

CREATIVE COMPONENT

Where Green Limbs Grow

“Our land is like a poem, in a patchwork landscape of other poems, written by hundreds of people... And the poem, if you can read it, tells a complex truth. It has both moments of great beauty and of heartbreak. It tells of human triumph and failings, of what is good in people and what is flawed, and what we need, and how in our greed we can destroy precious things.”

James Rebanks, *English Pastoral: An Inheritance*.

“The story tells that the snake said What do you know? What do you remember? What do you see ahead? And she said Nothing, nothing, nothing.”

Philip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*.

Chapter One

June, 1998

We left Gatwick airport and drove across the South Downs. I stared out the window with jet lag-heavy eyes. The journey to Westhill was smooth and blurry. My hand stroked the soft and fleecy hedgerows, the bleats of sheep were conversations, bird flights wove words onto the sky. In through the window came air that tasted like green. Already it was a dream place.

Hours later I woke up in my grandma's house and tried to make it sharp and real. I saw a large, mostly empty room, with pale blue wallpaper. The furniture was antique, dressed in brass handles and mahogany, marked with use. There was a sash window, set on a ledge. The room was clean but dusty too. It smelt like staleness and woodsmoke and lavender.

I sat up in bed. The murmur of a cow came up through the window. Following after were human noises. One farmer was right outside and I heard a voice rolling with the burr of a West Country accent.

The voice said, "Ah, come back here! Bloody heifer!"

The sound reminded me of a photo I'd half seen, which hung on the wall beside me. The young man hang-gliding over the rolling hills, his picture taken by someone in the air beside him, he'd spoken like that. The face was a lot younger than I'd ever known it, like the deep creases had been smoothed away by the wind that drew his black hair back.

There was a knock at the bedroom door.

"Charlotte, tea?" Monica stepped in. "I thought if you hadn't woken up yet the boys outside would have done it."

She was still a good height then and seeming even taller because of her thin build. Everything about her had the impression of being firm and well-defined, from her arm muscles to her opinions. The other resident of the house followed. Mrs Brown was all legs and curls, a cross between an English sheepdog and a poodle. Monica set the tea tray down on the dressing table and Mrs Brown sat against its leg. Grandma motioned to the tray, saw my nod, then began pouring. She conducted the tea with flourishes, making a performance of it.

“Oh sorry, don’t mind that.” She leaned over and plucked something from my teacup with a finger. “Just cow hair. Milk’s fresh from the dairy.”

She nodded as I lifted it up. The tea smelt like Uncle Hugh’s farm ute, like cow.

“Sleep all right?” she asked.

“Uhummm, I don’t want to wake up.”

“Ah, but you can’t let the jet lag win, Pea.”

I nodded, sipped again.

“I’ve invited some friends over for a drink tonight. And I thought we’d go for a walk beforehand. Mrs here would like to go out.”

The dog’s face moved from hers to mine.

I addressed Mrs Brown when I said, “Better hop to it then.”

The village was familiar in a foggy way, like looking at an old picture and recognising half the gathered people. I remembered the flint facades and thatched rooves, the wildflowers that grew along the road. Then even things I did remember had changed in the nearly thirteen years since. The hedgerows were only just above my head, and messier too, not neat private-school hedges but scruffy walls of leafiness, and nettles, and brambles. The garden walls had shrunk to my hip. I ran my hands along their stones. The village was tiny, a cluster of six houses and farm buildings strung along the oval lane. Their windows watched over the road, faces huddled in against the sometimes brutal winds.

We stepped off the road, over a wooden stile and into a field. Ahead of us, Mrs Brown searched out rabbit holes with her snout. I followed my grandma’s winding trail through cowpats. Flies swarmed up from them as we came past. Walking behind Monica, I saw the tan of her legs between the gumboots and sundress. It was across her shoulders too, bronzed and shiny with sunscreen. Her tan made my parents’ argument even weaker. Since when had Monica ever been “delicate”? Since when had she needed anyone’s help? She was sturdy, direct, and nearly always honest. I called out to her.

“So Grammy, what’s on the list for the next four months?”

She always had a list.

She rattled off jobs like weeding the shrubberies and tidying the cellar. Her brow sank low. “They’re things I need young arms for. It’s a bloody nuisance getting old, Charlie. I wouldn’t bother with it.”

“You don’t look so old,” I said.

She laughed. “Hidden it well then.”

So she wasn’t coming clean just yet.

We reached a fence then slipped onto a bridle path that ran along the field’s edge.

The path was bordered by trees that were growing a tunnel around us. Tainted light filtered down through their leaves. It was like strolling through a beer bottle. The colours were too green, trying too hard, nothing like the soft and easy mint of the bush. Monica brushed past some leaves hanging over the path and swore.

“Bollocks. You little bastards. Mind those stinging nettles, Pea.”

The breeze made the branches over us talk. Their limbs groaned like old men complaining; the leaves shuffled like slippers on the rug.

“How many people live here?”

“Thirteen at last count I think.” She paused to check, using her fingers to keep track.

“Yes, fourteen including you. But Jane and Livio— you wouldn’t have met them yet— they moved here, oh a couple of years ago now.” She thought for a moment. “Yes, in ‘96. Anyway, Jane’s pregnant, so we’ll be a village of fifteen any day.”

I gawked. “How many kids?”

“Why? Are you worried we’re all prehistoric like your fuddy duddy nan?”

“You’re not prehistoric. Palaeolithic maybe.”

I laughed at her mock horror.

“No, there’re still some kids. The Fortescue girls, they live here now, both have finished boarding school, the younger only just. And there’s the Wells boys, they’re cousins. They work on the farm. Do you remember Jude or Fred? Probably not, you were such a wee ‘un then. You were so cute, what happened?”

She pinched me lightly on the back of my arm.

“What are the girls’ names?” I asked.

“Tallulah and Lily.”

They sounded nothing like the windswept dune rats back home. It must have shown on my face.

“Now don’t go judging before knowing, Charlie.”

My cheeks grew hot and I turned my head away. Further down the path a new face appeared over the fence. He had a long roman nose, dark hair and watchful eyes. Monica introduced me to George, a large bay gelding.

“He’s big but a sweetheart.”

He’d been expecting a visitor and stretched out towards Monica. She pulled a carrot from her pocket. After some loud mouthfuls, Mon told me to give the horse a hand. I flinched at the rubbery lips and the hairs on them that were stubbly and ticklish on my palm. I wasn’t used to horses, or very interested in them, and now I was beginning to hear the river.

“I think I’ll keep walking.”

Monica ushered me on. “Go, have a look.”

A few metres on the tunnel of trees came to a sudden end and a fence cut across. It was so wrapped in moss and ivy that it looked to have been grown. I leant on it, the thing damp under my elbows. The wet leaves under my feet didn’t crunch, and instead I heard birds calls, ones that were soft and hollow.

Another footpath ran along the side of the next field, and tumbled down the valley until it partnered with the river and they wandered off together. The drop into the valley was slow. The village was a few hundred metres deeper, the church’s steeple the tallest thing. The river came from my right, ran down to curve around the bottom of the village like its moat. Monica wanted me to see it like this so I could make a map. It wasn’t too hard to understand; Westhill hung on the side of a grassy sink, some far off tap running the river.

There was a noise nearby. It might have been another horse, or a cow and I took a sharp breath. When I listened again I heard a human noise; tools hitting wood. To my left was a figure working on the fence a couple of metres away. I peered through the branches to see better. He was reattaching a loose fence rail, and as his arms moved I could see the muscles shift under his skin, like rips beneath the ocean’s surface. He was tall with broad shoulders, and a little gangly, like he hadn’t grown into his shape yet. He heaved the wooden rail into place in a practiced movement. Holding the beam and nail with one hand, he lifted a hammer in the other and began to swing. Something caught the light near his lips, and I saw he was holding a spare nail between them. He was humming to himself too, a slow deep tune that came in gusts. I moved closer, trying to see if I’d recognise his face. I pushed

a twig away and it broke with a clap. I didn't wait to see if he looked, just sprinted back up the path.

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Later, I lay in the bay window and rolled a sprig of lavender from the garden through my fingers. Arguments stacked up, like the dot points of an essay. They ran down an A4 page in my head.

1. I had deferred my enrolment in Melbourne so I had spare time to try and fill.
2. It was a *cultural experience*.
3. Mon might be a capable woman, but would still welcome help in a house much too big for her.
4. So Mum and Dad had exaggerated Mon's frailty, but they might know something I didn't.

Old questions appeared beside them. The counter arguments were in Miss Quinn's boxy handwriting. Why did I need to be Mon's helping-hand? I'd been to England before, why did I need to experience it again? My parents exaggerated what exactly? How old was she?

There were the odd remarks I'd overheard. I caught them when Dad was on the phone with Mon late at night, or he and Mum were up talking in the kitchen. Their words bounced along the hardwood floor of our federation house, like pennies coming right to me. Coded phrases like "for her own sake" and "when the time's right"; vague and infuriating and not even said to my face.

In the days before my flight conversations with them left a bad taste in my mouth, bitter and bracing like the coffee they drank.

"So she's picking me up from the airport then?" I said. "Not too frail to manage that?"

"Course, she can drive 50 minutes and back."

"Will she be able to walk through the terminal or should I go and look for her car?"

"I'm sure she can come and meet you." I kept noticing Dad scratching then neatening his beard.

"Okay, so what should I do to help then if she can drive, and walk, and find her own way?"

“Look,” Mum said. “I know it’s a long way to go and you don’t necessarily want to, but you’re starting to sound unkind Charlie. Wouldn’t you prefer, deep down, to do the right thing rather than the selfish thing?”

“Selfish?” I answered. “This year is the first time, the only time, that I... I studied, and worked a job, and cleaned the dishes, and got good grades, for the past how many years? And now I get to have it stop for a while, to just do things I would like, and you’re on me again, telling me what I should be doing and where I’ll do it. Can’t you just leave me be, just for a moment?”

“You’ve had the summer off, haven’t you?” Dad’s tone made me feel smaller than anything else ever could. “It’s been months since you finished school.”

“So what? So I’m not allowed to want more? I was at the shop from the moment I graduated. I’m still doing useful stuff; I’m saving money for next year. Isn’t that a good thing? And if I want to keep spending time with my friends rather than missing out on everything, isn’t that fair enough?” I felt my cheeks getting hot. “Why is that such a bad thing?”

Mum reached a hand over to mine and I bit back tears.

Dad forged a new course. “This isn’t a punishment. It will be a good thing. It’s like an exchange.”

“You never pushed an exchange before.” I said back, “Why now? Why next month? She’s sixty something not ninety-nine.”

“We’re not saying she’s ninety-nine.” Mum’s patience was a hard and audible thing. “You’re overcomplicating a simple situation, Pea. You’ve got a year off, she’s got a big house, so we think you should go while you can.”

“While I can? Because there’s nothing at all I’m leaving behind. I have a job, friends, Nick. I have an actual life here. You’re treating me like excess baggage, some vagrant child.”

Dad replied. “An ungrateful one it seems. You’re conveniently forgetting that you’re getting a free holiday out of this. Most parents wouldn’t fork out on flights to Europe without even the prospect of a thank you.”

“You’ll be waiting a while on that one.”

Mum spoke last. “Perhaps. But you will thank us.”

I made guesses about some cancer they were hiding or a divorce. Both seemed crazy. Likeliest was an attempt to force space between Nick and me. They were hoping this time the break up would stick better than they had before. Since the last time I'd fought with him I'd been raw and angry, like the skin beneath a nail that's split too far down. But there were other ways Mum and Dad could encourage distance, gentler ones that were more their style than moving me to a different hemisphere. They knew pushing the issue was a good way to make it worse. The incongruities itched at me like a rash.

I began to notice the smell of lavender as its oil seeped into my hands, velvety. The scent sent my memory searching further back, to cloudy memories of Westhill years ago. We played silly games, me and my brother, in the garden outside Grandpa's shed and listened to the noises of his tools, his radio and his swearing. His hard words punctuating the lofty trills of the classical music and the smell of the varnish. He would be working on old furniture, restoring it to re-sell. That or checking the gliding equipment, obsessing over how it was packed and put together. The house was emptier, colder, at the thought that he wasn't in it.

My grandmother came into the room, holding drinks for us. I was still thinking about Grandpa when I looked at her, and sought out the marks of grief still in her face.

"Ah, that's a pretty tippie," she said after a sip of gin.

She sat down on the couch to my right. The light from the window marked out the creases next to her eyes and mouth. Her classic dusky pink lipstick bled into the lines.

"When will the others be here?" I asked.

"Any second I should think."

We sat quietly. The sitting room was square. The bay window covered one wall, the fireplace another and the two others were filled by long, ornate couches. I stared at the view outside the window. It was so much like a painting it might have been a portrait hung over the panes as a trick. In the foreground was the statue that had always stood at the edge of the patio, a scaled down version of the Angel of the North. When I was small it had been more than twice my height and I was incredulous that the real angel was ten times this two-metre version. From where I sat the sloping green of the valley's opposite side fit beneath her rigid wings. There was something shocking about her rusty squareness, and the toned muscles of her body. She was firm and elegant, harsh and feminine. She reminded

me of Monica. I watched the view under her right wing until we heard the feet we were waiting on.

Mon's house was set down from the road, a keyboard of flagstones running to the front door. The feet were nearly on the porch. I hung back in the sitting room as Monica went to meet them. I caught sight of myself in the mirror above the fire. The brass frame echoed the dark blonde nearly ginger of my hair. I saw my reaction, the crinkle of my nose, and noted not to do that again. The whites of my eyes stood out to me and I tried to make them softer.

The first thing I learned about the Fortescues was the sound of their voices. They rung confidently through the high-ceilinged corridor.

One voice said, "Monnie, Jane's gone into labour."

"Our parents are driving them in. Livio was beside himself." That was another.

Their accents were like magpie calls in the morning, round sounds.

"Ah, how brilliant!" Monica laughed. "Livio the silly sod. And poor Janey, she's in for a time of it tonight!"

The young women who came round the door were very pale, with vivid amber hair. One was taller and had her hair cut short and sharp, while the other's was long and wispy. The room was much more tense with them in it.

"So you must be Charlie," said the taller. "I'm Tallulah, or Tully is fine."

She thrust out a hand for me to shake. She had short nails with dirt under them.

Then the other. "Lily. So good to finally meet you."

"Tully and Lily, that's easy to remember."

I was primed to notice things about them, to try and figure them out. Most striking of all was the way they moved. Their bodies seemed directed by something grander than muscles and bones. They were ballet dancers without dancing. They strolled through the room and settled on the nearest couch. They crossed their legs at the knees then joined their hands in their laps. Was this what private schooling taught you? I'd never been more envious of rich kids. When talk moved onto Jane and the baby I had to make myself follow the conversation instead of staring at them. Did their bodies do that without them thinking it? How long their torsos looked.

Monica got up to fetch some drinks.

“Are you dancers then?” I asked. Their brows pulled in in such unison I nearly laughed. “You just move like it,” I said.

Tully shrugged; a slight and smooth lift of her shoulders.

“We did ballet as kids,” she said. “Lily was much better than I was though.”

“That’s not true,” her sister replied. “You were better at remembering the steps. Remember that one, the three-step toe point thing, you’d do that for days down the hallway.”

“I just bumped around.”

I felt the tension in their disagreement, though they seemed not to notice. Their accents were less easy than an Australian’s, more closed and definite at the end of phrases.

“They say it helps your posture,” I said, gradually lengthening my spine.

We heard Monica’s voice from the kitchen as she called to someone outside, then more feet on the steps. The heavy front door swung open and two sets of feet trod down the floorboards towards us. They were laughing about something and still smiling when they came through the door. They brought a new ease into the room with them. The first guy had dark rusty coloured hair and a square face with stubble.

“Ello ‘ello,” he announced. “How are we all?”

Tully introduced me to Fred. He took my hand, and pecked me on the cheek. I saw his nose twitch as he leaned away.

“Lavender from the garden,” he said.

I nodded then looked to the other figure. I recognised him, and blushed thinking he might have seen me that afternoon too.

“Christ Oddie, look at you. You’re a scarecrow,” said Lily.

