the trap. Grabbing it with both hands, the cold metal, gritty against my palms, I dragged it along the ground and hauled it up to almost shoulder height and hurled it into the fire. A carcass tumbled out from the unstable arrangement of quietly burning bodies, sending sparks and spitting embers. It lay in the muddy grass emitting an acrid trickle of smoke. I stood very still, mesmerised by what I had just done.

‘You’re mad. You’re insane,’ he screamed. He pushed me out of the way to get to the fire. He was holding a stick and hooked the trap under one of the claws. As he tugged, the pyre started to collapse. I shouted at him to stop, but he had disappeared behind a wall of smoke. I scrambled away across the mud, my heart panting. I reached the top of the bank in the hope of getting a better view. But the smoke was too thick, until for an instant, like a curtain being drawn back from a window onto a garden scene, I saw him moving on the edge of the pyre. Shivering like I had climbed out of a freezing bath, I reached the gate, aware of

figures running towards me from the direction of the house. Carl's two friends hurtled down the lane, shoving me out of the way, and ran into the smoke. The smell of burning was strong. I propped my trembling self against the gate listening to their voices, the sound of them trampling through the wood.

* * *

I had to get back to the caravan and lie down. I was still clutching the carrier bag full of bloody clothes. I felt around inside the pocket of Magnus' coat for the key and realised that I'd locked myself out. The day was darkening; a thread of gold ran along the top of the Downs like a skimpy Christmas decoration. I knelt down in the wet and tucked the bag of clothes underneath the caravan. By the time I stood up the rain had come, pouring into my eyes, soaking through the overcoat. I ran up the garden and round the side of the house into the porch. Water gushed from the eaves and thundered onto the wooden roof. A streak of lightning illuminated the hillside, the thunder when it came was a shock; I jumped back against the door and tumbled into the hall.

I hadn't been inside the house since the work had begun. The roof tiles were gone, and the rafters were covered in tarpaulin. The light dimmed to nearly nothing as the door slammed shut behind me. I tried tugging at the handle but it was wedged fast. I felt my way up the staircase and sat down in the window seat where I had a view through the garden to the caravans parked down at the far end by the stream. It was quiet inside the house, the distant hum from the traffic, the odd animal sound, car horns, voices far off. I pulled my hat down over my ears, and wrapped my scarf around my neck; my broken sleep from the night before was taking its toll. I closed my eyes and slid into a half-waking dream.

The sound of an ambulance whined in the distance; a blue light flashed through the trees. A young woman jumped out of the front, caught in the glare of the headlamps. She was on the phone receiving instructions. Two men appeared carrying a stretcher, and went through the gate with the woman into the woods, sucked into the darkness. A torch flared, illuminating the perimeter fence and the fields beyond. The young woman returned, followed by the two men. Carl's friends were with them, dark shapes, casting long shadows. I pressed my face against the windowpane. The figure on the stretcher was illuminated momentarily, his face lolled to one side, grey in the glare of the torchlight. I studied the aspect of the stretcher-bearers for clues – were they frantic to get to the hospital, or calm, routine, relaxed, because they were sure this man was going to live? The stretcher went into the back of the ambulance along with Carl's two friends and one of the paramedics. The woman climbed into the front seat beside the driver, and they drove away, the blue light receding through the trees.

I woke with an uncomfortable cramp in my leg. A pale light bobbed against the ceiling. I heard footsteps. The beam of a torch swept up into the stairwell and missed me as I pressed myself back out of its reach. His face was strange, so alien, for a moment I wasn't sure it was him. I went down towards him, groping my way along the rough wall.

The torch swung away. 'What're you doing here?' he said.

'Magnus – I'm so glad it's you. I got shut in.'

He retreated. 'But the door was open. Where's Carl and the other guys?'

My heart jumped. 'I don't know.'

'Has something happened?'

The floor was wavering in the dark. The vertigo was back.

‘If something happened, you have to tell me.’

There was no holding it back, no slowing it down, turning it around. It had started.

Chapter Twenty

Magnus

I pull off the verge, wheels sucked down in the wet. Still full of thoughts of Alex, I come out of the woods into the clearing. The light is strange, the sky a charcoal pinkish colour, specks of snow pepper the air, not enough to turn on the wipers. I shift gear to ascend the hill and the house comes into view, the rafters blackened by the rain, only partially covered in tarpaulin. Through a gap in the high hedge surrounding the garden, I glimpse the caravans hunched against the edge of the wood, the windows dark. Where is Tom – where are Carl and the rest of them? A whisper of a thought as I climb out into a sleety wind, pinpricks stinging my face. The headlamps pick out deep indents of tyre tracks on the verge. Trying to read the signs, my heart slows like I am swimming underwater. I go back to the car and get my phone. I try Tom's number but can't find a signal. There is a light in an upstairs window of the house, there for a moment and gone again. As I approach I see that the front door is ajar. I go down the steps into a dark wall of shadow. The light I'd seen from the lane must have been the moon reflecting off the windowpanes. Using the torch on my phone, I pick my way through the debris. There is a dark mound slumped into the bend in the stairs; it is a moment before I realise it is Tom. He looks as if he is sleeping. 'Tom.'

He scrambles up, pressing his back against the wall like I am pointing a gun at him. 'Magnus.'

I switch off the torch. We stare blindly through the dark at one another. 'What're you doing here?'

‘I got shut in.’

‘But the door was open.’

He comes down the stairs like a very old person, step by step, clinging to the wall.

‘Where’s everyone? Where’s Carl and the other guys? They’re not in their caravan?’

We are two dark shapes. The sound of our breathing fills the space.

‘Tom?’

‘What?’

‘Where are the other guys?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Has something happened? If something has happened, you have to tell me.’

‘Like you told me about the cat.’ He is barely moving. It is as if I am talking to myself. ‘Look I’m sorry. Have you spoken to Ernie?’

The faint outline of him wavers in the darkness.

‘Tom did you speak to Ernie?’

‘No’

‘You weren’t supposed to find out like this.’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘But it does matter. You were attached to him.’ Darkness surrounds him like a halo. I go towards him. ‘Tom, I’m really sorry.’

He moves away. ‘Don’t worry about it.’

‘You’re mad at me’

Silence.

‘Are you mad at me?’

‘No,’ he says eventually.

‘Why not, you should be, you have every right to be.’ ‘Please,’
he says.

‘Tom, I’m sorry.’

He breathes out slowly like he has been holding his breath. ‘Do you mind if we don’t talk about this now?’

I step back, stumbling on something. ‘I’m going to the caravan. We can talk there. Are you coming with me?’

‘I’ll stay here for a bit,’ he says.

I switch on the torch and angle it up to the rafters, snow whirls into the beam. ‘We ought to go,’ I say. ‘You don’t want to be caught in this.’

‘You go ahead,’ he says, ‘I won’t be long.’

I pick my way back down the corridor into the hall, snow is pouring in through the open door. I call back to him, but he doesn’t answer.

Out in the lane, the snow is building, the storm thundering, thumping through the trees. I think about Tom, the quietness of him back there in the house, sucked into shadow, still and watchful. He is never going to forgive me. It is over. What I’ve wanted ever since that first communication with Alex. The door is open and I am free. I stop in the middle of the garden and look up into the dark sky, Orion, crisp and clear, three bright specks; I turn my back and locate the Plough, the pole star. I am frightened, and I am not entirely sure why.

I hear the sound of something crack like a muffled gunshot; I look round and see a shape moving by the builders’ caravan, the blue-grey light of a phone glimmers, and a face hangs in the dark like a mask. It is Peter, the older man. He is standing on the step of his caravan, and is holding a bag in each hand, and another over his shoulder. He has his back turned. I am not sure he has seen me.

It is a relief to find him here. ‘Peter,’ I call out to him through the wind. ‘Where is everyone?’”

He turns round. ‘Keep away from me.’

‘What’s happened?’ I angle the torch away from him so that he is a dark silhouette

‘Keep away from me madman,’ he shouts.

A watery fear courses through me. ‘Has something happened?’

‘My friend is in the hospital, all burned.’ He walks towards me slowly.

I back off, frightened he is going to hit me. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Ask him, that madman up there, ask him.’

I wish I could see his face. ‘I don’t know anything about this, I’ve just got back from work,’ I whisper. His furious bodiless voice scares me.

‘Keep away from me madman. Both of you are crazy.’ He makes the sign with his finger, pointing to the side of his head. ‘The crazy doctor and his crazy man, they should lock up the pair of you in that place you work.’ He hurtles towards me. His hand thumps into my chest.

I fall into the cold grass and lie staring up through the snow in the trees. There must be pain but I can’t feel it. It is very quiet, muffled. I am aware of the faint drone of traffic from the main road. I hear the sound of running feet. I sit up thinking Peter is coming back for me and see an enormous dog. A shaft of moonlight has broken through the cloud cover so that I can see the dog clearly. It is peculiar-looking, with its high-pointed ears, long thin head, and short black fur like a tight-fitting pullover. It picks its way through the snow with dainty careful steps, craning its long neck and sniffing. It trots off in the direction of our caravan where it starts to scratch underneath, wriggling forward, the front of its head disappearing from view. It reemerges holding the pale sleeve of a sweatshirt.

It burrows back under and brings out a pair of trousers. It continues digging and finds a shoe. It carries the shoe over and drops it beside me. I recognise the pale canvas, the green rim round the top of the sole, the distinctive orange laces. I kneel up and hold the shoe towards the light; under the earth stains it is the rusty colour of dried blood, old blood. The dog trots off and fetches the sweatshirt and the trousers and drops them down beside the shoe. It sits watching me with only kindness, only understanding in its eyes. The clothes are scorched and blackened like someone has tried to set them alight.

My phone is ringing in my pocket. It is Eric. ‘Magnus, can we talk? I feel bad about earlier.’ His voice is a tiny squawk against the wind roaring in the trees. I see him in his office, leaning back, a whisky on the desk, staring out as the storm moves in, comfortable. Eric is always comfortable.

‘Not now Eric,’ I shout.

‘Why’re you shouting?’

‘I’m outside.’

‘Outside – where?’

What if – what if I’ve got this all wrong? ‘It’s Tom,’ I bellow.

‘What’s happened?’ Eric behind his desk with his whisky, a Mozart adagio playing in the background, spreadsheets up on his computer, the grey glow against his face, ever the survivor, there is some comfort in that. ‘Magnus – what’s wrong?’ his voice growls in my ear, so close he could be standing beside me.

‘Can you come tonight? I know it’s short notice.’

He doesn’t sound surprised. ‘I’ll see what I can do. It’ll be late. What’s up?’

'I'd appreciate a second opinion,' I'm not shouting. I don't think he's heard me.

'I'll get back to you. Do you want me to bring Brian?' The line crackles, Eric is saying something but the connection is gone.

I go back across the garden into the lane and stand breathing in the damp night air. The moon is fully out from behind the cloud cover. I stare up at its chill brightness. The sky is thick with snow. I look round for the dog and glimpse the dark sliver of it running down the lane in the direction of the woods. I feel a sudden pang at finding myself alone and search in my pocket for my phone. Brian – why does he want Brian, the hospital social worker there? Are we going to bundle Tom into the back of an ambulance, have him taken away, all wrapped up, rubber-stamped, sectioned – is that the plan? The thought of the pair of them, pulling up outside the cottage in Eric's Jag, climbing out grim-faced. This isn't what I meant. I want to talk to Tom, quietly, calmly. I search the pockets of my trousers, my jacket. My phone is gone. I scramble into the car and switch on the interior light. It has vanished. I must have dropped it somewhere in the garden after the call to Eric. I have to get out. I try pushing the door, but it is forced back by the wind. It opens a crack and slams shut on me. I sit shivering in the passenger seat. There is no contacting Eric now. No contacting anyone.

Chapter Twenty-One

Tom

In my dream Carl was on a stretcher, half-dead but still alive. For all I knew he could've walked back out of the woods unscathed. I should've told Magnus the whole story. There was nothing left for either of us now. That first night when Magnus turned up on my doorstep, I knew he'd grow tired of me and leave. I'd always known this moment would come, I didn't know when or how, but I knew its inevitability. There was nothing left for either of us now. Propelled down the lane by the force of the gale, I reached out to steady myself against the wall and fell. On all fours, I felt something hard and smooth against my palm. In a patchy flicker of moonlight I saw Magnus' phone and shovelled it into my pocket. I edged my way round the side of the house onto the terrace and clambered down into the garden, the rough bricks biting into my palms. Sheltered below the terrace, there was a lull. I started to run, the wind picked up, I fell again and crawled the last few yards to the caravan. It was in darkness. Magnus wasn't there. I didn't have a key and would have to force the door. I reached for the handle but the freezing metal repelled me. Remembering the bag of bloody clothes, I lay down in the snow to reach under the caravan, and felt something spongy against my leg. I pulled my sweatshirt out of the snow and wrapped it round both hands, and tugged at the door handle with one foot against the side of the caravan. There was a tearing sound, the lock snapped, I hauled myself over the step into the kitchen, pulling the door shut with swaddled hands.

Fumbling in the dark, I tried the light switch. The electricity was out. I groped about for a change of clothes and found a dry jumper and the bottoms of Magnus' pyjamas. There was a vibration inside my pocket. I remembered Magnus' phone and fished it out, a message appeared on the screen. *How bad is he? I'll bring Brian. Will be there tomorrow morning, weather permitting. Can you hang on till then?* I walked over to the sink fighting a fluttery panic. My sweatshirt had been lying out in the snow. In a swift, frightening swoop of vertigo I realised that Magnus had found the bag of clothes. Fragments from that morning seeped back: Carl's hand, the dirty, hastily applied bandage held together with the flesh-coloured tape, the blood on the sleeve of his shirt, his coat, was the same blood that I'd trodden in outside the caravan, our two bloods mingled with that of the cat's, three bloods mixed. If Carl was dead they'd lock me up for the rest of my life.

I went over to the cooker and tried the gas; a small flame hissed. Brian, who was he? I'd never heard Magnus talk of a Brian before. Someone at the hospital, an underling, a nurse, a handyman? My heart dipped. A social worker. They'd need one of those if they were going to section me. Locked out of Magnus' phone, I ran through possible passcodes, his date of birth, the date he arrived in England, the date his mother died, the first four digits of our landline in the Blackheath house, a string of meaningless numbers, abstract, scratchy hostile things. I poured some milk into a pan and found the hot chocolate, bringing it to the boil. Breathing in the smell of cocoa I stared out into the storm, Magnus was gone, Kitty was gone, my mother was gone. There was no one left. I wasn't nearly as frightened as I thought I'd be. Perhaps it was a temporary lull, a reprieve and I'd wake tomorrow terrified.