He ran a hand through some dark, messy curls. It drew back some waves from his face, until he moved towards me and they fell down again.

“Hiya Charlie, I’m Jude.”

Then I recognized his voice too. “I think I heard you out chasing a cow this morning.”

He laughed. “Ah yep, Bumblebee was in a right mood, wasn’t she Fred?”

“Mardy bum Monday this morning, the whole herd was in a strop,” he replied.

“Bumblebee the cow?” I asked.

Jude nodded. "She used to chase bees when she was a calf. We figured she wanted to be one."

"*Bee one*," said Fred.

I asked, "Do they all have names then?"

"Most of them, yep. We've got a bull named Bruce. You might like that one."

"Bruce?" I said with a thick twang, and they laughed, repeating it back to me.

Monica came back with gins for each of us. We took them and sat. Fred turned to me.

"When did you get here then?"

"I landed yesterday afternoon. Flight's a killer though. I slept from last night through until lunch."

"Yeah I've done that flight a couple of times. My uncle lives in Perth."

He had a deep voice that matched his thick frame, and might have come off as brusque without the smile on his lips. We described Australian summers to the others, then they told me about English ones, laughing at my disappointment.

The last to come was a retired academic who lived up past the farmhouse. My head was full of names by then, but I already knew his. We knew he'd come when he coughed at the living room door.

"It's the owl and the pussycat," Fred said.

A black cat trotted into the room first, like a bodyguard, or a herald. No one paid attention to it except Tully who swept a hand across its back as it passed. Dr Keats hadn't changed much since I was a kid. Though perhaps the hair that had once grown on his head had defected to his beard. His wide mouth and soft voice made him look kind, and even though he was inside, he wore big, thick framed glasses with dark lenses. He blamed years of reading in dark libraries, with even the faintest light blaring into his pupils like the sun reflecting off glass. Lifting his glasses a centimetre, he wiped away a tear. As he did the cat came back to him and began curling in figure-eights around his ankles.

When Monica and Dr Keats stepped out to the kitchen the smirks between the others said there was something more than friendship between them. So, someone was already keeping Grammy company.

I
June, 1674

This story begins with a sunset. It is peach coloured and soft as butter. Its light colours the tallest faces. The shorter ones are shadowed by hedges and cottages. From their meeting place they make for a path through the woods. The villagers bend twigs with gentle fingers and step carefully. Mud has been spread over their bodies and clothing in long stripes. It camouflages them like the shadows of the branches.

When they appear on the riverbank they are greeted by a hooded woman. She draws a circle around her body with her hands and they form a circle in response. In the middle of them stands a wooden table. It is made from an oak tree. The chunk that forms the table top still curves like the tree's trunk and has kept its rough bark. It looks like an upturned canoe. On one side of the table is a pile of kindling, and on the other is something covered by a hessian cloth. The table, the object, the kindling make a line from north to south.

The villagers stand waiting there. As the ochreous sun sinks down their shadows on the grass stretch out long. Except for shuffling and shushes the shadows keep mostly still. At the right moment, the hooded woman turns to face the river, steps behind the table, and nods. The crowd joins hands and then they begin to dance. It starts with their heads. Brown, and red, and golden heads dive heavily to their left. Their hips, their legs, chase after their shoulders, swooping across together. In a sudden change, they lean themselves upright, with a sure roll of their torsos, to begin it all again. The bodies rock like tipsy sailors on the shore. Their breaths are warm moments on their cold noses. The women's ponytails and plaits are metronomes for their pace.

When the dancers are perfectly synchronised, together they make a massive panting thing with many legs. The differences between them in age, height, and strength are made inconsequential. On the riverbank a force begins to move.

Chapter Two

After Dr Keats, no-one else from the village called in. It was getting darker but we didn't turn on the lamp. A haze of gin was settling over us. Outside the window a swarm of bats burst out together and swam through the deep-sea night. Lily said we should move up to their house. It had a CD player in the kitchen and prosecco in the fridge. I encouraged the others ahead then knocked on the kitchen door. There were muffled voices behind it, and I stepped into candlelight. In the glow Monica and Dr Keats were huddled around the end of the kitchen table, their fingers knotted together. The candle flames were duplicated in the black of Dr. Keats' glasses. He looked away. Monica was less abashed than he was, but ushered me off with loaded hand gestures. I slunk back out the door apologising.

The lane was dark this time of night and it was eerie walking alone. There were no streetlights, only the moon inching through the clouds to see by. Past our cluster of houses the night was black, no lights out there either. The valley was tucked away from the world, and thick with things that outnumbered people. In the bush nature was sparse, and dry, and open, waiting for me to come and fill it, but here life was thriving haughtily, already too busy. Populated with round trees, mossy roofs and lichen fences, the wildflowers, cow pats and fruit flies. The dark was dense. I listened hard. There was the rustle of trees as the breeze swept through their boughs, and the thump of a hoof over the hedge. Then there were hard footfalls on the road. The noise approached as a disembodied thing. I stood still and my heart beat hard. My eyes danced around for a hiding place or a weapon until a voice came out of the gloom.

"Steady on, it's just me. It's Jude."

His shape appeared as he came round the bend.

"Christ. Nearly whacked you with this." I dropped my twig, grateful for the dark so he wouldn't see me blush.

"What a weapon! You know it's just locals here."

I didn't want to explain I was more scared of bulls than strangers. "So I should be safe then?" I said.

"We don't even lock our front doors most of the time."

"Oh really?"

“Maybe we should now...” He turned around and walked with me back up the lane.
“I just came to check you knew the way.”

“Oh, cheers.”

Beside the novelty of Jude there was hazy familiarity, like the village.

“Were you here last time I came?”

“Don’t think so. I didn’t live here as a kid.”

“Oh, right. How long have you been living here then?”

“Only a few months. I want some experience before I start uni.”

“You seem like such a local.”

“Well I was around lots growing up.”

“Summer holidays?” I asked.

“Summers, winters, whenever they needed help and I didn’t have school.”

“So you know all the village secrets then?”

“A few. I know who's got whose rose pruners, and scraped whose car in the lane. It’s juicy stuff.”

I laughed and when he grinned I had that familiar feeling again.

“I thought I remembered you and Fred, us all playing together,” I said. “And the three of us sitting in a kiddie pool. Could have been someone else.”

“A kiddie pool? Is that like a paddling pool?”

“Think so.”

He stopped in the street and turned to face me. His brows reached in towards each other.

“We had it out under the apple tree in Fred’s garden.”

I grinned. The blurry images were sharpened by his collaborative remembrance. There were apples and we’d bobbed for them.

“That must have been the summer holidays,” he said. “I always remembered you as a local kid, someone Mon adopted like she does. I don’t know why I thought that. You would have had an accent?”

“I probably didn’t open my mouth much. I was pretty shy.”

“Huh, there you go.” He stared down at me for a second, as if reevaluating me. “We’ve grown up a bit haven’t we?”

He smiled in such a charmingly boyish way that he contradicted himself. His teeth had the jumbled look of a kid who never had braces.

“How long ago was that?” he asked.

“Must be thirteen years.”

We stared at each other for another second and then he smiled again, even bigger than the last. There was conspiracy in it, and a playful lift to one side of his lips that made me laugh at him.

As we walked down the driveway of the farmhouse a cork flew out of the window.

“So close,” called Fred.

In the kitchen Lily was catching the liquid in a glass. We settled around the huge round table with our prosecco, and they played a Kylie Minogue CD to make me feel at home. I laughed at them copying my accent, offending Fred who seemed the cockiest and most fragile. When I tried theirs I made my mouth go round and my vowels long. Fred piped up, telling me I sounded like a constipated owl. I laughed with him, because this was more like friendship than politeness was. We finished the bottle and moved onto white wine, pouring glasses which reached the very rim because why bother with a glass half full when you can just fill it? We filled the glasses so completely that we had to leave them on the table and lap at them like dogs.

The house was huge and rustic, with its dated joinery and dark tiles, all under a ceiling strung with broad, black beams. Behind Jude was the AGA. It was a cast-iron cooker set into a tiled corner, like a relic of the Industrial Revolution. A black lab lounged next to it, thick tail thumping on the floor. The house had layers to read, like the sisters who lived in it.

Tully sat resting her toned legs up across the curve of the kitchen table and Lily sat behind, using them as an armrest. Even like this their limbs seemed to weigh nothing. I began to notice that while they were echoes of each other they weren't perfect replicas. Tully was reserved, sometimes harsh, but Lily was gentle. She nodded endlessly, eyes wide, while I answered her questions about kangaroos and Christmas in summer. They listened when I talked, all of them, which I hated but also loved. I let them think I was an exotic foreigner because I'd never been one before. I tried to explain to them what a bogan was, without sounding like I was one or that I would look down on one. I was working hard to make sure they saw a side of me they might like, and my brain was full with it. Unlike the

rest of them who seemed past the point of mere friendship and into something beyond it, like family ties connected them which relied on more than just genetics. Gradually I was lulled into it too. Wine tricked us into feeling as if I was an old friend, just newly reunited. They told me stories to catch me up.

“She had to lick... had to lick... she licked the first thing she found outside the front door,” Fred paused and wiped away some tears with cracked knuckles. “We came out and her dad’s massive hunter wellies were just sitting there on the pavers, one lying flat, fallen over. The cow shit was like an extra sole on that one, wasn’t it Tull? Like platforms.”

“For fuck’s sake, yes Fred. I licked the cowshit boot. I’m convinced you lot have ended up with cow shit in your mouths at one time or another. There’s a bloody swimming pool of it out there.” She gestured towards the farm buildings. “But Charlie, you should know, it was only the very tip of my tongue and I washed it right away.”

“With the garden hose,” clarified Jude. “It near blasted your tongue off, didn’t it Tul?”

Lily spat out her sip of wine and it sprayed across the table as a sweet mist.

Later we were out in the garden, staring out across the paddocks near the house. They lit cigarettes, rolling them deftly then blowing lung-fulls towards the stars. One of them, maybe Tully, made an “ahh” sound.

Fred leaned across. “Want one?”

“No, I’m alright.”

He looked me up and down then shrugged. Before the garden had had a vegetable scent, like fresh zucchinis, but now it lifted us from open grass and set us down in a packed pub. I wouldn’t have minded a smoke except the taste would take me to other places too, memories that were best kept stored away. I took two steps back from them.

When the moonlight would come through I could see the scattered shapes in it. Then when the clouds moved in it became a dark expanse of nothing and the cows were just heavy breaths and hooves. Their noises were lazy; sighs and huffs. There was a deep noise right near me and I jumped backwards, spilling wine over myself. Fred laughed hard, then stepped onto the fence in front of the hedge to look. He held his wine glass and cigarette beside him, stretched out for balance, one hand on the rail.

“Ah, it’s just Roanie,” he said, like I should know what that meant.

The garden we were in was as big as a field. It was scattered with bushes and clusters of trees that were all bordered by the hedge, and very dark, the only constant light given out by the kitchen windows. It was kept but it was wild, like once these plants must have been placed carefully but they'd been left to their own devices ever since, stretching out from their neat shapes. It was romantic in the same way ruins are: impressive, chaotic, sleepy.

"It's like a maze out here," I said. "It's cool."

"It's a mess is what it is," said Tully.

"Grandmama?" replied Lily, "Is that you? Have you returned from the netherworld?"

"Piss off Lil."

"Shall I fetch you your secateurs?" Lily taunted.

"These aphids will be the death of me, I'm sure," Fred added, his voice rising an octave and coming out through his nose.

Tully ignored them and Jude said "God she hated us playing those games out here. She'd get in a right strop about the rose bushes. Like that time you fell into one Fred and she was more worried about the plant than the thorns in your arse."

Fred laughed fondly for some reason.

Jude spoke again. "Hide and seek?"

We agreed with nods, then burst out into the garden with wine glasses still in hand, tiptoe running like cartoon burglars. The air was colder now and I shivered. I could feel the breeze like I was standing by an air conditioner, and it seemed like sounds became tangible too when giggles from the house arrived with the chill.

I rushed up to the furthest edge of grass I could find. When I came round behind a bush I bowled straight into something tall and hard. I stepped back from the tree holding my shoulder, then moved again when it made a grunting noise.

"Shit, sorry!"

"I think you broke my ribs," he complained.

"I think your ribs broke my shoulder."

"Do you think they heard us?"

Jude and I paused and listened. We turned to face the house. All I could hear was our own breathing. Neither of us moved or said anything for a few moments. There weren't

cicadas like there should have been on a summer night, just quiet. I noticed his breathing grow quicker and then its rhythm on the side of my face. He had turned towards me. I turned too. The sharp angle of his jaw and brow bone caught the moonlight. The strange light made him sharp and square, the hue of it took all the warmth out of his skin. For a second it was more like a mask than a face. Then I could make out the stubble on his cheeks, the one-sided curve of his smile. As I looked up at him, his fingertips trailed down my arm. I reached my hand over to his bicep. He leaned down towards me and when I stood on my toes our lips met. Our wine glasses rang as they touched.

Our kiss was keen and new. The thrill of it ran down my back like an ice cube down a T-shirt. His lips were wide and soft, urgent in the way they moved. They tasted of wine. His hot tongue had just touched mine, when there were voices near us and we pulled apart. As we moved his teeth grazed my bottom lip and I flinched, putting a hand to my face. Jude's shocked face made me laugh.

"I'm fine, it's fine," I told him.

The noise was a beacon for our seekers. Lily and Fred appeared from a dark spot, giggling to each other. We banded together and found Tully crouching behind a lawn chair.

Coming down into the light of the house Tully asked, "You all right Charlie? You look flushed."

"Yeah I'm good. Probably just the wine." I set my glass on their outdoor table. "I think I'll head home, but don't ease up on my account."

"We should probably hit the hay anyway." Tully turned towards Fred. "Wouldn't want to piss off the Meadowsweets with any 'excessive noise' would we?"

"And we're milking in," Lily strained to see her watch. "Ahh... 5 hours."

I left before the boys did, letting the friends say what they would about me. I thought about them too, and mostly just about one of them. Walking home I could feel the pressure of his mouth still, like if I put a hand to my lips I would be able to touch the feeling of him there.

*

My first days in Westhill were made up of late rising, book pages, chores, and cups of tea. There were no answers to the questions I had for my family. I protested by not calling my

parents and instead waited around for the locals to drop by. While I got to know them I thought I might get answers too. Lily came over during the evening after her work in the farm's shop in town, bringing the smell of the deli counter with her like an advertisement. The boys and Tully would come by in the day, when their work took them past the house. We became used to each other with tea as the social lubricant instead of wine, so soon we might be together without any drinks at all.

After my first couple of days there, Jude resumed his afternoon ritual of watering Monica's garden for her, as she tended to neglect it. I didn't know if it had always been that frequent, or if he had an ulterior motive. If I asked Monica I might be disappointed or embarrassed, so I left it as a question I could try and answer each day. It was a game of pretend accidents and secret planning to be reading or sun bathing outside when Jude came round.

He would be standing with the garden hose in his hand, or the dog's frisbee. He had the sort of hands that liked to be doing something. You could tell by the dirt that coated them and their easy strength. I would sit and talk to him with my legs crossed on one of the wicker armchairs that lived outside. I wouldn't have stayed sitting while he stood unless he'd made it feel like we were on equal terms, and that if anything I was the higher one. He liked talking about me as a 'lady of leisure'. He enjoyed that I'd come across the world to help around the house but I lounged while he worked.

"Completely useless the staff you end up with these days. They're just taking the piss. I'll be complaining to the manager," he told me. He was watering the geraniums and spoke over his shoulder.

"Are you gonna write a strongly worded letter?"

"I think I'll have to. It's gone beyond the pale."

"Go on then."

"What?"

"What will you say?"

He turned around, watched my face for a moment, then spoke. "Dear Mr Fledurghen Blurgen," he began.

"Interesting name," I said.

“Scottish.” He coughed. “Dear Mr Blurgen, you may recall that in our communications I requested a staff member who was to have a keenness for work and a thorough approach, and I must say that the staff member you have sent me is thoroughly keen to avoid approaching work of any kind.” He strolled thoughtfully along the stone tiles. “I hasten to add that your staff member is not only lazy as an ass, but more than a little condescending in her air with me, again much like an ass.”