My hands trembling, I emptied a rucksack and packed my toothbrush, toothpaste, a change of underwear, a couple of shirts, socks. I checked for my phone and my wallet, my passport was zipped up inside the rucksack. I wasn't mad, I had never been mad. Never, throughout the entirety of my childhood and beyond, had I displayed the slightest indication of insanity. I felt ridiculous tears sting behind my lids; my mother would've vouched for me. I ran through a handful of old friends and lost my nerve. There was Gwen, my mother's best friend, but I would disturb and frighten her. Kitty was with Len; I couldn't turn up there. I thought of contacting Susan as a character witness, but she had once told me, as a way of reassurance, that she thought everyone was a little bit mad; madness as far as she was concerned was no big deal. The only person left was my ferociously unhappy, estranged sister Angela.

I checked and double-checked my coat pockets, unzipping the bag; I couldn't afford to be less than vigilant. I tugged the door open. A gust of wind scattered books and papers, a plate crashed to the floor. I was flung back against the side of the caravan; there was no way I was going to make it up the garden to the lane. I clambered back in, defeated. No one would get through in this storm. I was safe for a few more hours. An enormous weariness took over like a powerful drug. I shouldn't sleep, I couldn't sleep. If I allowed myself to sleep I would be found in the morning.

* * *

The cat returned in my dream; he looked sleeker, calmer. I woke groggily, my head resting on the table, sunlight boring into one eye. All four burners on the hob were alight, sending out a swampy heat. I lifted the curtain and cleared a porthole-sized patch in the condensation, the sky was clear and very blue, everywhere a brilliant white, making my head spin. It was ten past eight. I had an

hour at the most. I checked my rucksack along with my wallet, enough cash, all my cards, my passport, and driver's licence. I found an anorak and put on sensible hiking shoes, gloves and a hat. I eased the door open; the snow was thick and very deep. I stepped down into it gingerly and made my way along the edge of the garden, keeping close to the hedge.

By the time I reached the lane I was exhausted, my legs trembling from the exertion. Heading down the track, I set off down the hill towards the main road, slithering on the new snow. I reached the gate leading into the wood and stopped to rest. There was a large mound of snow on the other side of the track. Thinking it was a fallen branch that had come down in the storm, I prodded the thick coat of snow, not expecting to come up against a hard metallic surface. I prodded some more and a small patch of midnight blue showed though. I recognised the colour. It was our car. I burrowed down to reveal part of the bonnet and a large area of windscreen. I leant across the bonnet and peered inside. In the gloom I could make out the AA road atlas on the passenger seat. I slid off the bonnet and stood staring into the woods. It was very quiet with only the odd car on the road below. A tree was dripping, a loud leaky tap; within hours the roads would be passable. I checked my watch; it was already half past eight. I clambered back onto the bonnet, tearing at the snow covering the other half of the windscreen. I pressed my face against the glass, there was a lumpy shape in the driver's seat, slumped against the wheel. I went round to the side of the car to find the driver's window. The lower half of Magnus' face was buried in the collar of his coat. I couldn't see any signs of breathing, I pressed down on the bonnet, rocking the car gently. His body wasn't moving. I cleared away a patch of snow on the roof and thumped. I thumped again. Magnus didn't stir. I went back to the driver's window; his head was still buried inside the coat. I went

over to the passenger door and craned round to get a better look. He had moved, and his head was tipped to one side so that his face was tilted towards me. For a crazy elongated, out-of-body moment, I wasn't sure it was him. I was looking into an eye, Magnus' eye, but so foreign. A flash passed between us, my heart jumped – he was alive in there.

I had to get help; help was what was needed, proper help, an ambulance team, paramedics, a large truck with snow wheels, an airlift, a ventilator machine, all the paraphernalia. The vision of Magnus' lifeless body, his breath a tiny trickle, hanging on by a thread, was terrifying. What would I do with him? Breathe life back into him, mouth-to-mouth; I might suffocate him, tilt him the wrong way. I set off down the hill. It was slow going; in ten minutes I had covered less than a couple of hundred yards. Magnus would be dead by the time I reached the main road. No one would blame me; I'd done what all the emergency disaster pamphlets advise you to do. I stood shivering, staring down at the dark hole left by my footprints, only I knew different. I was leaving him to die.

I promised myself that I was going back in a spirit of calmness. But the promise didn't last longer than a few steps. I hadn't helped him. I had left him to die. He had seen me walk away. If he survived he would never forgive me, he would hate me forever, loathe my guts. I could stand that. I could be sectioned, signed off by the pair of them, aided and abetted by Eric's Brian person. I could be locked up and the key thrown away, I didn't care as long as he lived. I scrambled back up the hill, trying to keep to my original footprints, but they were too deep, and I kept stumbling and falling. At the bend in the lane I glimpsed the gate into the wood; the car was parked a few yards up. I was nearly there, so nearly there. If he was dead I wanted to be dead too.

I reached the car crawling on my hands and knees. I sat down in the snow, and took hold of the handle to the passenger door, placed my feet against the front tyre for leverage and pulled. There was a creaking like ice breaking. I stopped to rest, and then pulled again. The crack was louder, a splitting, tearing, stickiness. The door seemed to bend and then bounced back, throwing me against the ground. I crawled over and peered into the car. He wasn't there. I pulled myself up and saw another set of footprints besides my own meandering towards the wood. Blinded by the glare from the sun, I waited for my sight to return and followed the footsteps. They were regularly spaced, with no sign of injury. When I'd last seen him, Magnus had been close to death. If by a small miracle he had managed to crawl out of the car, he couldn't have walked this far. The footsteps stopped at the gate. They didn't continue into the wood or up the lane in either direction; it was as if he had reached this point and had vaporised into the blueness of the morning.

There was a noise of something crashing through the undergrowth. A dog, its head massive, enormous ears like turrets, came lolloping across the wood. The creature was huge, the size of a small pony, moving with graceful ease, kicking up a spray of snow as it bounced through the bracken. It stopped a few feet away, separated from me by the gate, heat rising off its back. Its head flicked round as if someone had called it, and it bounded off across the wood. At the brow of the hill it looked back at me, waiting. I pushed the gate open, treading easily on the crunchy bracken. I might've been walking down a paved path with none of the difficulties I had experienced earlier in the lane. I knew where I was going. Annie had forewarned me. I'd been here before but not recognised it; this time I knew, this time I was wide awake, and travelling in a

spirit of knowledge. I knew exactly where this was leading, and I was glad, relieved it was over.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Magnus

It is pitch black outside and bitterly cold inside the car, like sitting in a fridge. I lean back against the seat, shivering in my thin jacket. I cannot forgive Tom, he has deceived his way into my life, making a nest for himself, furnishing it with his cranky family, Kitty, the ridiculous dog from the rescue home. But he has only ever presented a part of himself. If I'd listened more carefully to his skidding over the constant distress of the dreary childhood, and taken the time to peer between the cracks, I might've seen it coming. But it is too late. And now I am hitched up to my worst fears, and my ungenerous heart cannot forgive him.

The snow is building against the windscreen. Soon I will be sealed in, blind like a mole in my icy prison. I turn on the engine. The petrol gauge is hovering on empty. The wind booms against the sides of the car, pummelling the bonnet. I think of Scott trapped inside his flimsy shelter, frozen into a mountain crevice, unable to feel his limbs. When the engine gives out, how quickly will the car freeze – should I try and escape to the house while I still have the strength? I am drowsy from the radiator heat. I feel my eyelids drooping. Sleep is dangerous. I turn on the radio, there are storms across the whole of the UK, cars trapped, roads blocked, snowdrifts, the odd fatality. I am not going to be one of them, the newsreader reassures me, not when there are rescue helicopters, snowploughs, the apparatuses of a sophisticated working infrastructure. The calming voice moves on, something about Alex Cornwall the opera singer. The radio starts to hiss. The engine cuts out. The voice stops and starts again, murmuring in my ear,

telling me that Alex's car skidded at a bend in the road, that he lost control at the wheel, and hasn't survived the ambulance journey to the local hospital.

Newsreaders don't usually go into so much detail, mentioning short distances from houses, fatal bends in the road, cars skidding, the journey to the hospital. Besides news doesn't travel that fast. The car is muggy; condensation is starting to creep up against the windscreen. I close my eyes and travel with Alex in the passenger seat, there beside him as he takes the bend, slowing into a nasty skid. The car spins and comes to a stop in the middle of a dark country lane, pointing towards home. He starts the engine and continues in the direction the car has spun into, driving back to the place where he has come from. He is alive, he breathes. He isn't going to die.

I wake to a thump and feel the car dip. A bright light like an optician's torch shines through a porthole scratched into the snow. I blink into strong sunlight. Tom is staring in at me through the windscreen. He looks frightened, and I know that he's found my phone and picked up the message from Eric. Help me, my gaze breathes into his. Help me. Help me. But he looks away and slides back across the windscreen. I hear his squeaky footsteps growing fainter and fainter. It is snowing again; the opening is starting to fill. It won't be long now before I am unable to see out. No one will know he has been here, his tracks will be covered, and I will be found frozen at the steering wheel, a closed case, another fatality brought about by bad weather conditions. I hear the thud of a helicopter, a cold wind gusts through the car. I can see the helicopter through the trees, its propellers glinting against the sun. The passenger door is open, hanging on its hinges. I tug myself across the seat and crawl out. Like a switch being thrown, the sun is gone and swallowed up in a snow burst. I can scarcely see my

feet; ahead of me there is nothing but snow. My hands are numb, frozen stumps. I attempt to crawl back in the direction of the car. I am going to die, I am going to die, I am going to die. I cannot get the defeatist mantra out of my head. I kneel up and wait.

* * *

As if a wand has been waved over this part of the land, the snow stops, the light shifts and the grey seeps away like a scene change in a play, and everything is bright, sparkling against a brilliant sky. I feel something nudge me. The large black dog is back. It leaps up and barks at the helicopter as it circles back across the valley. The dog pads over and nudges me in the direction of the car, but I am resistant, and in a gentle tug of war, the more it prods the more I resist, sensing that it is trying to keep me away from something. And then I see him.

Alex is standing beside the gate, concealed in shadow. He is wearing a short brown jacket and pale jeans, not his normal clothes. His hand is bandaged and he has a woollen hat pulled down over his eyes so that I cannot see his face. In the shadow he is bigger, bulkier; I'm not sure I like the look of him. I sense that he is angry with me, disappointed. He turns away impatient and heads into the woods. I am surprised by my light, swift speed as I go after him. The dog bounds out across my path, and leaps up against the gate, its huge paws resting on the top bar.

Inside the shadow of the wood it is cold and sunless. I see the faint indent of footprints in the snow belonging to two or more people, and hear voices further off. The dog hears them too. I am chilled and hot at the same time, feverish in the freezing shadow. Alex reappears at the bottom of the hill. He doesn't look pleased to see me and is shouting, but I cannot understand what he

is saying. Maybe he is telling me to keep away, to go back. I wish I understood. The dog bounces down the slope after me, and stops a few feet away. I know what it is thinking – I don't have to do this. But what life have I got without Tom, without Kitty, with my mother and my sisters gone. Something small, dark, smooth as a beach stone, cleaned by the tide, comes slicing towards me and hits me on the shoulder. I start to run. Another of these missiles hits me in the back. I do not stop, I must keep going. I cannot let Alex down. I cannot bear for him to be disappointed in me. The dog is beside me, its body shielding me from the stones, it yelps and leaps away as something hits it. Another and another of these things slices into me, but I do not mind, it is not as if I feel anything. I tumble head first into the snow, my face pressed into the freezing cold. I roll over onto my back. Blood trickles into my eyes. The world is fringed with pink. A grey pale pink sky, a storm is on its way. I will be snowed over, probably not discovered for days, weeks.

A man is shouting in a language I don't recognise. A face, red, bruised by the cold, hat pulled down over his eyes, wavers above me, distorted against the trees. He wipes his hand across his mouth and spits. I feel the warmth of it on my face, just below my left eye. His face is gone, he says something in his language, and the heel of his boot with the intricate spider pattern appears in its place, coming for me now. I do not know if it will wipe out my sight, there is more blood, I think it is from my nose, there is something foreign inside my mouth – it might be a tooth.

I am comfortable in the bed of snow, the bracken providing a firm mattress, the sky is very grey, and the wood around me growing dark. I am sublimely, supremely, deliciously, comfortable. I think that I have never been so comfortable in all my life, the bliss of being an infant all over again. The dog is

nearby, I hear him prowling around in the bracken. I feel a spray of snow as he sets off, crashing back up the hill. I cannot feel my fingers, my hands, my feet or any part of me; soon I will not be able to hear anything. It is very quiet in this part of the wood. My vision is restricted to the small patch of pale sky between the tops of the trees. I hear footsteps crunching through bracken, quick, light. Alex's face, pinched from the cold, looks down at me. I cannot tell what he is thinking. He is wearing a brown jacket with a dark pullover underneath, and pale jeans. I have seen these clothes before, but am sure they don't belong to him. He looks different, his face is not the same. I think it might belong to Carl. I am not sure. It doesn't really matter. I feel the weight of him, his head against my chest, I want to tell him to get up, that to lie down in the snow is not a good idea, but I am not sure he would be able to hear me. 'Are we both dead?' I want to ask him. I would like him to fill me in about the car accident, the bend in the road that took him by surprise. Did he survive the ride in the ambulance to the hospital, or is this is just a piece of him that has splintered off to keep me company, so that I won't have to go alone?

Tom looks wild, his hair stringy from the snow, a mad adventurer. I sense the dog is with him although I cannot see him, and realise that he has brought Tom to me. Tom is speaking, but I can't hear a thing, I am trapped in a silent movie. He kneels down in the snow beside me, and puts his head against my chest where Alex's head has been. The dog is on the other side; I can feel it settling beside me. I am wrapped up between them, Tom and the dog. It is a relief to know that I will not die alone. I stare up at the grey patch just visible between the tops of the trees; it is snowing, great flaky pieces landing on my face, my hands. But I cannot feel a thing. The wood is silent, the sound stripped away. I

keep my gaze fixed on the gap of sky, blue now, brilliant against the snow.
Darkness is moving in until there is a tiny porthole that I am looking out of,
clinging on – time to let go. The darkness burns on the edges. I am ready. I am
ready now I tell myself. The darkness flickers. I can wait, I am happy to wait.
What's the rush?