“You seem more than a little interested in your staff member’s ass.”

Whenever the thin veil between what we talked about and what we meant was lifted too high one of us would draw it back down again.

“Perhaps,” he said. “But that’s not going to get the roses watered, is it?”

He smiled and turned back to the plants. Sometimes when it was me who’d said something too brave I’d stare down to the chair and hope my cheeks weren’t blazing red. I’d look at the faded floral pattern of the cushion under my thighs, tracing its swirling vines with red and blue flowers. Each time I would notice how wrong the setting seemed to be, how ill-suited my grandmother’s old garden furniture was for the thoughts and feelings Jude was bringing to the surface of my skin.

I was beginning to know them all better. But I thought that what I’d seen of them so far wasn’t quite their real selves but more like polished versions. When we’d sit around in the evening it was like the light of a jab would flick on in Fred’s eyes and he’d bite his lip to stop it slipping out his mouth. I wanted badly to know the exact insult he’d had lined up for me each time. When they let themselves show roughness and all, then I could too. As part of our authenticity, they might let me in on whatever they knew about Monica.

Dr Keats was around the house most nights too. In the strange stretches of the day where jet lag made me feel like I’d been woken from the dead, we would lounge about and talk, sometimes with Monica though usually without. We’d find our way into one of the deep caves of his anthropological knowledge, him recounting field trips to Central America or South Africa. The way he spoke was academic, but sprinkled with vivid little moments, like the colour of the dirt on his hiking boots, or taste of fresh goats’ cheese: tangy, milky, and soft as silk. He would sit with his arms crossed over his chest, the end of his thin, grey beard tucked underneath them, his cat curled up on his thighs.

One evening I came into the sitting room to seek him out and saw he was in the garden just outside, smoking his pipe. The thin wisp of grey air streamed back from his head like a scarf in the wind. I sat on the couch to wait for him and saw a tan, leatherbound book on the cushion next to me. It was typical of Monica to leave her half-read books strewn around. I picked it up to see which novel it was and found it wasn't a hardback like I'd thought or a novel at all, but a notebook. On the flyleaf was written 'Philip Keats,' in a cursive hand, and underneath 'Westhill.' Our friendliness made me bold enough to flip through the rest of the pages but I kept an eye on the door as I did it. On some of the ones that flew past my thumbs there was a sparsity of the black ink that filled the others. I stopped at a page and turned the book landscape to see better. It was a sketch, done in tentative strokes with a light pencil. I recognised the view from the top of a hill coming down into the village. There was something dated about it, the hay bales were tall clusters, not the cubes of a combine harvester, and there weren't any cars in the lane. In the bottom corner of the page he'd written 'Photograph, 1889.' I skipped through to another drawing. It was of two figures standing in the foreground, their backs up against a low hedge. One figure, a portly, older woman, was looking straight at me, but the other, a young girl, was turned away, an arm stretched out next to her over the hedge. There was another shape beyond the hedge. A deer's lean neck reached its head over the foliage and out towards the girl's hand. Some pages later was another drawing. It showed a man in the middle of an open field, and at his heel was a sleek, short haired dog. It was big, the head of the dog at the torso of the man.

I flicked over the page to read something of what he'd written and found I couldn't; it was all in what looked like shorthand. The page was saturated with ink, scratchy symbols scrawled on every bit of empty space. I was scanning the page when I heard his feet across the patio and the doors opening. I shut the book and replaced it on the seat next to me. As Dr Keats came back inside I watched the book out the corner of my eye, still trying to get the measure of it. As he came into the room he stooped down, picked up the book and held it to his chest. It was fused to him for the evening, either on his lap or balanced on the arm of the couch. It was part of the collected things that made him, like his glasses, his cat, and his pipe.

*

I figured I'd proved myself worthy of friendship when the four friends came by one evening to suggest we rent a house in Cornwall for the weekend. Lily had found a small rental in St. Ives. We drove down in a station wagon borrowed from Fred's mum and reached the Cornish coast at dusk. The town was like other coastal places I knew; it was salty smelling, and old fashioned. There were signs for fish and chips, and shops selling buckets and spades. But it was also nothing like what I'd known. While Australian towns were open and flat, stretched out like a sleeping snake, St. Ives was tall and compact, coiling up upon itself. There was no room between buildings and they were three storeys or more. In the streets hanging flags looped out between the brick facades, window boxes with blooms rested above swinging signs, the cobblestones were littered with benches, and white chimneys punctured the sky. Cornwall preferred clutter to space.

It was getting dark by the time we'd settled into our cottage, and we walked down to the harbourside for dinner. I was at the back of the group, and watched with a smile as they fanned themselves in the heat, if 25 was what you could call heat. We settled on the harbour wall to eat our soggy fish and chips, legs draped over the cold stone. They tried to explain to me why anyone would put vinegar on fish while the seagulls, seeming nearly the size of pelicans, circled above. By now it was almost completely dark, but the lights of St. Ives shone both behind and before us, the watery duplicate of the town shuddering with each ripple. I watched briny earthquakes shake the town again and again. I realised that part of me was glad to be away from home, to be in a place and with people who were interesting but uncomplicated. I breathed in St. Ives. It was fish and seaweed and salt distilled into their strongest forms, with notes of frying grease. Watching me, Fred did the same, and boasted that he could name every kind of fish whose scent hung in the air. Tully shot him a look, but I laughed as he recited each species from tiny mackerel to deep fried cod.

Making our way back to the holiday house, I was laughing again, as Lily gave her impression of Fred's pick up lines. He called her some name, poked her in the ribs, then chased her down a side street. Tully sprinted after them.

Jude and I were alone.

"Will they get lost down there?" I said.

“Couldn’t if they tried.” said Jude.

“They know St. Ives well?”

“Not really. The Fortescues are just never lost. Lily is particularly annoying,” he said, “she can’t help but know where she’s going. She just looks around, gets her bearings, from the stars or the sun or however she bloody does it, and she’s off. We’ve tested it before. Yep, we really did. We blindfolded her, drove her out to the middle of nowhere and left her with a torch and a mountain bike and waited to see when she’d get back.”

“And?”

“She made it back less than an hour after us. She said she found a shortcut along bridlepaths. Bloody weirdo.”

It stunned me how easily they found their way round the fields and tracks and woodlands around their home. They’d been grown for the country, while I’d been grown for the suburbs. Lily knew organic details and hidden footpaths, while I knew wide roads and corner shops. It was like an atavistic kind of knowledge existed in her. I wanted to know what being in her world felt like.

We walked a few steps in silence, then I heard him clear his throat to ease it.

“So,” he said. “Is England like you remembered it?”

That was another thing about Jude; he asked questions like he wanted to know the answer. He wanted to know what people’s lives looked like. Because of it, he knew about countless random things, like sailing, and tanning salons, and breeding guinea pigs. The others teased him for it. But just as easily he could switch on that charming nonchalance, the kind that said he’d have a great time with you, but could manage without you too. I wanted to keep his gaze on me for as long as I could.

“Uh, yeah it is. But it’s kind of weird too. Everything is slightly different.”

“Like what?”

“Like, the people are bigger, you and Fred are, but the houses are smaller. The weather’s better, not as rainy as I remember.”

“You’ve been lucky so far.”

“Mon’s the same though.”

He laughed. “That doesn’t surprise me. She’s chuffed you came. She was fussing for weeks beforehand. She went into her ‘mission mode’, that’s what we call it.”

“I know the one,” I said.

“She raved like a mad woman about bedside tables and shower gel.”

“And now I’m here all she does is order me to make tea.”

“That’s Monica for you.”

That pissed me off, that he could tell me what my own grandmother was like, that he probably knew her better than I did.

“Do you know why she was so keen for me to come and visit?”

“Uh, to see you?”

“I mean, apart from that.”

“Don’t know.” He looked up the street ahead. “To make tea?” When he looked back his eyes were warm. Smile lines reached out from his eyes like the rays on a rudimentary sun. He brushed some curls back from his face with his hand and I noticed a black fingernail.

“She never said anything else? Just Monica and my parents were dying for me to visit but I never really got why they were so into it.”

“As I said, Charlie, not sure.” He kept his eyes away from me now.

“It’s cool.”

He didn’t say anything else and I worried I’d made him uncomfortable. I tried to shift the mood back to how it was. Gradually it did, as we came towards the top of the hill and I laughed at how much longer his streetlight shadow was than mine. He shrugged, then took long strides up the street to show how good it was to be him. Walking with him through the Cornish streets changed my perspective on their weird ratios. Without the clarity of daylight, the houses could be tall one- or two-story buildings. As Jude strode past them it was me who was too short for their dimensions.

When we came in the door I saw that Tully had taken the couch, leaving me to share a bed upstairs with Lily. I found my bag already in the room then went to find the bathroom. Jude was coming out of the bathroom door, ducking his head to fit under the frame. He was shirtless. When I looked up to his face, his eyes were sweeping along the empty corridor. I watched their path and knew what they were checking. They found no footsteps or movements. His eyes settled back on me and weren’t hard to read. He pushed the bathroom

door open, hand spread flat along the white washed wood. I stepped under his arm and inside.

The bathroom was colder than the rest of the house. I felt the air cool my flushed cheeks. Quietly, he shut the door behind us. I put my toiletry bag on the sink, breathed deeply, then turned around. He was right in front of me. Our bodies met with force, and a sound like a dull clap. My back found the cold tiles behind me and I felt a drip run down my spine, not knowing if it was shower water, or my sweat. So much of him was against me, his lips, his chest, his stomach. I felt his hands grip onto me and I gripped onto him too, as a raft in a current. Though his body was firm against me, he kissed me gently, delicately. He spoke a soft language to my lips, while his body said something stronger. The firmness and lightness together made my head spin, like something from a fever dream.

My neck was stretched out towards him and one of his hands held onto the back of it, encouraging me up. My hands moved along his shape, finding his torso to be taut and wide. My fingers trailed up the middle of his abs to the small hollow between his chest muscles. I felt the wiry hairs under my thumbs. Reaching up to his shoulders and neck I felt waves of his hair, trailing down like pigs' tails. My fingers combed up through the thick, messy curls. Touching them was like being closer to understanding him. Perhaps he thought that too, because I felt him sigh.

He discovered my shapes too. I would later imagine how strange and small my body might look under his wide palms and long fingers, when I relived it again and again. His hands traveled down my sides and over my hips. His touch was different to others I'd felt before, less determined. He held my waist, my hips, and drew my outline with his fingertips.

A gust of wind came through the bathroom window and gave me goosebumps. It blew my hair into our faces. I pushed our bodies off from the wall to lean back from him and tie up my hair. We held eye contact. We both had questions of each other and the air felt full of answers. He watched me and stayed two steps away. The look on his face was hard to read. His lips were closed and straight, not smiling, and his eyes were wide. I hadn't looked into them like this before. Their green was flecked with hazel, and at the centre, right near his pupil, were darker hints of brown. His eyes were the colours of English trees.

He broke the silence when he spoke.

"Charlie," he exhaled.

He stepped towards me, pecked me on the forehead and turned to leave. I stood in the empty room and learnt how different boys could be.

II

Now the dancers are humming. Together their voices make a steady droning sound. The humming and the dancing keeps time, the sound guided by the steps, the steps guided by the sound.

The dancers' eyes are drawn to the centre when the cloaked woman lifts her hands to clap once above her head. It is a strong, harsh noise. At once they shut their eyes. Now the dancing creature they make is an elegant sightless thing. The cloaked woman glances once around the moving ring, then strides over to the kindling, crouching beside it. She lifts a twig to her mouth and runs her tongue along the bark. The spit glistens for a second. Next she holds it near her pouted lips, blowing on it gently until the trail from her tongue catches alight. When she replaces it the other wood follows suit, and she soon stands beside a blazing pyramid. It is the brightest light in the new dark. Again she claps and the dancers' eyes flick back open, now with tiny flames reflecting in them.

The woman tips her head backwards and begins to sing her own song, high and undulating. Her notes come without order, circling around the droning of the dancers. Her song weaves the intricate embroidery onto their even cloth. All the while the woman's green eyes are fixed upwards, wide with concentration. She reads the incantation from invisible things. She continues this way until her head falls forwards, the table catches her body, and the dancers stop still.

When she can lift herself back up, the woman looks around the circle until she finds the face. She catches the eye of a tall, young woman, with dark features. She gestures her forward. The man on her right drops her hand and watches her go. The circle joins again behind her. As the young woman passes by the fire, the bold curve of her stomach and swollen breasts cast rounded shadows, eclipsing things around her. The call of a wood pigeon makes heads turn, and hers does too. She stops a second in the silence then hearing nothing more, ambles over to the hessian cloth in the centre. She stoops down, leaning stiffly, bracing her back with a hand and landing on her knees. When she stands she is cradling something limp across the rise of her stomach. With her eyes on the cloaked woman, the younger comes over to the table and the object is placed gently on its surface.

She steps back to reveal a gyrfalcon, already dead, and resting on the timber that might once have been its roost.

Chapter Three

A clapping sound woke me up. I looked over and saw that I was alone in the bedroom. The lace curtains drifted inwards, like the veil of a see-through bride. It wasn't just the sea air coming through the window, but the clapping too. I swung out of bed and leaned out. The white paint of the frame crumbled in my hands. Below me stood Jude. He was slapping the soles of his thongs, or "flip flops" as he called them, against each other. His hair was wet, and the salt made it even curlier so it was dark, wild corkscrews. As he moved his arms I could see the tan line on his biceps appear then disappear under his sleeve. To see him, it was hard not to call out to him.

The little courtyard behind the cottage was lined with sandy coloured pavers, and I imagined them to be so because of all the other visitors who had cleaned their shoes like he did. He dropped his thongs to the ground, slipped them on, and went through the kitchen door. The carpet was so threadbare downstairs it was like walking on bitumen.

From above I could hear that the others had started eating breakfast. The radio was on and "That Don't Impress Me Much" rang through the bottom half of the house. I hummed. *Ooh-ooh you think you're special.* In the kitchen below, cutlery on crockery was skill-less percussion. Then the rhythm of their conversation. There were no words, just noise, until Tully's voice rose above the others.

"I'm not being funny though, you remember what Mon said. Zip the lip."

I stopped still on the stairs, stopped humming. Lily replied to her sister but her voice was lower. I stepped down the last few steps and into the living room.

"...feels strange, you know? Knowing that she's suspicious and not saying anything. We're lying to her."

"We're not lying to her," replied Tully. "We're avoiding the topic. And anyway, what would we say? 'Yep, the jig's up, let us explain what your family is keeping from you.'"

There was only the crunch of toast for a moment, then Jude's voice. "But I did lie to her, last night."

"Well if what you said was convincing then we're off the hook." It was Tully's voice again. "We shouldn't even be talking about this, she could come down any second."

"We'd hear her on the stairs," said Jude.

“We might not, she’s such a wee thing,” countered Fred.

His comment stung in a way he didn’t mean. I was tiny and ridiculous, a child who’d overheard a grownup conversation. I crept carefully back up the stairs and sat on the top one. My throat was tight and the summer warmth of the house was nauseating. My hands clenched into fists until the knuckles went a boney colour. I got up from the step and went into the cold bathroom. The tap groaned as I turned it and water splattered out. I cupped it in my hands and brought it to my face. It was cold and soothing on the puffy skin under my eyes.

My sigh fogged up the mirror above the sink. My reflection was a pale, blurred oval. After a minute, I wiped out a strip across my eyes and looked into my pupils, as if I might read my mind better through them. Distracting droplets ran down the glass on my mirrored cheeks. The question wasn’t what person my parents saw, or who Monica saw, even who these people down stairs saw, but who I did. And, more importantly, what she was going to do. The grip I’d had on who I was had been loosening since leaving school and leaving Nick. Who was she, this freckle-faced girl staring vacantly at me? How pathetic that I didn’t know that, or what she felt, or what she’d do. He’d always known. Nick was so sure of himself other people gathered round him to bask in it and borrow bits he didn’t need. So strong he couldn’t help but expect the same, like that time he’d told me “Don’t be weak, Charlie. You’re better than that.”