Chapter Twenty-Three

Tom

As I went through the gate into the wood I noticed the faint indent of footprints. A few yards in front of me I saw a rag, red-coloured, tied to a bush like a marker, frozen by the snow. There was another one further down the hill, and another in the distance. I walked in the direction of the nearest piece of rag, my footsteps amplified in the quiet. I could hear the dog scurrying the other side of the hill, its light panting, its feet in the bracken, and then it was quiet and everything was still, with only the patter of trees dripping. By the end of the day much of the snow would have melted and the lane would be passable. I heard a rumbling; the low thud growing louder, the helicopter was back again, the tops of the trees caught in a sudden wind. Its dark belly came towards me, and then it changed its mind and rode back up, the noise growing fainter and fainter as it disappeared across the valley.

I reached the first marker and unpinned it from the bush, partially frozen; it was soft in my hands. I recognised the material from Magnus' coat. It left a stain on my hand; I brought it to my mouth and tasted blood. I scrambled through the bracken following the bloody markers, and found Magnus at the bottom of the hill, lying on his back with his arms out at his sides like he was drinking in the sun. The dog was sitting beside him. It got up as I approached and pressed its large self against me as I knelt down beside Magnus. He was all smashed up, his coat shattered, the paleness of his arms and legs showing through the torn bits of cloth. I brushed the snow away from his face. He had a gash above one eye, his

other eye was bloody and caked. He was pale as a ghost, his skin bleached. I removed my coat and tried to slide it under him meaning to wrap it round him, but he was stiff and unresponsive and the coat only partially covered him. I removed my hat and pushed it down over his head. I lay down beside him, the dog settled the other side, its large black self pressed against him. I might've felt the rise and fall of his breath, but I couldn't be sure. I lay with my head against his chest, no longer listening for his breathing, too numb to feel the cold; if I was slowly freezing to death I couldn't feel it. I wondered if I had already passed through Annie's portal; I wished I could tell her that there's nothing to be afraid of. No need to rush, I wanted to tell her. I could feel the snow in my hair and on my face. In half an hour or so we would be covered, and in another half an hour, we would be an indistinct mound, no longer recognisable as two humans and a dog.

The dog sat up, shaking the snow off his back and out of his eyes. I was far too comfortable lying there, the last thing I wanted to do was move. I heard him circling round, jumping up and down, snapping at the snow before bounding away up the hill, crashing through the bracken, out of the wood into the nearby field, a great black flying thing, racing across the expanse of white. And then I heard it, an awful sound, a terrible outpouring of grief whooping up into the grey sky. It went on and on, growing in volume, sweeping down over the hillside, across the valley, in through the cracks in windows, down chimneys, up under the eaves – impossible to block out. After the horror, I was relieved, grateful that the dog was giving vent for me. Magnus was gone. I remembered his eyes not quite closed, flickering, unbearable to think he died not knowing I was there with him. I lay with my head against his chest, serenaded by the crying dog. I wouldn't be very far behind; not long now.

There was such a noise, such a hullabaloo, such a din; a terrible cold wind as I was bundled onto a stretcher, strapped in tight, men's voices, bright scorching lights and that noise, the roaring and the wind, men shouting. I was swinging, swaying, the wind and the noise swallowing up the sounds of my sobbing. He had gone on without me. I was howling, great ugly dog howls, screaming into the whirring blades.

Kitty was whispering my name. I wasn't going to open my eyes, give her that satisfaction – she could wait, give me time to slip away. She wouldn't give up. She leant in close, her brown eyes enormous. 'Tom,' she whispered. 'Tom.'

I heard another voice and recognised my sister Angela. I could cope with one, but not the pair of them.

'Kitty come away, let him rest,' my sister said

But Kitty is pigheaded. I felt her breath on my face. 'Tom,' she whispered. 'What the fuck were you doing out there?'

I wanted to tell her to fuck off herself, but my throat was dry as sandpaper. 'Fuck her,' I thought. 'Fuck the pair of them.' I was not happy to be alive.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Angela

They were found, the pair of them, under a mound of snow in the middle of a wood. My stupid brother was lying with his arms clasped around a corpse. Magnus apparently had been dead for a good five hours. It was the dog that alerted them, it'd been howling in a field nearby, it spotted the police helicopter and ran off into the woods. The pilot followed and the heat sensors picked up Tom's body warmth.

I got a call in the early morning from Len. He sounded freaked, properly freaked. I couldn't understand a word he was saying. I'd just got back from Madrid that night and was kipping on a friend's floor in Bow. The noise of the traffic on the flyover was deafening. Len was talking really quietly, whispering down the phone. I had to keep telling him to speak up; that's when he yelled at me that Magnus was dead and that my brother was in intensive care in this country hospital, and that my daughter was bawling her eyes out 'cos she was shit-scared Tom was going die, and he didn't know what the fuck to do, Mrs. Len had just got out of hospital after a hernia operation, they hadn't signed up for this.

I finished the phone call feeling weird. It wasn't a bad sort of weird, more a calm, resigned sort of weird. My friend lives on the top floor of this tower block that was earmarked for demolition. It was just before dawn on a clear night, and the stars were out. I was in his living room looking out across the big old slumbering city, all those lives out there, life I couldn't begin to imagine.

Puffing away on my last cigarette of the night, contemplating my insignificance, it was comforting to feel so small and worthless; it reduced the guilt factor. I didn't feel like such a shit, a shit about Kit mainly, and a bit about my brother. I dropped the cigarette butt into the cold tea and settled down on my friend's slightly stinky old sofa. I lay looking out across his balcony at the night sky. I tried figuring out the constellations, but I'm pretty useless at that sort of stuff and gave up. What was I going to do if my brother died – what then?

Len was supposed to bring Kit to the funeral but at the last moment he pulled out, something to do with his wife's operation, fair enough. So I took her. Tom was being driven down in an ambulance from the hospital. They'd got him in a wheelchair. The consultant said he'd walk again, that he could expect to lead a normal life eventually. Physically he was going to be okay. I got the impression they were more concerned about the mental side of things. They didn't go into it in too much detail, and I wasn't in the mood to push things.

We weren't that talkative on the drive down. If Kit had been reading a map or something, it might've sparked a bit of conversation, but we had the sat nav, Nancy, to get us most of the way there, and she only gave up on us once we'd passed the sign to Bedham. We were inside this wood packed with these big old trees with enormous spooky grey trunks, all bare branches and bracken. We trundled along this narrow track, stones pinging, wheels crunching, and I thought of Magnus up there, or wherever he was, smirking, smug, watching me wrestling with the jack, trying to change the tyre after a puncture – karma. Kit spotted a sign for the church hidden in the bracken. We backed up and turned onto a potholed bit of track, the exhaust pipe knocking, about to drop off.

The church was heavy grey stone, small, old, just Magnus' sort of thing, quaint and sort of musty-looking. I pulled up behind a huge four-by-four and we clambered out into the muddy lane. Kit wasn't going to wait and scrambled ahead. It had been raining; the air was clean as spring water. I was in no mood to mingle and took my time getting through the graveyard, crusty old headstones scattered around the front of the church, the sort of place that doesn't get much use, or only on the weekends. Perfect for a certain type of funeral – classy.

There were people everywhere, professionals in their funeral clothes, well-dressed Magnus types, making me feel like a bum, until I noticed these other guys, a bit rough-looking, anoraks and short jackets. My first thought was gay clubs and Magnus' other life – good on them. Most of them were smoking, a couple eyed me with interest, shiftily, like they shouldn't be looking, and I realised they were Magnus' patients, some of them old inmates, some let out on day release. There must have been around twenty of them dotted about, smoking heavily, creating little grey clouds in the wintry air.

Someone shouted my name. Gwen, in black with a red scarf and red shoes, came tiptoeing across the grass. 'Angela,' she took my arm. 'Come here.' As she pulled me to her this weird thing happened, weird and very uncomfortable, because I thought I was going to cry. She put both hands on my shoulders like she was a trainer giving a pep talk to an exhausted fighter. 'I'm so glad you came,' she said.

I always liked this Gwen, my mother's best friend. I wanted to remember her from my childhood, she must've been round to the house in Romford. She steered me through the crowd into the cold little church. 'He was a good man,' she whispered like she knew what I was thinking. 'Your mother always liked him,' she added.

The place was packed, benches crammed, mourners spilling out into the aisles. She led me to the front of the church, keeping a firm grip like she was worried I was going to do a runner. It was pretty weird with all these people watching and wondering, who was this person with a special connection to Magnus, being led by the mistress of ceremonies to a place in the family pew?

Tom was in a wheelchair parked at the end of the front bench, close to the pulpit. It was a shock to see him all tucked in under a blanket. A stranger was sitting beside him; I figured it was a nurse. Kitty was sitting next to the nurse, her head bowed. There was a man beside Kitty, small, slight, in his late thirties, sitting very straight, staring ahead, elegant like a ballet dancer. He didn't notice me as I sat down beside him. Gwen was gone in a flash of red. I remembered from somewhere that she didn't have any children, and irrationally I wanted to be adopted by her. At the other end of the pew Tom managed a little half-wave and looked away, not giving me a chance to wave back. Kitty hadn't looked my way once. I was relieved that this straight-backed, elegant ballet dancer person, exuding such a wall of separation around him, was sitting between us. It let me off the hook, I wasn't going to be any use to her at this funeral.

Gwen was back with a small woman with wiry dark hair. She must've been in her early fifties, neat, petite, dressed all in black, with a nicely tailored coat, and boots. She settled beside me and removed her gloves, revealing perfectly manicured nails. She leant forward and signalled to Tom; something flashed between them. I saw she was a comfort to him. A wizened man with wire-framed glasses and a pointed goatee beard, a sort of Sigmund Freud lookalike, was watching me with ill-concealed curiosity. I figured he must be a colleague of Magnus' at one of the hospitals. He wouldn't stop staring. I looked away and met the gaze of a woman sitting the other side of the aisle. She had an

unusual look with flowers wound into her long curly hair, and was wearing a bright purple hat and purple gloves. She was sitting beside an enormously fat Indian man in traditional dress, whispering to him, keeping her gaze glued to me. In the front bench across the aisle I noticed two women, their heads leant together consulting the order of service, tall, rangy, sunburned. One of them glanced up, sensing me watching, and I found myself looking at a female version of Magnus.

The neat woman beside me leaned in and whispered, 'It's a good turnout.'

She smiled, showing very white teeth. 'Are you family?'

'I'm Tom's sister.'

'Of course, I can see the resemblance. I'm a friend of Tom's. I'm so relieved he's on the mend.'

Her accent was Australian. I noticed she didn't express any regret about Magnus. Instinctively I trusted her. 'That's Kit, his niece.' I indicated to my daughter, hunched, head bowed.

'She's a beautiful girl,' the woman said. 'She looks like you.' Her small dark eyes were full of understanding,

I don't know why I was close to tears again, which I suppose was just about okay seeing it was a funeral, and you're allowed to cry at funerals, but it wasn't the sadness getting to me, more the feeling of being such a fraud.

The church went silent, the buzz of conversation dropped, six small men came in through the door struggling under the weight and length of Magnus' coffin, slim, light brown wood covered in flowers. I glanced at my brother; he sat crouched in his wheelchair, eyes glued to the floor. Kit was staring ahead, the picture of misery; she didn't like Magnus any more than I did. The man beside me was looking down at his hands.

The pallbearers were having difficulty getting past the mourners blocking the aisle. A couple of times one of them nearly tripped and the coffin slipped; it was sort of scary. I stood up and sat down and stood up and sat down I don't know how many times as the priest led us through the ceremony. I couldn't take my eyes off the coffin. The thought of Magnus, lying inside there, decaying, was horrible, and I'm sure I wasn't the only one having thoughts – death is shitty. Halfway through one of the creaky hymns I was overcome with a painful longing for nicotine, and felt in my jacket pocket for my cigarettes. The packet crackled, and the elegant man beside me looked round. I caught his eye; we were both gasping for a smoke

One of the sisters walked up to the lectern. She was tall like Magnus, strikingly similar, perhaps a couple of years older, sunburned, easy in her movements, dressed simply in faded jeans and denim jacket, her long hair tied back in an effortless bun. She had a nice voice, low and musical, and spoke with an easy confidence, describing her younger brother, her childhood in a part of Greece I'd never heard of, their mother, picnics, swimming, money troubles, a lot of strain, just like us, only not like us at all in grey, clogged Romford and the daily grind of the Water Board where my mother worked for nearly thirty years. After her, the Sigmund Freud lookalike took the stand, crisp and precise, reeling off a long list of Magnus' many accomplishments, and how his passing was a great loss to Beechridge – blah blah blah – it would've been impressive if he hadn't sounded like such a fake.

A stringy, slightly strung-out ex-patient followed and started by thanking Magnus for saving his life, then got tangled up in this long, complicated story. Another couple of guys followed, saying more or less the same thing. Stuffy old Magnus had been good for these guys, they really rated him, but the weird thing

was the more these speakers took to the stand, the more the Magnus I knew and disliked solidified and a pigheaded stubbornness got a grip on me. Death doesn't bring a softening, like you'd think, a willingness to overlook. I was as hostile towards the dead Magnus, snug in his slim brown coffin, as I was when he was alive. Listening to another of his ex-patients praising him for his compassion and understanding, I glanced over at my brother, bundled under his blanket like an old man, and I loathed Magnus, I hated his fucking guts. The neat kind woman sitting beside me reached over and squeezed my arm, tight, with quite a force, pressing her strength of understanding into me.

After the last speaker left the stand there was a lull like no one knew what to do next. The vicar seemed have zoned out and looked around like he was waiting for someone to take over. The man next to me stood up and excused himself very politely as he climbed past us, stepping round the people in the aisle. He stood at the altar rail with his head bowed, and stayed that way for a while. I glanced at the woman beside me – who was this guy? Up at the altar, he braced himself, threw his head back with a little flick like he didn't have to care about a thing and started to sing.