I wondered who I would be if I called Monica and she came and got me from Cornwall in that beat up Land Rover. I thought about who I’d feel like on the lonely flight back home. Don’t be weak, Charlie. When I came down the stairs I made sure that they heard my footsteps and that I was smiling.

On Fred’s suggestion, we visited another inlet along the coast for lunch, a fishing village called Halloway. We followed the high tides of visitors that swept from the carpark to the harbourside. At times we could only walk in single file, holding hands to snake through the crowd. Jude was last, with me in front. His thumb stroked the inside of my wrist. Our palms were sweating in the heat and I pulled away when the crowd thinned.

“Getting clammy,” I said.

“Okay.” He wiped his palms on his jean shorts and kept walking up the pavement, passing me.

I watched the back of him. The mustard colour of his T-shirt had a small damp patch between his shoulder blades from being crammed in the car. He wasn't uncomplicated like before, not so simply beautiful. But then there was a new complexity, and with it bloomed a new kind of desire for him. I didn't try to, didn't want to, understand the feeling.

Halloway was smaller than St. Ives and huddled around a cove. We walked through stone houses and restaurants onto a path that led up along the cliff. When we'd left the village, the path wound through lush ferns and bushes growing hot pink flowers. Lily picked one and tucked it behind her ear. Fred saw and did the same. When the light caught the ruddy shades of Fred's stubble he was framed by brightness and warmth.

We reached a lookout and looked down on Halloway. The houses spread back from the water and made a shape that echoed the cove. Nearly all of them were whitewashed, and it marked them out from the nature around them, a croissant shape of pearly brightness. On the harbour bobbed fishing boats, mostly white too but with dashes of primary colour. The village was a bright crescent slotted into the swaying and rustling greenness. We lined the wooden rail of the lookout, shielding our eyes from the sun. Tully craned over next to me to see the water below. It was soft sun and gentle beauty, unlike home where the sun burnt and the landscape dug itself under my skin.

We followed Fred round to a beach past the headland. It was a pebble beach, and covered in people. The day was still warm but soft clouds were starting to pass over; a migration of giant birds. I lay with my eyes closed, watching their shadows through my eyelids. A minute later I sat up to rub where the pebbles had left indents in my back.

The sea lay flat and calm in front of us. The colour meant icy cold, though you wouldn't have guessed it from all the swimmers. For Tully and Fred it was a challenge. Tully sat down to adjust her water shoes, booties made out of wetsuit material with a rubber sole. Lily wore them too. They said the pebbles hurt their feet. It seemed wrong that women who herded bulls and vaulted three bar fences couldn't hack pebbles.

"Looking sexy Tull," said Fred.

"Didn't know you had a foot thing Fred."

Jude interjected, "He does love toesocks."

Fred shuddered, reliving some past trauma.

“Do you like rubber socks too Freddie baby?” Lily stretched a seductive foot out towards him.

He stumbled back on skittering pebbles.

“You coming then or what Tully? Stop faffing about.”

“Someone’s had a nerve touched.”

Their jibes continued down the beach with them. They burst into the surf like dogs off a leash then stood shivering waist-deep, anchored by rivalry.

I lay next to Jude with Lily on his other side. He was stretched out on his stomach, resting up on his elbows. His back was scattered with freckles, most gathered up on his shoulders. It moved as he spoke to Lily, gesturing with his hands, and the tiny freckles danced around too. I followed the line of his backbone down to the faint tan line above the top of his shorts. The strip of white hovered above his blue shorts like whitewash off the fabric’s swell. His face swept round towards me and asked a question. He knew I’d been looking at him.

“Want me to put some on your back?” he repeated.

I stood up to pull my dress over my head. He stayed watching me, and wasn’t embarrassed about it. Lily lay back with her sunhat over her face. I pulled the cotton over mine and threw it to the sand. As I lay down Jude was following my thighs. He knelt beside me and I heard the wheezing of the old bottle. The smell of it was summer, as if even though it was chemicals and body lotion, other things had been put in there too, hints of seaweed and salt and barbeques. Then it was cold on the small of my back. His calloused hands swept upwards. It was when he came up to my shoulders that I felt it. Just inside my left shoulder blade. Something like pressing a bruise, but so sharp it brought a wave of nausea down over me.

I moved away from his hand and sat up.

“What’s up?” Jude asked. “You alright?”

“Yep.”

I got up onto my knees and tried to feel behind me. I took deep breaths through my mouth to push down the feeling in my throat. My back was smooth and even. I turned my back to Jude.

“Is there a bruise? Something hurt just before.”

His hand trailed over the spot and the tender place made me shudder.

“Can’t see anything. Does it hurt still?”

“A bit.”

When I looked into his close-up face I remembered the night before, its heat, felt my back meeting the tiles. Perhaps he thought of that too, because I saw his brows knit together.

Jude’s legs made the pebbles shift as he moved from his knees to sit down. The noise was harsh and solid like scratching pennies.

He looked up at my face. “You okay?”

I nodded, though in truth the nausea was still hanging onto me.

“I’m just going to the bathroom.”

I grabbed my dress, pulled it on and made towards the ladies. When I glanced back I saw Jude and Lily looking after me, both making visors of their hands. As always there was a line, so instead I veered to a path that led across a short-grassed headland. I found a bench that looked out to the ocean. The wind sent wisps of hair across my hot cheeks. I breathed out a sigh that was snatched greedily away by the lungs of the wind.

I sat back on the bench and felt it again, a sensitive spot against the metal. Suddenly and immediately I had to vomit. There was no time to stand. I tilted forwards and spewed up between my legs. It splattered across the top of my feet and dribbled over the grass in streams. When the feeling passed I sat up again so I wouldn’t have to look at it. Up on the headland the wind was biting, and I felt its teeth keenly, like I’d been dunked in ice water. Goosebumps sprung up along my arms and the back of my neck. I didn’t know what to do or where to go. I glanced down to the beach to see that Lily was legging it up the hill. They must have been watching me. As she came closer I spat the saliva out of my mouth.

She was quick on her feet.

“You okay, Charlie? What happened?”

“Not sure.”

She waited, but I didn’t want to open my mouth again.

“Okay, well, let’s get you back.”

She stood up, gesturing down to the beach, pointing in the direction of our house. The cottage was downhill from us and gravity pulled us there, Lily’s arm linked through

mine. When we got inside she watched me get into bed and rushed off to fetch a bucket from somewhere. When the bright yellow plastic was perched ready next to me, I dissolved into the cotton sheets. I remember Tully's face hovering over mine and it was dark outside. I could tell from her expression that I must have 'gone all grey' as Mum used to say. In the night I had fever dreams. I dreamt of a hot fire in a cold dark field, over and over again.

*

"You alright, vommy?" Jude came towards me in the kitchen.

I nodded, taking the water he was passing. "Better."

"What do you think it was?"

"I dunno. Maybe a bug, or a flu from the plane."

I was groggy and achy, but they were too, hungover from a night at the pub. The kitchen smelled of alcohol, sweat, and bacon. I opened the window and took a deep breath of air that was fresh but salty too. There was an empty sick feeling in my stomach that I didn't know if food would remedy or provoke. We ate a half-arsed breakfast, narrated by grunts and sighs, and laughs at each other's pain. I said I'd drive back, mostly to dodge the squash of the backseat.

We crept along the crowded motorways under grey skies, listening to a Dido CD. Every few miles Jude would reach over from the passenger seat, as if to let me know that he was still there. His hand would rest heavily on my thigh, and only his thumb would move, making a quarter circle shape. I liked the feel of his touch, but didn't need him to console me. We came down the hedge-lined lane to Westhill by the early afternoon then scattered back to our houses.

As I came into the kitchen Monica was up and ushering me out again, ignoring my groans.

"I've been hoping you'd be back, you have to come and see something."

She took off her glasses, threw down her book, and swept me towards the front door. It wasn't wet but she insisted we wear gumboots, 'wellies' she called them. I dragged my heavy feet along behind her.

She urged me up the lane towards the farmhouse, encouraging me with flighty hand gestures and a frantic smile. We came to a barn next to the Fortescue's house and through

the doors to appear beside a pen of huge black and white cows, all of them with round stomachs that stuck out the sides of them. On the other side of the barn was a pen of calves. They were young, still all limbs. The smell in there was immense, like we should have been able to see it. There was animal body in it, and cow shit, industrial things, and something vaguely sweet. It was rancid butter, scraped over fruit toast, dipped in diesel. The moos of the cows echoed around the metal walls, like a chorus of disappointed people.

As we came down the line of square faces, Tully, her mum Jo, Jude, and Fred appeared, leaning on the metal rails. Tully held a finger to her lips as we got close. The cow was facing away from us so I could see without asking what Monica had brought me to watch.

“That’s Moonie,” she whispered.

She was lying down, her bony hind facing us. She was pushing hard. A pale pinkish thing was coming out of her. The portion out in the air was shaped like a cone. Fred said it was the front hooves and nose we could see, which was a good sign. The cow was nearly silent, just small huffs and deep breaths. When she looked round at us her eyes were wide, a crescent of white rising above her dark iris. After more small efforts the cow gave one huge heave and the whole sack sunk heavily onto the ground. The cow grunted. For a second it was still a sealed cocoon. But the calf would have to breathe, it would drown in there. The human bodies tensed up. Fred bent down and braced to swing through the bars, waiting a couple of breaths. Just as he started to move, the calf’s hooves shifted inside, piercing the bag, and it appeared bright white and ebony black. Fred eased himself upright whispering,

“Lucky.”

Moonie stood up, and turned around to her baby. She nuzzled the body and head as if checking it was real. Around them on the straw was blood, and shit, cords of the birthing sack still trailing. I made myself look at it, mimicking the serenity of the others. It was nothing like the hospital ward where my brother had been born. The barn wasn’t clean, but it wasn’t so stark either. Around the pen were other clumps of placenta. It was the colour of insides—red, white, pink—and it lay in thick lumpy trails. The stuff wasn’t living and wasn’t dead either, it was like a body part left behind to preserve each labour. I counted five in the pen. The bodies and fluids and straw fit inside the construction of the barn in a way that

didn't work in my head. The thriving life and the hard steel clashed like fresh fruit kept inside a tool box.

I noticed the swaying movement of Moonie's head and tongue as she licked the newborn's body. She was rough and routine. Jude slipped through the metal rails and crouched down inside the pen. He moved quickly, low to the ground, straight over to the calf and pulled back the rest of the sack. He brushed away some straw that had stuck to its cheek. The boxy head of the calf seemed too heavy for its slim neck and it succumbed to being cradled in Jude's palms. The head was made smaller by being in Jude's hands, more canine than bovine. The doe eyes beamed up at his, following their movements. For a moment he was the sun and the calf had just learnt it.

"She's a beauty," he called out.

"Another heifer calf, brilliant." Tully was speaking to Jo.

"And what a sweet little face she's got," Monica said.

Jo asked, "Thoughts on a name then?"

Fred spoke up from along the fence. "Charlie should choose."

Their faces turned to mine. "Anything?" I asked. "Or is there a theme?"

"Whatever," Jo replied.

The first thing that sprung to mind was "Pineapple." They looked at me for a moment. "Is that weird?"

"I like it. Pineapple." It sounded different in Jude's mouth, more exotic.

"Pineapple," said Jo. "Welcome to the world."

Pineapple's face was mostly black but with a white patch in between her eyes. Jude let go and stepped back through the rails, wiping his hands on his jeans. Once left alone Pineapple began to find her feet. Her too-thin legs stretched and stumbled under her bodyweight. Clumsily, yet so quickly, she moved over to her mother then sucked her first drink of milk from a bulging teat. Her fresh tail made jittery movements, like Mrs Brown's when I gave her dinner.

The Fortescue's invited us in for a drink, a new calf as good an excuse as any. We walked up to the house. Monica and I trailed behind and I could ask her,

"What happens to Pineapple?"

She laughed. "Attached already?" She saw I wasn't laughing. "She'll become a dairy cow, like her mother."

"She'll stay with Moonie then, she won't be put in that other pen?"

"No she'll go in the calf pen. They feed the wee 'uns formula."

I looked down at my feet, the daisy-patterned gumboots on the grey stone of the yard.

"You didn't know that?" Monica asked and I shook my head. "She'll be all right." Then she laughed condescendingly. "Such a city girl."

"How often do they need to have calves?"

"Usually once a year."

"And what about the boy calves?"

"Don't stew on it Pea. Pineapple will be fine."

There were too many questions I could ask, and only a few more footsteps until we were inside the farmhouse. How many calves had Moonie had before Pineapple? How long did it take a mother cow to stop calling for her baby? Was that what the bovine murmuring was in the barn, grief? But then, I thought with relief, how could there be any suffering for creatures under the gentle hands of Jude?

Inside the farmhouse I swirled the rose round in my glass, a big pour of sunset colour, and caught Jude watching me through it. He was covered in mud and probably cow shit, splattered brown like someone had flicked him with a paintbrush. He might have been caught behind a quad bike. They were used to it in their kitchen. The splatters and his messy hair together made it clear that he wasn't trying to look like he did. I wanted to take a clean towel, hot water, and wipe it all back until it was just his fresh, open face. I wondered if he knew what people must have thought when they looked at him, even when he was covered in shit, and whether he would see it in me when I did. I looked back to the wine.

At the Fortescue's, wine was filled endlessly so you could never know how much you drank. They liked a bit of mystery. After we'd between us polished off maybe 5 bottles, things were lazy and warm. There was no quiet, even between sentences, because someone was always filling the gaps.

"D'you see Hamish the other day Jo?" Fred asked. "He finally wore his kilt to the pub."

"He didn't? And I missed it. Hell."

“He did, and with very little underneath, if you know what I mean.”

“We always know what you mean Fred,” said Tully.

“Did you get a good view?” Jude asked.

“Oh ey, the whole haggis, as it were.”

“And?” asked Lily.

“Very promising Lily. A bonnie lad, and I don’t mean Hamish.”

Their laughs echoed around the tiled kitchen.

Don Fortescue’s bass spoke up over it. “Christ Fred, don’t hold back on our account.”

Monica joined with Don. “You shouldn’t go round talking about other peoples’ genitals Fred. It’s not polite.”

“Lily asked,” he replied.

Their bodies, their words, were heavy now. They made themselves lighter by shaking off inhibitions. Lily got up and danced near the radio and Fred joined her. In our haze it would be easier to ask them the niggling questions I had, and easier for them to answer.

Jo and Don went upstairs when Monica went home, around the time it got dark. Tully turned up the kitchen CD player. Their parents’ bedroom was at the other end of the house, and music wasn’t much worse than the normal noise of cows. The four friends and I, plus a guy called Andy who worked on the farm, stayed in the kitchen and swayed between the bread and butter on the table, the bottle of wine on the bench, and the tiles near the CD player. Everything in the room had a potent sensation. The wine was sweet then sharp on my tongue, the bread and butter were soft, chewy, and the music pulsed, persuasive.

Wine could change everything, even minds. I took Jude’s hand while we were dancing and dragged him over to the window seat at the end of the kitchen.

“Hello,” he said. “And how are you, Miss Charlotte? Having a jolly old time?”

“I am, and you? Having fun?”

He was nodding while I was speaking, and bringing the wine back up to his lips. The stem was too slim in his big hands. The fine glass was laughable alongside the lines of dirt staining his knuckles. I giggled at it, at him, and he ruffled my hair with his other hand, so I had to look at him through a thick fringe of waves. He put down his arm around my shoulders and watched the others dancing.

“Did Mon say anything to you when she left?” I asked Jude.

“Just that she was going home.”

“She looked a bit off to me; she’s been off a bit lately.”

“Maybe it’s menopause,” he said, then laughed at himself. It came out like a snort.

“Sorry.” He wasn’t looking at me.

“Has she been weird with you? Said anything?”

“Don’t think so. She’s a character though. God, remember that time with Pumpkin... oh no, you wouldn’t would you, well it’s a good one. Settle in. So she was planning a church event with the vicar where two guests were speaking.”

Either he was avoiding the question or too drunk to recognise it.

“As they were coming into the churchyard, right, they stopped to look out over that field next to it, talking through it all, you know. Anyway, there were two Shetlands in the paddock, Tully and Lily’s old ponies put out to pasture, and when the vicar asked Monica ‘What are their names again?’ meaning the guest speakers, Mon thought he meant the ponies and said ‘Pumpkin and Sprout.’”

He glanced at me and I nodded. He bit his lip to curb some anticipatory giggles.

“Christ, it’s so brilliant. Give me a sec.” He took a couple of calming breaths, a sip of wine. “So obviously the vicar was pretty skeptical, but Mon wouldn’t budge, said she’d known them for years and that had always been their names. It takes a bloody will of iron to disagree with that woman, as you’ll know, and he didn’t have the balls for it. I guess he thought they were part of these new age hippy names like River or Rainbow, I don’t know. But then when the meeting starts a couple of minutes later the Vic introduces their honoured guests to the room as Pumpkin and Sprout. Apparently the woman speaker was so confused she looked like she’d eaten a lemon, and seeing it the Vicar turned white as his dog collar. Mon had just taken a sip of tea and was trying so hard not to laugh that it exploded out her nose and sprayed all over the parish newsletters. She had to excuse herself from the meeting because she couldn’t stop either apologising or giggling. Christ, she’ll never live that one down. Pumpkin and Sprout, little pain in the arse ponies but worth having just for that.”

He was still grinning when I got up. A feeling was coming up my throat. It tasted of powerlessness, sharp and tangy like vinegar. Then it wasn't a feeling, it was tangible things like bread and wine. In the bathroom down the hall I watched it all come out my mouth.

III

The falcon's chest is lifted by the curve of the altar's surface. The cloaked woman runs a hand down its front to smooth the feathers. She treats it softly, like a sleeping child. Then she takes from her side the athame, a ceremonial knife with a black handle, and cuts a deep line along the raised chest. Replacing the athame without wiping it, she waves her hands over the bird. She murmurs tumbling words. Like the summoning of water to a riverbed, the falcon's clotted blood becomes liquid and seeps out. The bird is a bright white, that would be caught luminously by the full moon should the clouds part. Dark liquid marks lines upon its snowy feathers. The cloaked woman runs her fingers along the wound until they are coated and lifts them to the other's forehead. She wipes the blood from left to right, left to right. The red tears run fast down the smooth face, fall over the edge of her chin and land on her breasts.

When the older woman has run her fingers over the bird's wound once more she then comes to balance a small dome of blood on her middle finger. She lifts it to the open mouth of the other and drops it into the centre of her tongue. The ruby dome sits there a second, then sinks into the already red mouth. The younger closes her lips and the two figures look up at one another.

The cloaked woman leans across the altar and softly, reverently, spreads her hands over the bulging stomach. Her fingers are stretched wide apart, thumbs just touching under the hazelnut belly button. There is a great silence hanging between their bodies, that to them seems louder than the fire and the river and the wind. They stand firmly like this for some minutes, until the cloaked woman lets go and stumbles backwards, wide eyes blinking. As the younger one ambles back to her place, already it is beginning.

Chapter Four

I woke up with a heavy head. I shifted to sit up in bed and watched slits of memory. They were snippets of a blurry and disjointed film. Lily had come in after me to the bathroom and held back my hair. There'd been more bread and some water, and then some more wine. Jude's face had been close. I could see it right in front of me, under the bright kitchen lights. He was sweating. Lots of parts of his face were shining like tiny stars, his eyes, the tip of his nose, the inside of his mouth as he sang. Then I was walking back home and the road was very close, coming closer. I leant down and found the grazes on my knees.

I shifted up again to have a drink of water. Not just the water, but a big mixing bowl had been brought in, put on the floor beside the bed. I took a sip from the cold glass and then sat back against the bedhead. My back touched the wood of it and exploded. It was like I'd been shot. Pain sprinted across my shoulder, over my back, down the backs of my legs. I froze, too scared to move. I heard myself breathe in through my teeth. The pain didn't stop. It was a sharp, bone-deep ache that made the surface of my skin tingle. I needed some help.

In the loungeroom Monica was holding a magazine open and staring out the window. When she heard my footsteps she turned round.

"Someone had a big night."

"I need to ask you about something."

"Oh right, okay."

I pulled up my top to show her. That thing Monica always said echoed around my head in hope. 'Leave it alone and it'll get better'. The way she said it the phrase became extra rhythmic, like a line from a children's book. I waited to hear it.

Instead Monica made this noise in her throat, like a mixture between recognition and annoyance. I pulled my shirt back and perched on the couch arm.

"What is it then?"

"Have you been feeling a bit off in the tummy?"

I nodded.

"Bit hot?" She leaned over and felt my forehead. "Oh hell, okay. I wasn't prepared for this today." She put down the magazine she was holding on the coffee table and placed her hands on her lap. "I need to explain something to you. It's a complicated thing, so I'll make

some tea. And I'll ring Sandy and cancel lunch. Sit tight a mo'." She was already up and moving towards the kitchen.

"What? I don't want any tea. Just tell me what this thing is," I said, "then we can talk about the complicated thing."

"This thing is the thing, Pea."

She left the room, glancing back at me with a too tight smile. The pain in my shoulder was easing a little, but throbbed to remind me it was still there. I tasted dirt under my nails as I bit them. Monica came back a couple minutes later with the tea tray and set it down on the coffee table. She gestured me over to the couch seat beside her. She began talking as she began pouring.

"To explain this I have to go back a bit so just bear with me. You won't know this yet, but you have a particular ancestor, one that lived here in Westhill, who's very important to our family history. She took part in something that touches all of us. You probably haven't even heard her name before. It's Clementine. She's your great, great, great grandmother, eleven generations back."

She was looking at me expectantly.

"What? What's that got to do with anything?"

"Because of her there's a genetic trait handed down in our family. That lump is the beginnings of it in you."

I imagined some strange condition and tried to read in her face whether it was fatal. She passed me a teacup.

"I don't know how to begin really," she paused. "It's silly because I've had so much time to think about it, but now it's happened. . . . It begins with proximity to the village you see, like there's something in the water."

"What?"

Her eyes were looking into mine, searching for something in them.

"What's in the water?" I asked.

"I might as well just come out and say it, mightn't I?" She waited for me to nod. "Well Pea, this trait that runs in our family, you see, it's a funny one because it's only displayed by women, but can be carried by both sexes. A bit of a genetic anomaly, actually, usually that's not possible biologically speaking. But then this isn't what you'd call scientific."

What did she mean not scientific? How could something happening to my body not be biology?

“Thing is, the bump on your back is there because something is going to grow out of it.”

“Ew. What will?”

“It’s something beautiful, not horrible.”

“Oh God. What is it?”

“Some wings.”

I waited a second to let her laugh, but the pause just stretched out.

“Okay,” I said.

“I’m not joking. That’s what it is. Soon there’ll be one on the other side too. You better hope so or else you’ll be very lopsided.”

She laughed then.

“Okay that’s enough, let’s just be straight now. I’m worried about this thing on me.”

“I am being straight with you, and you’re right to be worried.” She stopped. Tuted. “I’m not explaining this very well. They’re not weird wings, not properly magical or anything, they’re a bird’s wings, but on *your* back.” Her mouth stretched out in a straight line and her eyes narrowed. She watched me a second. “It’s not as crazy as it sounds. But you don’t have to believe me now, it’s going to happen regardless. I’ll be here with you though, every step of the way. I’ve done it before, obviously.”

She sipped her tea. It was an insane prank. Then it got worse.

“In fact, I can show you. Believe me it’s better to just accept it and deal with it from the beginning. Much better that way.”

As she was speaking my grandmother put down her cup, stood up from her seat next to me, and began to unbutton her blouse. She leaned down to squeeze my hand for a second.

“The fuck are you doing?”

She looked abashed, then swallowed it.

“Showing you.”

Her slim fingers quickly unbuttoned and parted the cotton front of her blouse. To my relief, as she undid a little more I saw I wasn’t going to be flashed any cleavage or a lace bra,

because there was something in the way. It was nude coloured, and at first looked like a singlet, but as she kept unbuttoning I could see that whatever it was, it was very thick fabric, more like a compression bandage. It didn't have any straps; it was a boob tube.

When the blouse was off she placed it neatly on the arm of the sofa. The undergarment was very close to the colour of her skin. I wondered whether it was some sort of old lady corset. She reached under her left armpit. She groped for the tag of a zipper and when she found it, pulled straight down. With one hand Monica held the front of the fabric in place, to keep her chest covered. The fabric dropped from her back and hung across her front and down her right side. I saw her arms move a second later but I couldn't understand how she'd done it. It was like she'd stretched them out beside her and then dropped them down again. But neither of her arms had moved, none of her had moved. There was something hanging behind her, another piece of skin coloured clothing. I got up.

There were two long shapes draped down her back. They'd looked like arms because they matched her skin tone exactly. I was in front of her, but I could see one of them in the gap of her waist, and down behind her leg. They reached down to the floor. Slowly I stepped around her body. They hung down from her shoulders, long and slim and delicate, a small portion touching the carpet next to her heels.

I backed away. My body had gone fuzzy, like static on my skin. I stepped towards the fireplace and leaned on the mantelpiece. The static came up my shoulders and settled in my ears. Suddenly I was alone in Westhill, in England. I had no family here, no stable thing to hold on to. My grandmother wasn't what she'd been before, she wasn't tea and jokes, or hair rollers and comfortable jumpers, she was someone, something, completely different.

She was calling to me, alternating between Charlie and Pea, beckoning for me to look at her. The wrinkles around my grandma's eyes were drawn out when her mouth smiled, but her eyes themselves weren't smiling. She was still holding the skin fabric against her chest.

"What's going on?"

"I'm just being honest with you. I don't know how else to do this."

She was using her soft voice. I'd heard it maybe once or twice in my life and it only made it worse. I just shrugged at her.

"Come here," she said, reaching towards me.

I didn't move. She nodded slowly until I forced myself towards her upturned palm. She took my hand and I felt her warm fingers pulling me round beside her, urging me to look again. The things on her back were unlike anything I'd ever seen. They shouldn't have been there, on her or in the house. It was like seeing a brown snake in the living room. I wanted to throw them outside and slam the door. I felt myself cringe.

"Go on," she said, pulling me.

The things were now clasped around her back in a cross, like someone had placed them diagonally over her. The left one came over the right. They began from just inside each of her shoulder blades, and stretched over her back and down, then crossed in the small of her back, the tips coming over her hips to her stomach. They were shaped like, well, wings. A teardrop, wide at the top and tapering at the bottom. They seemed contracted now, like all the parts had tightened and folded themselves smaller. They were coloured like her skin, but darker and lighter, cooler and warmer, more speckled and less. Every individual feather was different from the one beside it, and packed tightly together. The way they reflected the light seemed a testament to their uniformity and softness. I stared at them for a full minute without speaking while the clock on the mantelpiece tutted.

They were stunning, but most shocking of all was that her hands hadn't built these, they were too intricate for her impatient fingers. They couldn't be prop for a strange joke. Monica had turned away and the soft sunlight was resting on her tense lips. It wasn't the body language of a joker.

I said, "I don't know what to say."

She motioned for me to sit again, and perched herself on the arm of the sofa.

"Okay well, when the women of this family are in their late teens, some bones and tendons and feathers, this stuff, starts to grow from their shoulders. It's an ancient thing, a legacy of living in the village. Clementine was the first and now it happens to all our women. It happened to my mother and her sisters, and their mother before her and so on, way back." She waved a hand past her head.

She talked in a slow voice that became clinical in its clarity.

"There was this pagan ceremony, hundreds of years ago, and a kind of special rite was enacted by Clementine, our ancestor, and she was 'creatured' somehow, that's what we call it. That's what the bump is on your shoulder, that's how it started for me when mine

grew. I know it's bizarre, and maybe intimidating, but the wings themselves aren't anything to be scared of. You'll learn that yourself. If you're anything like me, after a while you might actually love them. They change almost everything." She wiped hastily at the moisture under her left eye, as if it might cheapen the moment. "And when they're grown I can take you up with the hang-gliders and you can see what they really do. That makes it all worth it. You have never felt anything like it, Charlie."

In the numb unreality of the moment, that revelation was a slap to the face.

"The hang-gliding had something to do with this? So Grandpa knew about it?" I knew the answer before I finished the sentence. "Christ." Realising it all was stepping down stairs in the dark.

"It's okay. Let it all sink in."

"I don't know if I'm ashamed or if you should be. How could you hide this from me?"

"Shame isn't useful to anyone, my darling, so forget it. We always talked about how we would tell you, me and Grandpa, you should know that. How one day you would be up there with us. How me and you could have our wings out together, with Grandpa cruising alongside. If he were here he'd be so happy, so proud of you."

She reached a hand towards me but I let it hang there.

"Stop. Please."

I was holding my wrists in my lap and looked down at them, stared at them as hard as I could, like if I focused enough I could make the world smaller and more reasonable again.

"Well it might take some time, and that's okay."

My knuckles were white. The nail of my right thumb was making crescents in the skin of my left wrist.

"I'm trying to help explain it to you," she said. "What can I do? Tell me what would help?"

"Who else knows?"

"Your parents."

"Jimmy?"

"No, not your brother."

"Will you tell him now?"

“No. You could tell him though, if you wanted.”

Monica had put her blouse back on, and was standing, watching me, waiting. The deep breaths I was taking made no impact on the shallowness in my chest.

“So you’re saying,” I began, “you’re saying that because of some genetic trait, handed down from dad, I’m going to grow some of those on my back, and there’s nothing I can do about it?”

“That’s about the size of it.”

She stood with her arms crossed and her shoulders curled round, everything focused in towards me.

“What if I don’t want them?”

“You don’t have a choice, Pea.”

How could she look at me like that? So calm.

“And all the lies were for this?”

The hurt overpowered the disbelief and then I knew it was real. I got up, walked over to the window and stood with my back to her. That’s what Westhill was, not so much an adventure as a safehouse. I was like a pregnant girl shipped off to a relative before I started to show.

But then...

“Did you say it’s starting because I’m here?”

“That’s right,” she said.

“And if I hadn’t come they wouldn’t have grown?”

She nodded, cringed.

“I can’t believe it. Oh my god. How could you make that decision for me?”

“I thought you might feel that way, but I had to do it.”

“I’m not a kid. I should have had a choice.”

“You don’t understand Charlie. Yes, it’s happening because you’re here and yes, we encouraged you back.”

“That’s one word for it; forced is another.”

“But you would have ended up here at one time or another. Everyone is drawn back eventually and I knew it should be while I’m still here, while I can show you and help you. If nothing else I can be here and tell you I know how it feels. And of course it occurred to me

that you might not want this but I also knew what it would mean for you. This is crazy, utterly mad, I know that, but it's the kind of thing you don't just miss out on, it's the kind that changes your life, changes you, makes you."

Her face and body had hardened as she spoke, rendering her into a statue more than a woman. Her posture was solid and stern. She was a double of the Angel of the North just outside the sitting room window, the figure I'd seen everyday since I'd been there and never understood the meaning of until then. I didn't want to be in the room with her anymore.

"I'm going for a walk," I said.

"Wear boots," she said. "It's wet."

I left by the side door in the dining room, went down the steps in the back garden, out the gate into the fields. My legs were heavy, feet beating across the grass. The heads of cows followed me. I didn't know where I was going. It had rained overnight and I trudged through the sodden fields and climbed over the lichen fences. All the world was soft and soggy. I reached a group of willow trees down near the gully and stopped to lean my forehead against one of them.

I'd had this body my whole life—my blonde eyebrows, my square hips, my wide feet—but even it had hidden something from me. It was unthinkable that this had been waiting to happen, just beneath my skin, and I'd never known. My body was a traitor. One I couldn't escape, or ignore, or punish. I was trapped in the shell of something I hated so suddenly and fiercely my skin burned with it.

I didn't even want to touch my back but I could feel a lump pulling at my T-shirt, still throbbing and achy. It was an infection, a disease, a tumour. I could try and pretend I didn't know or understand what Monica said would happen, but I couldn't escape the piece of evidence sprouting out from my shoulder blade. I wanted to punch something, or scream. I kicked the tree trunk with the toe of my gumboot then regretted it. "Fuck". My voice was flat and lame.