I'm not an opera fan. The sound was so strange, so unaccustomed, I felt my stomach lurch; it was a such a shock this sound coming out of him, swooping up into the rafters, circling the tiny church, this cry from the heart. Some people had their heads in their hands, others were kneeling, others just sat there with tears streaming down their faces, letting it all hang out. The woman beside me was dabbing her eyes. Tom was curled up in a lot of pain. Kit had her face buried in the collar of her coat. The singer finished his song and stood very still with his head bowed, his hands clasped in front of him, and then walked off quickly down the aisle like he was a visiting alien that had just dropped in. Everyone was

holding a sort of collective breath, and only when the sound of his footsteps were gone, and the church door creaked and slammed behind him, were we able to breathe again.

After the service, outside the church in the rain, people were talking about the singer who'd made his escape by then. I heard the name Alex Cornwall mentioned a few times, not that it meant anything. I had no one to talk to; Kit was with Tom and the woman that was sitting beside me in the church had disappeared. The vicar under a large black umbrella looked lost. The pallbearers had taken the coffin off to a far corner of the graveyard and were squeezed under umbrellas smoking. Mourners stood in huddled clumps, most of them smoking, an anxious bunch. Gwen, a streak of tropical red amongst the sombre blacks and greens, dived under the vicar's umbrella, from where she peeked out and waved a gloved hand.

People started drifting off in the direction of the newly dug grave. I was relieved to be moving, no longer standing around lost. I slipped in behind a group of smoking ex-patients; we trudged along in silence, no one talking much. The vicar and Gwen were waiting with the pallbearers. A man climbed out of the grave and flung a shovel onto the muddy grass. The mourners closed round the grave. Kit was at the front with Tom; I edged back so that I was on the outside of the circle. I figured I could slip away, I had done my bit, Kit would get a lift back to London with the nurse, no one would notice. As I started to walk back towards the church, I saw the slightly weird couple I noticed earlier in the church, the woman with the flowers in her hair and the large Indian man, coming towards me, picking their way through the wet, arm in arm. I was ready to step off the path to let them pass, but as they approached the woman let go of the man's arm and tottered towards me on high heels. 'I noticed you in the church,' she said.

‘Darsh pointed you out – the family likeness – you look like Doctor Hunt’s friend. You must be his sister, and the girl is yours.’ She looked fondly at her friend, ‘He’s very clever with faces, he recognises everyone. He should’ve been a detective.’

There was a slightly off-the-wall atmosphere coming off her, but I don’t mind that sort of thing. Besides it was a relief to be talking to someone, to have made some sort of connection at this funeral.

‘You are just like your brother, you have the same eyes, the same kind atmosphere,’ the woman said.

I don’t know why it got to me; I was suddenly about to burst into tears.

‘You shouldn’t be sad,’ the woman said. ‘You really shouldn’t be sad.’ She glanced at the man. ‘Should she?’

Darsh shook his head, gazing at me with huge brown eyes.

The woman put a gloved hand on my arm. ‘Were you very close to him?’

It was getting stranger and stranger. I couldn’t work out if it was the pair of them or just her that was having this effect.

‘Doctor Hunt,’ she said, bringing me back.

I shook my head.

‘That doesn’t matter.’ She glanced at the man. ‘Does it Darsh?’ She slipped her hand through my arm. ‘You know the last time I talked to him was six weeks ago – no, longer.’

‘More like seven,’ the man said. He had a slight accent.

‘Darsh knows everything, he’s a very useful friend to have.’ She turned to him. ‘That was Alex Cornwall, the famous singer earlier, wasn’t it Darsh? And that song he sang was Orpheus singing about his sadness for Eurydice wasn’t it?’

Darsh nodded.

‘I suppose you knew that?’ she said to me.

I had no idea what she was on about. ‘No I didn’t.’

She rolled down the sleeve of these long purple glove she was wearing, and started to scratch her arm. ‘There are midges round here, even in the middle of February.’ She continued with her scratching working up a large angry welt. She studied it closely then peeled her glove back up. ‘Better not let anyone see that, they’ll say I’m self harming and report me to my mother.’ Her look was wary. ‘Are you a psychiatric nurse?’ I shook my head.

‘Or a doctor?’

I was shaking my head to everything she said

‘I could’ve sworn you were a doctor.’

My voice was back. ‘I trained as one a long time ago. I dropped out of medical school.’ I stared at her; I never talk about that.

‘I apologise if I’m asking too many questions.’ She retreated and stood close to her friend. ‘I don’t mean to make people uneasy, but sometimes I do, don’t I Darsh?’

I wanted to go. ‘It was nice meeting you,’ I said.

She nodded quickly, her face averted.

I wanted to tell her that I wasn’t rejecting her, that I didn’t think she was strange. ‘It was a nice service,’ I said.

She was watching me warily.

I tried a smile.

‘You have a good heart like your brother,’ she said.

It was starting up again, the knotty, uncomfortable twisted thing that had been wedged inside me ever since I got to the church. ‘No, I don’t,’ I whispered.

She let go of her friend's arm and came close, but not close enough to touch me. 'I'm a good judge of character, that's what I told your brother when I met him. I can tell these things.'

'You know Tom?' my voice came out as a pathetic squeak.

'We met one afternoon about six months ago.' She glanced nervously at Darsh waiting for his confirmation. 'I don't think it matters if you didn't get on with someone when they were alive. If there's stuff you want to say to them after they're gone, I know a way.' Her brown gaze was fixed on me. 'I told your brother how.'

Darsh put his arm protectively around her shoulders as if to forestall something. She was looking across the church in the direction of a small gate opening into the woods. Some sort of dog, at first I thought it was a small pony, was running round sniffing the ground. It stopped and seemed to look straight at me. It had these long twitchy, pointy ears like something out of a spooky children's picture book, a witch's dog.

'I can show you if you want,' the woman said in her nice kind voice.

Suddenly I was thinking of my mother; she popped into my head, an unwelcome ghost in her old cream-coloured mac.

The woman took hold of my hand. 'Do you want me to show you?' She glanced at her friend. 'It's easy – isn't it Darsh?'

Someone was shouting my name. They sounded a long way off. My first thought was that they wanted another Angela who deserved to have this person shouting for her.

'Angela – Angela – Mum.' Kit was running across the grass, a long lanky thing, a flash of darkness in her black clothes. She arrived flushed, panting, her long pale hair clinging to her face in the rain, her eyes enormous dark saucers.

‘Tom wants you.’

I turned to the woman. ‘This is my daughter Kitty.’ I said, forgetting for a moment, using her new name. It didn’t feel so strange

She held out a gloved hand. ‘You are so alike,’ she smiled at her. ‘They are good people,’ she said to her friend.

Kit shook her hand reluctantly, making a little face that only I could see.

‘We should go,’ I said, not wanting to risk insulting her. ‘Are you staying for the burial?’

‘We have shopping to do in town, we don’t get out much,’ she said and turned to her friend. ‘C’mon then before they close at Sainsbury’s.’

Kitty hurried ahead of me, the connection lost. As we reached the edge of the mourners, I caught a glimpse of Tom in his wheelchair close to the priest at the graveside. Our gazes met, just for instant; he was smiling at someone behind me. I looked round. The woman with the flowers in her hair and her friend had gone. It was a long way to the village, and I wasn’t too sure there was a Sainsbury’s anywhere nearby. Perhaps they came in a car, perhaps they got a lift, perhaps on the drive back to the house I would see them walking along the side of the road. Perhaps, a lot of things. I looked up at the sky. I know you’re allowed to cry at funerals, and it doesn’t necessarily have to be for the person being buried, but I couldn’t, I couldn’t go over there until I’d fought it down. I began to count slowly under my breath backwards from ten, and by the time I’d reached the end it had started to snow, cold flecks sticking to my face and hair as I made my way back towards Magnus’ grave.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Magnus

Someone had left a packet of cigarettes balanced on one of the headstones, with a box of matches placed on top of the pack, an offering for the dead. My first thought was that it was a trick set to test me. But whoever it was doing the test hadn't done their homework; it's not as if I smoked when I was alive. Maybe round the next corner, tucked under a bench I'd find a crisp cool bottle of white wine, then you'd be talking. I settled my incorporeal self down on a comfortable gravestone – five more minutes to go.