I noticed a noise nearby because of its rhythm. Footsteps were coming in my direction. They weren't the amble of grazing livestock, more deliberate. I huffed at the thought of Monica having come after me. Without really noticing it, I listened to their beat to check their owner and my mind's eye saw Lily. Her feet were getting closer. I debated

what to do. I could have talked to her, even let her see my angry tears, and she could never have guessed what was wrong.

The steps were nearer, and it was much too late for me to run. I kept still behind the tree trunk. Lily came past three metres from me, the green of the willow tree between us. The leaves hung in rows of teardrops, suspended mirrors of the angry moisture I struck off my cheeks. The wind through the leaves said “shhhh,” and I kept still. Lily was a world away. She was biting a nail, squinting hard. In her long green gumboots, jodhpurs and old rugby jumper she was the picture of a country girl out to catch her horse. Suddenly she stopped biting her nail, stood still, glanced around, then fell into a run straight down into the gully. She ran like no one I’d ever seen, plunging fearlessly down the slope. For one long second I just watched her.

I waited until she’d crossed into the next field to turn back and break into a sprint back up the valley. I came in the side door of Monica’s house panting, then through the dining room with muddy boots still on, and into the kitchen where I leaned over the sink and tried to catch my breath. Monica was in there already, cradling a cup of coffee. She watched me wide-eyed. I saw she was holding the phone in her hand and guessed she’d been speaking to my parents.

I turned round and leant my lower back against the cold dampness of the sink. After a moment of long breaths and swallowing saliva I could speak.

“I saw Lily out walking.”

“You did? She alright?”

“I don’t know!” I stared at her. “What do they know about this?”

“Why? What did they say to you?”

“They didn’t say anything to me, just about me. I overheard it in Cornwall. They said they knew something about my family that they shouldn’t say to me.”

I scraped my hair back from my sweaty face then stepped towards her.

“So?” I probed.

There was no way she could explain it. The thought of them knowing was the dreams where I’d suddenly realise I was naked and everyone would already be staring at me.

“Charlie, calm down. It’s not what you think.”

I walked to the kitchen table and leaned on the back of a chair.

“Sure okay. Then why would they say that? I’m not stupid, gullible maybe, but not stupid.”

“Okay.” She watched me without blinking for a moment.

“What did you tell them?”

“I told them about something else, that’s what they’re talking about.”

“Jesus,” I said. “Something else? What is this place, Pandora’s box?”

“No, it’s not a scary thing. It’s actually a lovely thing. I was going to wait to tell you but I’ll have to now. Philip, Dr Keats, and I are getting married.”

“Oh. Well, congratulations.”

“So that’s why they think you came, to represent the family. I told them not to tell you because I wanted to tell you myself. I’ve been waiting for the right time. I said I didn’t know how you’d react, which was only half true.”

I made a ‘hmm’ noise. Despite it all, I liked the thought of her and Dr. Keats together. It was a small, safe feeling that was nice to hold onto for a moment; a buoy I could use to stop swimming.

“I would have told you sooner, first in fact, but I couldn’t know what was going to happen with this. I didn’t know when it would start, and I didn’t want to have the wedding while you were in the thick of it. I didn’t know what else to do except wait. But when you’re through it, then we’ll figure out the wedding. First we just need to focus on your change.”

“How can I possibly come to a wedding?”

“Of course you can come. You’ll learn to tuck them away like I do. Oh my Pea, there’s so much. Will you sit?”

For a moment I stayed put, then sighed as I stepped towards the kitchen table. Monica sunk into her story. She bathed us in the places, people, the objects they used, and the thing they changed. So much to know I could barely keep my head above, and afterwards all of me was saturated with it. She spoke with something between awe and fear, and I began to feel it too, thrumming in my head, my molars, my back.

IV

It is now Autumn. The young woman has given birth and is holding her new baby. Clementine stands in the kitchen of the flint walled, thatched roof cottage, warming herself by the hearth. The baby hiccups and milk dribbles out its pouted mouth. The mouth is all bright red and white. She wipes at the face with her skirt, then holds the baby to her chest, cradling its head against her shoulder. She fits easily into the crook of one arm; tiny, curved and warm, like a fresh loaf of bread.

Clementine's free hand runs down her baby's back. It is naked and smooth. The mother leans down and kisses the round little shoulders. The oldest child is playing in the garden outside the window. He has a mossy piece of bark in his hand, held like a scythe. He's been watching his father. The other is just beginning to walk, stumbling about the kitchen and around her feet. The little boy loses his balance and falls backwards, landing in a sitting position on the hard floor. For a moment he looks about to cry. Clementine lets a wing drop down from its folded position across her back. She wears a loose tunic and the point of her wing appears where the fabric stops at her ankle. The boy sees the feathers and lunges for them. He's played with them before. He trails his chubby hands along the wing, then fiddles with the wispy end. The sound of his gurgled laughter feels to his mother like the taste of fresh honey from the rectory bee hives.

Although no one had known exactly what would happen, not even the wise woman, Clementine had felt the offer was a privilege. This was her chance to experience the hand of God. He was in nature; he'd built all the beauty of the trees, the birds, and the cows, and now nature was in her. While she wasn't born in Westhill like most of them, she feels something in her body being there. The Downs and its winding river are beautiful to her in a way that she doesn't know if words exist for. It's like the hills and woods are parts of her body she simply hadn't seen before, things she's known all her life, and feels at home to touch. When the wings of the falcon grew on her back she became a local creature too. It was a selfish kind of martyrdom, and more brutal than she had thought it would be, but that had only made it more sacred.

The ceremony has answered her call for belonging, but there are questions still unanswered. Will it carry to her daughter, to the tiny body who had been inside of her? Will

it last her whole life? Will they molt as she gets old? And the most fanciful of all, can they do what wings are built to do? Her body is still young, barely 19 years old. She's been thinking about it for days, imagining what it might be like. She dreamed of seeing her home with God's own view. If ever there is a time to try, surely it's now.

Chapter Five

Eight days were all it took. As long as a fever, or a bad period. A day longer than Genesis says it took God to make the world. I guess wings are more fiddly than worlds. Not that I believed in him then, there was nothing holy about what happened to me. The first two days had hurt like hell; after that it was all growing pains, achy and throbbing. I didn't look behind me, I slept face down on my bed and willed for it to be over. When they started sprouting, then I couldn't question it anymore.

Monica came to wash my back every day, dabbing a hot cloth in quick movements. She had said it was best to let them loose, rather than pin them back with clothes or straps. By the eighth day they lay out beside me, still like the wings of some sore sparrow who flew into the glass. They came out from either side of my torso, across the mattress, then fell out of sight to the floor. I could feel how they lay, could move them too if I tried. They weren't very mobile yet, not because they were weak but because I was. While they were still growing they felt numb, like an arm that I'd slept on. But I could lift them a little, one at a time, and feel the tendons and muscles tense, then the bounce of the mattress when they released.

In the black days and nights, I'd been having dreams that I was back home. I would be walking through a strip of bushland, watching the line of dirt under my feet being infiltrated by sand, until that's all it was. When I'd look up the sand would be bordered by spinifex, and I'd be on the top of a dune facing the ocean. It was always low tide, and the fall from the dune a massive one. There'd be a moment of that falling sensation, my arms spinning beside me, until I'd be pulled back. I didn't know, and didn't think to care, what the weight behind me was because relief would wash over me in a downpour. Perhaps it was the spray off the waves. That's when I'd see someone coming towards where I was, walking along the shore line. As the figure got closer I would begin to make out their face. It was Nick, his features squinted in confusion, and his long, straw hair flying in wisps about his eyes.

We'd spent so many different days on that beach and references to them would be on his face, in the sunburn and freckles and his cracked lips. Days of Nick surfing and me waiting on the sand, roasting in the sun when it was hot and wrapped in a thin old towel

when it was cold, or walks in the evening when we'd first met, or bonfires at night with the Long Point kids, or esky runs in the caravan park behind the dunes. From his expression in the dream, at first I'd think it was a surprise I'd planned for him but then I'd see that it wasn't confusion in his features at all. He would get closer, and closer, inextricably closer, until the only thing was his handsome, repulsed face. I had seen that face before, after what I'd done to him, but in the dream it was much worse. When I woke up in Monica's house I knew I'd had the dream, even though I couldn't remember it.

I had other dreams too, sweeter ones, lying awake in the daytime. In those ones I was on that road trip to Melbourne we'd talked about. I'd have my legs up on the dashboard and recline in the old leather seat with one hand out the window. Nick would drive and we'd be like the President and First Lady of the car, getting to choose the music even when Maeve, Joey, and Peaches would complain. We'd only roll our eyes and say "You guys don't know real music." We'd fly down the Princes Highway like the only things that mattered fit inside the Ford Laser and everything else would blur away with the trees and fence posts. The tears that came when I imagined it were salty and it helped to pretend it was from the ocean that we'd swum in at some place we'd stopped along the way. I ached at the thought that they might be doing it without me and hurt even worse when I realised that it wouldn't matter if they waited because I could never swim with them again.

By the eighth day inside my bedroom I still didn't know what they looked like. I'd only ever taken quick glances beside me. I knew how, two mirrors together was all. The urge wasn't quite narcissism nor masochism. I wanted to know if the look on Nick's face was justified. I got out of bed, moving clumsily towards the dresser. It was like standing up and forgetting you had a backpack on. My feet made the floor creak, the sound sharp after so many hours of quiet. The windows had been shut against the noises of the village, and the curtains drawn, helping me to sleep. The air in the room was stale and stuffy, tasted like the planes I'd come over on. It was suffocating me, but opening the windows would have meant letting in the world.

Lying on the dresser was the shirt I'd been throwing on whenever I ventured to the bathroom. It was a halter top that tied up around my neck and my lower back. It was an old thing of Monica's and the only top I could wear. Its bright blue sequins threw happy light onto the sad surfaces of my room. Monica smirked every time she saw me. With it tied I

took a small mirror from my makeup bag, then moved into the middle of the room. There was a bigger mirror on the dresser. I held the smaller one in front of me and floated it around to find the angle.

It took a moment to get it right, and then I saw myself. My arm convulsed and I had to steady it with the other. There was an animal on my back, a massive downy thing perched on my shoulders. I wanted to run away from it, tear it off, at least face it with my own eyes. I couldn't. I went back to the bed and leaned down on the wooden frame. Deep breaths flooded in. I counted out loud from 5 down to 1. Looked down at my toes. Clenched my hands, unclenched, clenched. I picked up the mirror from the floor and looked again.

The two wings together made a crude heart, rounded at the top and coming together at the ground. A slim point of plumes rested on the floorboards. They weren't quite even; they met just outside my right heel. Maybe I was right-winged, just as I was right-handed, or I hadn't learnt to hold them straight yet. They were a weak olive colour, and speckled like my skin. Their elegance was absurd, more a sculpture than a living thing. I shocked myself when I realised how much I wanted to touch them. Gingerly I reached my right arm down and around behind me. I swept my hand along an inch. They were tender, and I felt the aching pull of the new skin as my forefinger ran along some wispy feathers. It was painful and sore. But then under that there was a sweet feeling, a nerve-deep shiver. The new skin was sensitive as that around my nipples. Touching the wings was intimate, irreverent, like touching a thing I didn't have permission to touch.

The sound of a knuckle rapping on the bedroom door made me jump, and I pulled my hand into my chest. Monica came in.

"Checking yourself out are you? I remember doing that."

I threw the mirror onto the bed.

"You should come down for a bit," she said. "You're wearing the carpet thread-bare between here and the bathroom."

Coming down the stairs, the wings brushed along behind me, their ends falling over the edge of each step. I looked back to see them sweeping along the carpet like a trailing feather duster. Should I care about them collecting dust? I decided I didn't.

The air was colder downstairs. Out through the kitchen was a small courtyard, set down from the road and hidden by ferns and the steps running to the front door. No sun

made its way down there this time of day and it smelt damp. I looked about for somewhere to sit, then saw the stool that lived next to the herb garden. I wondered how to do it. The thought of bending the new limbs made me nauseous. I squatted down gingerly and let them sprawl out beside me on the brick. The cold of it made me shiver.

The sky was a vivid blue above, too harsh on my eyes, so instead I looked down at the dark green caterpillars of moss growing between the bricks. I sat a couple of minutes breathing in the heavy air, in slow breaths, until a voice nearby made them shallow again. It was Fred's.

"Wouldn't you say Smokey? I should say so at least. And if Mrs Brown is rude to you *this* time, then that'll be the very end of it, we'll never come again, what do you reckon?"

When he spoke to animals his deep voice found new notes and softer shapes. He finished and seemed awaiting a response. Nothing supplied it except his own footsteps. Then the rusty metallic swing of our front gate. His footsteps were too close for me to move. I held my breath and kept still. His profile trod steadily down beside me, the thriving ferns between us. He used two footfalls for each flagstone. He was used to their deep tread. I could see that his face was burnt, the skin on his nose was blotchy and peeling. There was a pang of something like nostalgia when I looked at Fred again, like he was from another era.

Smokey, the Fortescue's labrador, was plunging down the steps next to him and panting hard. As soon as they reached the bottom and stepped into the porch I got up and went for the kitchen door. It was a stable door. The top was open so I lunged for the bottom half, drew it open and slipped inside. I moved just fast enough to keep the wings from getting caught when it shut behind me. The door banged hard. I was sure Fred would lean out of the porch and look towards the noise. In panic I ducked straight down, belly meeting kitchen tiles with a round slap. With sudden relief I realised the wings had managed not to slap down on the tiles with me. They had come to meet the floor more gently, like gravity didn't touch them in the same way.

Even in the kitchen the heavy thud of Fred's fist on the door was loud. It was a farmer's kind of knock, or a tradie's, someone whose hands are used to being strong. Monica trotted along the corridor.

"Hello Freddy," Mon said.

"Hiya, here's the Smokester. Shall we come in?"

“You better not. Last time that tail nearly destroyed the living room.”

“Right okay. Straight round to the garden then?”

“That’d be brilliant, Fred.”

“Course. Any chance of a cuppa while I’m here?” he asked.

I prayed that Monica knew not to say yes.

“I’ll bring a pot out to the garden,” she replied.

A relieved breath came out my mouth, a puffer fish washed up on the sand. Monica came into the kitchen and saw me sprawled on the floor. There was a small lift of her brow.

“Well that brings back memories, you used to lie on these tiles like that when you were little, pretending to be the cat.”

“Why didn’t you warn me Fred was coming over?”

“Well I wasn’t going to let him in was I?”

“I was sitting just outside.”

“And you survived unscathed didn’t you?”

Monica could be unbelievable, utterly unflappable. She filled the kettle and crossed back to the other counter. Cavalier as she was, there was no chance she’d step on me. She knew better than anyone else living the tiny bones it would break.

“He only wants to see you’re okay, you know. They all do.”

“And how do you think that will go, Mon?”

She stepped over me again to the fridge, then back to the stove. When the tea was poured she made towards the kitchen door with the tea tray in hand, and motioned to me with a nod, the lifting of her gaze. I retreated upstairs.

Fred didn’t stay long. I guess he realised he wasn’t going to see the invalid. When I heard the shrill signal of the gate I came back down the stairs and out to the back garden. If I couldn’t be near people, it was something to be where they’d just been. The garden sloped steadily downwards, like everything in Westhill. Little garden beds slotted into the hill forming steps. They were boxes of delicate leaves, pastel petals and short grasses. Looking over the patio outside the door it was obvious where Fred’s muddy, booted feet had rested, under the stool made from the seat of an old tractor.

Monica had gone back inside, but the dogs were there, Mrs Brown teasing Smokey with an old bone, and him trying to ignore her. I shouldn’t have been outside, someone

could walk by in the field at the end of the garden, but the door was nearby, and wings from a distance were explainable. I might have been wearing a costume.

I sat down on the tractor seat, adjusting the wings out behind me. I noticed the mug Fred had left on the outdoor table and what he'd placed underneath it. The piece of lined paper was folded twice in half. I moved the mug and opened the note, shifting it into the shade to see better. Their notes always started the same way, with the elegant black strings of Lily's looping words.

Hiya Charlie, thought we'd send through another update since you're still cooped up. Hopefully not long now, Mon said you're on the mend. When my cousin Bron had glandular fever she was very ill for a week, then spritely as anything as soon as she came out the other side - so fingers are crossed for you. Not too much worth reporting really. The calves just keep coming, and you wouldn't believe the length of Pineapple's legs. Oh, and the real headliner, Fred made an utter arse of himself a couple of days ago. I'm still giggling while I try to write it down for you. We were checking on some cows down by the river path, checking the electric fence etc. It was just as a group of guys was walking by along the river and we said a bit of a hello and whatever, and Fred probably fancied one of them, you know what he's like. Anyway, as he got back on the quad he was going for a smooth, cool-guy move and tried to hop onto the bike and swing his leg over the seat, but the cowshit on his boots made him slip on the footrest and he bollocksed it up. He nearly knocked himself out on the handlebars and landed knees first in a cow pat. One of the hikers laughed so hard they snorted. I'll try and reenact it—sans cowpat—when you're better. Customer's just come in so I better pretend to do my job. Shop's been quite busy! Talk soon, L.

Hiya Charlie, hoping you're feeling better. Lily's description above is faultless, the only missing detail is the foul mood Fred was in the whole evening afterwards. Jude and I happened to mention the word "knee" a few times that night, purely by coincidence. Just everyday phrases like "on my hands and knees" "a knees up" "bee's knees" etc.

and he did not take to it well. And “Aw d’you need a little pat on the knee?” really sent him over the edge. I encourage you to try it when you’re up and about. Speaking of, I rode Conker past the Speckled Hen yesterday and remembered we have to take you there. You’ll need a decent glass of vino after this I’m guessing. It’s on the river bend down towards Tadforth and there are picnic benches under the willows. I think you’ll like it, Tully.

Charlie, Tully and Lily exaggerate. You know what they’re like. Tully’s right about the Speckled Hen though. As you say, it’s “nice as.” And on the topic of old birds, hope you’ve not gone loopy cooped up with Mon. Looking forward to getting giggly when you’re well again. Tata, Fred.

Hi Charlie, hope you’re resting up. Tully and Lily do not exaggerate. I wasn’t there but I still know it. I’ve been keeping an eye on Pineapple for you and she’s doing well. I picked up that Powderfinger album when I was in Brighton the other day. Remind me of your favourite track? Tell Mon and she’ll pass it on. We’re all thinking of you, Jude.

I finished reading and put the note down on the table. How I wanted to be back in the world they described and out of the one I’d been living in. I closed my eyes, faced up to the sun, and willed it to be over. A thought which had lingered in the dark corners of my head shouldered its way to the front. It made room for itself that I’d never given it before. I imagined myself holding a knife. I saw my red right hand.

I made for the shed then, before terror had time to sink in. Grandpa kept an old bottle of Scotch up on a high shelf like it was a trophy. Monica had stepped out to the shed a few times since I’d been there, and I knew that she was going to be near him, to repeat his rhythms. I repeated them now too, taking down the bottle from the dusty shelf, and pouring a good glug into the mug that sat next to it. The light was only faint in the shed with the door closed and it helped not to see how big the sip was until I’d already started drinking. I waited a second while the fire burnt down my throat. The shed was cluttered with his old

things, all metal and wood. It smelt like sawdust and varnish, like he used to. The air and the memories made my lungs feel heavy. When the burning in my chest dulled to soft warmth, I poured another drink, the liquid again disappearing into the depths of the deep blue china. This time some of the Scotch dripped down my cheeks, and I wiped at it sluggishly. If only I'd thought of this earlier, the pain of my back was already duller.

Soon I would know why Monica hadn't brought me gin to help with the aching. Not yet though. Not until I had the jagged tooth saw in my hand. Not until I had forced my wing onto the work bench next to me. I was fuzzy, and only felt the pain in a distant way, like wind through a jacket. I stood at 90 degrees to the bench and stretched my wing out across it. I lifted the elbow of the arm on the same side, and hovered my saw-wielding hand above the feathers. It was a guillotine. Its fall would deliver justice. It was recompense for how much it had hurt, but more than that, the utter powerlessness. These thoughts echoed around in my head. I relived the moments of hopelessness when I'd woken in the night to find my pitch black room filled with the throbbing ache of the things, and the weight of the tumours on my back. I had lain quietly in the dark, too terrified to look face on at whatever force was working its sharp magic. They were an unplanned pregnancy, selfish, draining, unwanted. I convinced myself that I was like a surgeon, only removing what did not belong and could never thrive. Finally, slowly, I lowered the blade towards the outstretched wing. When the teeth met the skin they were already sweeping back, sawing like my dad had taught me years ago, and each tooth that passed through that delicate skin ripped the cut a little deeper.

A noise came out of my mouth. I'm not sure when it punched through my lips, but it was more of a battle cry than a pained one. I guess it came before the cut. After I'd done it the saw fell out of my hand and I stood still. There came a blissful moment. I was belly up in a tropical sea. I felt dampness on my cheeks. At that moment Monica burst in. She must have heard something, whether it was the noise I made, the clatter of the saw on the shed's floor, or that warning voice that women have in their head. I felt my face smile at her. The whites of her eyes were the last thing mine set on before my legs buckled and she lunged to catch me.

At dawn each morning Clementine's husband leaves home and at dusk he returns. He is a shepherd, a labourer, a builder, a milker, and whatever else the farm needs him to be. He knows the farmland like the back of his hand, the crop from each field by their texture, and the cows by their names. He knows the valley to be beautiful and to be brutal. Regardless he is part of it. Clementine can see it in the way he moves when he's working. His hands lift and grasp and encourage things along like he simply knows they will obey. She thinks the world around him is hypnotised into complying with his every whim. They are the hands that first held her, different from the tentative ones that hold their children. He is mesmerizingly capable, and Clementine wishes to be so too. The desire moves inside her like an embryonic kicking.

This morning when her husband leaves the cottage for the farmhouse she leaves soon after. She won't be gone long. Her breasts are full of new milk and the pressure is enough to bring her back to her baby as much as the instinct to be near her. She's told her mother there are mushrooms to pick on a fallen tree by the river, and hopes there are so she can bring them back. All the same, this is her chance, when the men, the dairymaids, and all the farm hands are busy with the sheep dip.

The River Denum sweeps through the bottom of the valley, a short walk down from the village. The path through the woods meets the open bank then forks in two directions. One follows along the bank like the river's friend, the other continuing over a wooden bridge, one that is high and wide to account for the rising water at flood times and the rows of livestock that cross it. The worn wood creaks underfoot as she steps. It has high rails built up either side, the wooden beams criss-crossing over one another to make tall diamond shapes. The top of the diamonds are just higher than Clementine's head. A long rail runs atop the diagonal beams. She leans out through the rails and looks down at the river. It is rushing past smoothly, a flat surface that pretends not to know the grasping current underneath. It carries things up river away from the bridge, like small twigs, bits of bark, and leaves. They decorate the water like plant offerings to a river god.

Clementine stands a moment on the bridge. She looks to her left, back where she's come, then across to her right, following the footpath's journey over the bridge and into the woods. She closes her eyes and listens. There is the lawless chatter of the birds, the water, the wind in the trees, and some far off cows. There are no human sounds. Perhaps every now and again she catches a man's call, perhaps a bleat, carried on the breeze towards her, but that is an assurance that they are still where she wants them to be. She feels she is safe.

It takes a great deal more courage than she thinks just to lift off the first layer of clothing. While she loosens her skirts it is incongruity as much as impropriety making her hands shake. It is like sleeping on the kitchen floor, or cooking in the cellar. She swallows the lump and continues. Each layer she takes off she places on a beam that runs across the bridge at waist height. Each piece is neatened by her hands, as if the conscientiousness might redress the indecency.

She has made a tunic from old pieces of fabric which let her back show without having to be naked. Just a tunic by itself is naked enough. When she's undressed, for the first time rays of sun can touch her new limbs. She is shivering but feels the solar warmth on her body more definitely than she ever has before. She's never been to the desert, or even seen a painting of one, but in her head the feeling on her wings is the desert glare on Jesus' back. There is encouragement in it, though those less faithful might instead think of Icarus.

The skin across her wings and under the feathers is more pale than anywhere else on her body, so much so that she can see the veins running through underneath, below the translucent pink skin and thin layer of white downy hair. She can follow them like tributaries, guessing where they've been and where they'll go. Her wings remind her of her pregnant stomach, soft looking, delicate, and unexpectedly firm. Her wings are stronger than they look. But despite their strength, their perfect form, they cannot hope to do what Clementine desires of them. They are splendid but absurd.

A gyrfalcon sits on a tree limb watching the river, the field mice in the reeds and every now and again watching Clementine. The falcon sees the woman climb up onto the top rail, so she stands twice her normal height, hanging above the river with the bridge. The falcon sees the wings unfolded from her back and stretched behind her, flexing right down below her heels. There is a tilt of its head when Clementine lifts her wings to flare out next

her body, morphing into a fledgling. The woman leans her body forwards so it makes a right angle with her legs. She doesn't dare look down at the water below her but out over the fields in front, across the valley to the point where the sun sets in the evening. Her toes hang over the edge of the beam, like her heels do behind her. Tiny bits of splintering wood try to pierce the skin between her toes.

The wings start beating before she gives up her foothold. The desire and energy of her body is shown in the way she clenches and unclenches her hands, held straight out in front of her. When her feet leave the bridge the wings are beating as hard as the young muscles can allow and for a second or two it is enough. A look of pure shock flashes across her face. It opens the features into blooming joy. Her body has never felt like this before, it is strongness and lightness together as she defies the falling feeling she's known all her life. But a single second later it is lost. Her body becomes two misplaced parts. One part is agile, keen, and rising, the other heavy and earthbound. The muscles pull against themselves and there is nothing she could do.

The gyrfalcon sees the woman descend clumsily towards the river, all limbs. She is under the water quickly, gobbled up. The bird's eyes trail the droplets that spray across the surface and are stolen by the current. Clementine's wings are heavy on land but even heavier water logged, and instead of pulling her up like they are supposed to, they are pulling her down, away from the sky, the land, and the air. In seconds, she sinks down with finality and is swept away. As she is taken her fingertips trail along the surface for a moment. It is the same gesture as a hand trailing through the water off the back of a boat, except the world is flipped upside down.

Afterwards, the river is serene, smooth and glassy again. The bird takes off and flies away, cruising over the Denum. Clementine's last thought isn't about the chill of the water, or her boys, or her husband. The last thing she sees is her daughter, so tiny, no more than a round body with little legs. She isn't at home in the arms of her grandmother, she is here, down at the river, soaring lazily over her, only an arm's length above the surface. The world has gone all wavy but she can see it is her kin. It is a vision given to her by God, she thinks. What does her own fate matter with that view before her? What does she care that she can't fly, that she can't live, if her daughter can?

Clementine is in a very different place to the river when her shoulders hit something and she is jolted back into the world. The current pushes her up against a fallen tree and grinds her wings against its bark. The water that pulled her down seems to have had a change of heart and suddenly it urges her up. Her bleary eyes recognise rays of rippled sun up above. Instinct makes her hands claw up the bark. As she breaks the surface, river water comes spluttering out of her mouth and into its place she gasps breaths of warm air. The world is a friend again and she scrambles up the bank and onto its grass. Clementine sits looking at the water, the reeds, the sky.

Chapter Six

The inside of the shed was misty, like the photos of Westhill at dawn. Monica's body was a firm thing, a solid shape moving through watery ones. We were drawn together out of the wooden walls. One of my feet stepped and the other tripped over the threshold of the front door. Monica was directing me in and through the house. We moved along the dark corridor and turned right, into the kitchen where we were flooded with light by its square windows. I felt myself squinting. The woozy warm bath feeling was draining away and into its place flooded a worse clammy sensation. Everything was hot, my skin, my scalp, eyelids, and then a breeze came through the window and goosebumps rose on my arms. Monica walked me round to the end of the table and settled me on the old captain's chair. It was the sort you find in English pubs; dark wood, and a leather cushion held in place by metal studs. The rounded end of the chair's arms had been smoothed by countless hands, and the feeling on my palms was so soft compared to the sharpness behind me.

The wings fell down from my sides onto the kitchen floor. Monica came round and picked up the right one. I could feel the fingers of her left hand spread out underneath it, like she was carrying a dinner plate. The other hand was on top, tentatively separating feathers to see the depth of what I'd done. The blood was clotting. I was watching the droplets fall and pool on the kitchen floor and there were fewer of them. The pool made the shape of a fat cross, seeping out along the tiles in a vertical blotch and then also horizontally where it dipped into the grout between them. The tiny messy splatters of red around the cross made my head spin. I wanted to clean it up, make it go away. I cringed at the image, until I noticed the rhythm of it. The drop, the splash, the tiny concentric circles, the expansion of the pool, the specks of blood around it, the drop again. It faded in and out of clarity. The whole universe might have existed right there in the pattern of it, if I let it.

"Jesus, what have you done?" Monica spoke to herself.

I didn't reply.

"You don't get it do you? This isn't your choice. We've all had to live with these things; you can't just cut them off. Lord knows what would happen if you did." She fussed over the feathers for a minute. She looked deliberately at me. Her hands stopped moving across the wing. "I think I should get Philip."

Monica leaned down, head on the side, trying to look at me. I lifted my face up from the table.

“Why?”

“He has experience. He trained as a medic during the war. He’ll be able to tell whether you’ve done any serious damage to yourself.”

“But he’d see them.”

“Do you really think the man I’m going to marry has never seen mine before?”

“Jesus.”

“So yes?”

“Doesn’t seem like I’ve much choice.” All of me was numb compared to the harshness of the cut, and my lips blurred the sentence into one long word.

“No, you don’t.”

She rested the right wing down across the arms of a chair, then left by the stable door into the courtyard. I heard her feet going up the steps to the gate. I put my head back on the table to wait, shifting my face around to keep to the cool bits of wood. If I’d been together enough to think about it, I might have worried that Dr Keats knew about us. I half thought it, but more in emotions than full ideas or words. It was a frail feeling, small and open to the air.

I couldn’t stop feeling how the cut would expand then contract, expand then contract. It was a skin-deep siren. Monica jogged back down the steps, came inside and began rummaging around in a cupboard under the sink. A couple minutes later I heard some slower footfalls and Dr Keats appeared at the door, peering over the closed bottom half. Seeing him look at me sent shame running across my skin like ants; scattering, spreading. When Dr Keats let himself in, his cat followed. Monica picked up the cat and took it out to the next room. Its eyes stayed on me, wide and predatory. I rested my face on the table again and stared at the wall in hot-cheeked humiliation.

“I heard you had an accident,” he said. “We’ll have you fixed up lickety split. Things like this happen all the time at the farm.”

I heard him set down the leather bag he was carrying on the kitchen table, then move to the sink to wash his hands.

“Now,” he spoke over his shoulder as he washed, “do you know if the object was clean? A saw was it?”

“I don’t know.” I spoke loudly so he could hear me over the sink. “It was dark. I didn’t clean it or anything.”

“Dark? God almighty. No wonder.”

He dried his hands and came to stand next to me.

“Now let’s have a look shall we?”

It wasn’t a question so much as a warning. First he smoothed some feathers down, encouraging them to fall back into their right place. I felt his fingers trail along with the grain of them. Afterwards his hands made their way towards the cut, creeping steadily along the feathers as five legged insects. For a second I imagined them as spiders, then held my head up to watch. If I could see what he was doing, I could brace for it. Around the cut the feathers were matted with blood. Lines of crimson ran along and down their silky exterior as if marking rivers on their terrain. Instead of falling in thin strands the barbs closest to the skin lumped together, chunky and uneven, like too-thick mascara.

“Okay Charlie, I’m going to remove the really damaged feathers because then we can get a better look at what’s going on underneath. I don’t know, but I can assume it will hurt.”

I nodded. He gave me a countdown, and I breathed deeper the closer he got to one. He pulled on two to catch me off guard, his deft hand plucking both at once. Quick as it was, it tugged at the skin and the cut bled profusely. Dr Keats put the two feathers down on the table in front of me. One was bent and just hanging together. The other was already sawn in half, only the hollow end and downy barbs in my hand. The rest of it must still have been lying on the shed floor. Holding these victims, it was as if the thing I’d cut wasn’t me but a creature I’d attacked. When Philip was done cleaning and dressing the wound, I went back up to my blacked-out room as a naughty child who’s been taught a valuable lesson.