At the far edge of the graveyard something was moving behind the hedge. When the dog poked its head out I was reassured and for the first time a little frightened. What if the creature was there to shuffle off the last of its dog self and hand over to me, my new self transformed inside a tight-fitting dark, furry skin without a human thought inside my head? I stayed put, waiting for the dog to come over, but it didn't seem to have seen me, and disappeared back into the undergrowth. My nerve was holding steady. The minute hand on the church clock had reached half past, the time of my appointment. Should I stand up, or remain seated? It was nearly dark on a gloomy February afternoon. A light breeze rippled through the trees, along the tops of the hedgerow. I wasn't prepared for this. I thought of making a grab for the cigarettes as proof of my unreadiness, but it was too dark, I wouldn't know where to find them.

There was a glow coming from the same patch of hedge where the dog had been. I left the path and went across the grass towards this nearly-nothing glimmer, fearful that if I looked away it would be snuffed out and I wouldn't be able to find it again. The light was growing stronger. I can only describe it as like an old-fashioned celluloid picture projected against the hedge, square-shaped and slightly lopsided. Two figures, small and dark in silhouette, wavered in the centre of the frame, heads bent together, engaged in conversation. Now that I was closer the contours of their faces were filled in. The smaller of the two women was wearing a long pale mac. The other woman was taller, thinner; she seemed younger, her dark hair tied back in a wispy bun. As the darkness seeped out of the image, I saw my mother in her long patchwork dress, the scuffed canvas sandals. The other woman, Tom's mother Sylvia, had her hand on my mother's arm, holding her back, steadying her.

The frame of light was losing definition; the figures receded and shrank away. This was not how it was supposed to be. So calm and sanguine in the graveyard only minutes earlier, waiting for my allotted time, so sure I could handle this, and now so lost with no one to guide me. How to leave it all behind? Tom and my sisters, Kitty and the annoying hairy dog of hers, Angela, Eric and his ridiculous hospital, Arnold, his parrot lady wife, the friend who took me to the opera that time and introduced me to my first sighting of Alex.

So much noise, a roaring in my head, I was knocked to the ground, tossed into the darkness, sucked up through the tangle of trees into the freezing cold inside the clouds. I would've spread my arms like wings as though I was flying but there was nothing left of me, my body disposed of, this weightlessness taking the edge off my misery. I caught a whiff of wood smoke, and through a gap in the trees, glimpsed the cottage, the angle of the roof, the chimneystack

against the skyline. I was falling fast, faster and faster, like I had dropped out of a plane without a parachute. I was terrified of a crash landing, slamming into the roof tiles, smashing the bony bits of the earthly parts of me. Inches from impact, my speed decelerated and I landed on a ridge tile close to the chimneystack.

The wind had dropped. It was a blessed relief to be still at last. Something, a piece of shadow, was wavering along the top of the roof, playing tricks with me: a bird, a rat, a squirrel, walking on four legs, not much of a tail. It approached slowly, its one eye fixed on me, and planted its front feet on the lip of the chimney and peered down into the smoke. It turned to face me, not unkindly, it wasn't there for revenge – 'off you go' it said, but not in human words. It hopped down from the chimney and stood aside, waiting. I wasn't afraid. This wasn't a test, a punishment, just the next step. I stood balanced on the stack and jumped. My new streamlined self slid down easily without a scratch. I landed in the grate, spitting sparks onto the rug. The dog looking up, sniffing the air. Tom was inches from me in his wheelchair. Angela was beside him, crouched over a newspaper. Kitty was typing on a laptop. I peered over her shoulder and saw the start of an essay on the origins of World War I. The dog stood up, shook herself and went over to Tom, laying her head on his lap.

I stayed on for nearly a year, through the spring and the long summer till the end of autumn. During that year I grew more adept at moving around, hovering, and floating from room to room. The last of my bodily self evaporated along with sensations of vertigo, imbalance, heat and cold, pain and any strong emotions. A lot can happen in a year; things change faster than you would think. Kitty moved out of Len's and came to live in the cottage with Tom and Angela.

She took her GCSEs from home and transferred to the local sixth form college in the autumn. Angela got a job working in the village health food shop, and Tom got out of his wheelchair. It took him some time; by April he was walking.

I'm not a natural snoop, but this new existence does have its advantages. Kitty has a little something going with this boy called Jake. Neither Tom nor Angela knows a thing about it, although Imelda and Sheryl have their suspicions. I sometimes peer over Tom's shoulder when he is working in his study. Recently he has been venturing onto online dating websites: he'll inspect a potential profile and almost immediately click off and stay away for days before sneaking back on. Angela is seeing the man who runs the health food store in the village. It is not a secret, although as far as I know she hasn't let him into her bed, and is holding out on him for the sake of her daughter, who is busy messaging this Jake with his wild hair and obsession with skateboards.

I am ready to go now, circling on a thermal from the fire below, waiting for them to turn in for the night. Angela is making her chamomile tea to take upstairs to her room. Kitty is sorting a hot water bottle, and settling Skinny in her basket beside the stove. And Tom is upstairs with the newspaper, ready to turn in for the night. I wait until their lights are out and their windows are dark, and I wait some more, giving each of them another half an hour to fall properly asleep, and then I slip back down the side of the cottage and in through a bedroom window.

I am in Kitty's room, hovering above her sleeping self. I am a little nervous as this is new to me and I am not sure how successfully I can make it work. I twist myself round and round so that I am the merest sliver and enter through her sleeping ear, burrowing down into the dark place of her dreams. I am there to give my blessing, and take my leave. It doesn't take longer than a split

second before I am out and back beside her on the pillow. She turns over in her sleep and grunts. I wonder whether she will report a strange dream that she can't quite fathom in the morning, and over the coming months, will start to feel a little better when she thinks of me. I am in Angela's room now. I take a deep breath and dive into her sleeping ear. It is not as quick as with Kitty, not so easy. I continue on to our old bedroom; Tom is lying on his back snoring softly. I lie down beside him and rest my head against his chest. I want to stay like this all night but I must be gone before dawn. I rouse myself and slither down into his ear where it is rumbling, full of noise, and I have to shout to make myself heard. I tell him to please stop hanging around and contact that nice wine merchant he's been checking out this past week. I slip back out onto the pillow, and take one last look at him; he's sprawled on his back still snoring. Time to go. The sky is lightening, dawn is on its way. I don't want to miss the boat and have to wait around another year; it's not as if I'm leaving forever.

I am in the sitting room now, inside the fireplace, I count down slowly listening to the wind roaring in the chimney, scattering ash. I step forward. I am used to this, an old hand. I am drawn up the flue and out into the night. Such pleasure, such a wonderful feeling. I am getting used to this.