*

During the time the wing took to heal I tried not to think about what Monica said in the kitchen and the way she made creaturing sound, like a haunting thing. I went back to pretending I couldn’t see my wings, and that whatever else was going on under the skin of my back was out of sight and mind. The best distraction was reading. In thumbing through

the novels Monica had piled on my bedside table I was reminded of another book. I knew where it lived.

Next to Monica's bedroom was a small boxy space that might once have been a child's bedroom, but for years had been Grandpa's dressing room. It was where he'd kept his clothes, shoe polish, his shaving kits, one of his many radios. It was a place of paisley and silk things, kept in mahogany chests. He'd spend time there each day, usually in the morning, with the door closed to the rest of us. I went in there sometimes, only sticking my head in because it was still his and still private. Each time the forcefield of his aftershave wafted over, with its mixture of soapiness and spice. It had been kept as a shrine to him, one Monica visited in the way that I did. But it had been changing in there. The red-wine, velvet curtains had been taken down, and the green leather-topped desk moved under the window where it caught the sunlight. The original occupants shifted to make room for new objects, like a real time representation of Monica's love life. The different objects spoke of a friendship between the two men, of a shared love of wooden things and craftsmanship. Amongst the mementos and antique curios that scattered the desk's surface, a clear, neat square had been made in the centre, and in it sat a fountain pen, and a tan, leatherbound notebook.

I noticed the guilt of it each time I picked the notebook up, but the feeling was inconvenient and easy enough to swat away. If Dr Keats could know about the wings, then I could know about this. I'd take Dr Keats' book out of Grandpa's room, back to my bedroom, and sit in the high back armchair meant for the dressing table, but moved next to the window. I'd keep the curtains open enough to see the front gate so I would notice when Monica was coming home.

I spent time looking at the drawings, though sometimes I'd stare deeply at the scrawled symbols of his shorthand and pretend that suddenly they'd mean something to me, becoming a language I'd never known I'd known. Or that if I skimmed my eyes over them long enough some pattern would emerge and I could decode it. The shapes were delicate and precise and meaningless. Flicking through the book I found that along with the view of the village, the women with the deer, and the man with his dog, Dr Keats had also drawn a landscape sketch of the open paddock down near the river, an owl of some kind, and then the last drawing in his nearly-filled notebook was of a gyrfalcon. I stopped on the

page and turned it to the light. In the pictures Monica had shown me of the species, our species, the birds were always clinical and sharp looking. They didn't have life to them the way this one did. The bird was perched on a long twig, thin enough for its talons to reach right around, and its tail feathers stretched down below the branch, like the tails of a grey morning suit. It wasn't the easy posing of taxidermy in natural history museums, instead its figure was tense, its wings seeming ready to spread but still hovered next to its body. The body itself sat vertically on the perch, with high-breasted posture, while its head was turned round over its shoulder and tilted downwards. The shape said it had just seen movement on the ground below. Beneath the drawing Dr Keats had written, 'Tawny Bank Wildlife Park.'

I flipped back to the picture of the owl to check, holding my thumb on the falcon. It was true, the hand that had drawn the falcon was quite different to the one that had drawn the owl. While the owl was a simple sketch, of something familiar and tangible to the drawer, on the falcon the strokes were thinner, more intricate and stacked together to form a much more intense level of detail. The mottled colouring on its wings and head might just have been simple dashes of dark pencil, but looking closer I could see that each patch of dark black feathers was unique, a specific little shape. The marks became so tiny around the bird's beak and eyes I had to squint and hold the book right up close to make them out. The hand that drew this gyrfalcon moved not just with precision but adoration.

That's when I realised what it was; the drawing was a love letter to my grandmother's back. The picture might have been drawn from life, from the bird at the wildlife park, but certainly from memory too. After that I didn't look at it anymore. I placed it back where it had been, the pen and book parallel, then shut the door behind me.

Other times when Monica was out walking or visiting friends with Dr Keats, I'd stare out at the hills and let my mind go home. I thought of the people in my life who didn't know what was happening to me and imagined how they might react if I told them. I imagined telling my brother. I saw his smirking face, enjoying the trick he'd think I was playing. He'd grab the wings to see how I'd made them, pull on them to make them come loose. I imagined telling the girls I was close to at school, my cousin Jasmine, and most of all Nick. His reaction was the hardest and most tempting to imagine. There'd been no emails, or calls

or romantic letters since I'd left. That wasn't surprising given the last time we saw each other we said the cruelest, angriest things we ever had. I broke him first though, and I couldn't blame him for wanting to break me too.

It happened at a party, and I'd relived it constantly since, chewing on it like a sore tooth. Some kids from our school had lit a fire on a beach, brought some music and beer and waited for word to spread. I walked down with friends from one of their houses. We cut through the bush as wombats wandering at night, following thin tracks, and came through to a tiny stretch of sand about the length of an AFL field. At either end were high cliffs covered in tea trees. It was hidden and hazy like a speakeasy. Nick and his friends had said they'd meet us there.

When I replayed that night random images acted like triggers. The thin trunks of the trees reaching up to the flat, sloping line of their canopy; a hill floating on stilts. The way the crashing waves threatened to scoop ever closer to my pale toes and their purple nail polish, but never quite reached them. The intermittent lightning flashes of the camera a boy had stolen from his parents. How the fire burned sepia through my beer bottle. How the trail to the beach was empty whenever I looked over to it, never producing the person I wanted to arrive.

We knew people there, some just by sight, but most by name. We sat around the fire, and I dug my legs into the cold sand whenever they got too hot. A group came and sat behind us. They were boys from the year above us and a couple from the year below. We turned our bodies to face them. It was a colder night than it should have been and the newly chilled front of my body braced against it, while my back baked.

The only real light was behind me, so how could I know if they could see my face and where my eyes flicked to? When my gaze drifted back and again to a dark haired boy I didn't know if he could tell. But I could see his eyes, the way they danced over me. They were quick and flighty like his speech. In the dim haze of the moon, the fire and our beer-blurred sight, we moved closer together. We thought our movements were indiscernible. We sat side by side, facing the water.

He already had a man's body, though he wasn't nearly old enough to suit it yet. His features were big and sharp, and his hands square and clasped in front of his knees, his fingers twitching this way and that as he talked. My body got closer to his body, until I could

feel his warmth. He was familiar with me, laughing at my anecdotes, elbowing me in the side like an old friend. It lulled me into trusting him; it was a lure just like the ones he used to catch fish in the bay. In the early hours of the morning the fire burned low and most of them had either gone home or lay asleep on the sand. In the anonymity of the dark our hands found each other and soon after our lips.

“God,” he kept saying, “Fuck, should we?”

His voice was deep and slurred, his kisses desperately firm. The beer hung on his breath too, like an olfactory reminder that everything he said and did was tinged with it. He touched me like he was waiting for a hand to slap him away and would do what he could before then. When I stood up and took his hand he followed me down the beach, towards one of the tea tree headlands. The dunes sloped gently, and just behind it we found somewhere out of sight. Being with him felt like holding Nick’s fate in my hand and as if I could tilt it whichever way I liked.

When I came clean about what had happened, two painful days later, I was given a new identity. Nick and his friends threw it onto me and leaked it into people’s heads like dye. I became short, harsh words. When the accusations are true, what else can you do but wear them? It doesn’t matter if you’re sorry or if you admit you’re wrong, you’ve still done it. Slut’s a slut. What’s done is done.

But it wasn’t finished. Because not everyone else on the beach had been oblivious. There were pictures. The digital camera, the one passed around all night, had followed us along the sand, and no one seemed to know who’d been holding it. In the photo of us sleeping on the sand with our clothes half off, I was curled up tight. I became lots of things at once after the photo - I was small and worthless, but big, too obvious a target. I was easy; I was unfuckable; I was wanted by random people in the street; I was naked everywhere. Hands held onto a version of my body over and over but my hands weren’t there to stop them.

Some friends held my hand walking into school. The photo, they said, was inexcusable, sly, evil. They used alcohol to explain what I did, and I let them because I didn’t know how to say it out loud. How could I explain why it mattered that we had never been even? How could I tell them that when Nick looked at me sometimes I could feel that thing in my chest, the one that made me wanted but feeble? The thing that said I should say yes.

Did they feel that as well? Should I feel ashamed of it? I didn't understand why I saw the same look in his eyes when he was on the AFL field. I would watch the way he lunged and jumped for the ball like it was the only thing on the planet. But, at the end of the game, it was still only a ball, easy enough to pass off to his friends in the locker room. And whatever he did with it, it was *he* who was doing it. Whatever happened in the game, whether *he* won or lost, it was *he* who played. The ball was only a useful means to an end, a way to score points and boost egos. A thing to be considered for its skin, its size, its shape, its resistance in the hand, how quickly it bounced back.

I couldn't say that out loud. There was no way to show them that what I'd done was a grab for something like strength in the only way I'd ever been taught, with my skin.

The look on Nick's face when I told him what I'd done was a gut-punch. It was shock and fury blended together. I'd never seen so much of his eyeballs before, their off-white creaminess and the red threads of veins. His hands clenched into fists so tight his blood might have stopped flowing there. It made me want to shrivel down so small, into the frailest version of myself.

But something happened in Westhill, the more I remembered the look he gave me then, and the ones that came after too, reliving them in Monica's house. I realised I couldn't do any more than I already had. The more I sat with myself the more the thought of all that judgement began to make me angry, so angry I could have heated the room, the house. I let the feeling boil up in me, getting so hot it killed off everything else. At the beginning the feeling was determined and bitter, harsh like gnashing teeth, but slowly it cooled into something warmer and more softly spoken. Slowly it became something less like self-preservation and more like love. I realised it in inches, one at a time, scattered throughout the long days.

Maybe Monica knew that I was beginning to force myself out of the dark room, and towards the sunlight that snuck through the slits and pinholes in my curtains. When the cut was just about healed, she copied out a quote for me, in her flowing, calligrapher's hand, and slipped the piece of writing paper under my door.

"Hope is the thing with feathers - Emily Dickinson."

When I came down from my room she was in the kitchen, listening to the radio and chopping up herbs from the garden.

“Can you show me how to fold them?”

“Hmm? Fold what?” She didn’t look up.

“*Them.*”

Then she did.

Chapter Seven

I woke up to call my parents. We agreed over email on a time; late for them, early for me. The echoes of their voices came through in their typed phrases, and I'd read them swiping away mutinous tears. I wanted to hold myself together and survive it on my own, but more often I was the kid who's fallen in the playground and has no willpower yet to stop their bottom lip from trembling. It got worse the more I began to forgive them. Each time we spoke (and sometimes yelled) it got easier to let the hurt go, but in its place swelled up other things, like a simple longing to be held. I thought of the comforting parts of them. Like Mum's hands, the oval symmetry of the creases her knuckles made, and how I'd trace them with my nails when I was little, too young then to have many creases on my skin, and too naive to know that wishing for them was silly. I thought of Dad's beard, the wiriness of the whiskers, his smell of hard work, and in the evenings of lager.

When I came downstairs to sit by the phone I was remembering their faces; thinking of how they looked in that photo of them under the Harbour Bridge. I pulled my dressing gown around me to ward out the early morning chill and dialed their number. It connected and they were already speaking, gossiping about their neighbour. I let them talk until they noticed the call had connected.

"Oh sorry poss, we're just jabbering away."

"What's Bob been up to then?"

They were good at taking hints and kept it light. Dad answered.

"Christ Charlie, that man is a walking pharmacy. I took him down there yesterday and we could have filled a trolley with all his scripts."

Then Mum. "Dad thinks he's doing backyard deals with those White Point boys."

"He'd make a motsa," I said.

"Certainly enough to hire a handyman, at least that would give old muggins here a break."

"I thought you liked wearing that toolbelt I bought you?" asked Mum.

"Only when I'm not wearing anything else."

Mum made a noise like a panther and I made a noise like someone vomiting.

"Hello, this is your child you're speaking to."

“Speaking of, Bro-Monster’s been at it with the camera again.”

They told me about my brother’s new series of photographs, explaining the blurry images to me. He had taken snaps of his friends at a running carnival, their legs no longer singular bits of flesh but ghostly versions of themselves, defying being kept to one single moment. My parents described them so vividly I can’t remember if I ever actually saw the photos or just created them in my mind’s eye. They laughed down the line at the look on the face of my brother’s friend Paul, hypothesising that his tactic was to stretch his pouted lips so far in front of him that he’d win the race with his face alone. Chris, his actual name, was lost to the depths of time. From then on he was only ever Smoochy.

They were telling the anecdote between them when a noise outside cut through their words. The sound was so high pitched that for a second I thought it was a siren. I got up from the kitchen table to check outside the window for flashing lights. It was still dark, only just gone 6, and there was nothing. A few minutes later feet trod down the flagstones outside the window. I saw Jude’s figure through the sheer curtains, illuminated as he came down past the kitchen.

I must have physically started at the sight of him because tea split over my pyjama pants. I reached down and rubbed it in, then trailed my hands over the rest of me. Both hands swept over my back, feeling across the fluff of the dressing gown. My wings were tucked away, folded like they’d just learned to do, and I could only notice the vague shape through the two layers of fabric. He wouldn’t be able to see them. Once I knew that, I shocked myself by wanting to get up and meet him.

I was jolted out of my head by what sounded like Jude’s whole forearm hammering against the front door. My parents were still going, and I cut in to say I had to go.

I rushed along the corridor, threw open the door and we were face to face. He looked the same as he had before and it was like the world had just stayed as it was as well, except then shock fell across his features and he looked strange too.

As I came through the door I was already shushing him.

“You’ll wake Monica!”

“Oh Charlie! I wasn’t expecting you. How’d you get here so quickly?” he asked.

“I was in the kitchen.”

“Ah. You’re better then?”

“Yeah, getting there.” The pitchy repetitive sound was even louder outside. I pointed towards the farm. “What is that? Is something wrong?”

I saw the answer to my question by looking at him. His hair was flattened on one side from where he’d slept on it, but sticking straight up in bushy curls on the other. And the answer was in his body too, usually heavy looking and slow. Now it was bunched up tight.

“It’s Newsome, an old cow. She came up to the farm house making that racket. Tully went out to look what she could be on about, and found the other cows down at the river. The river’s broken its banks and Newsome’s sister and son are stuck in a ditch.”

As he spoke a hand pushed curls back from his face. I saw the hand had the jittery movement of adrenaline. He was watching me for a response.

“Okay, so what do you need? Should I call someone? Like the fireies?”

His brows pulled down lower.

“The fire brigade,” I continued, “to help?”

“They can’t help. They’d never be able to get down there. What we need is all the hands we can get. Can you and Mon come?”

“Us? Uh okay.”

“Please, if you can.” Fingers ran through his hair again.

“I don’t know what use I’ll be, but sure.”

He gave me a weak smile. His eyes lingered on my face for a moment, maybe noting my sallow skin and deep bags. I was thinner than before too, more boney. “Tell Monica it’s Riverway, the field.”

He reached out a hand towards me, I think to squeeze my shoulder but I leaned away from him. I caught his frown before he covered it, then he marched back up the flagstones, long legs striding up two steps at a time.

I banged hard on Monica’s bedroom door then heard a groan. She was a deep sleeper, stubborn even when unconscious.

“Charlie?” she called.

“Can I come in?”

“What is it?”

She was leaning up on one elbow and had the sleep mask lifted off one eye. She must have seen worry in my face because her tone changed when she asked the question again. We both dressed quickly, me calling out what I knew across the hallway. Monica had given me one of her skin-coloured zip-up tops. The fabric was soft and stretchy, but I hated the feeling of having my wings pressed into my back, constricted like an arm in a sling. I folded them onto me, using my hands to guide them. I put the right one under the left as they liked, then picked up the top. I brought the zipper together at my hip and pulled straight up. The cups were a bit big for me, but it would do. I put a T-shirt over the top, and moved towards the mirror to have a look. Monica had made it well, I guess from years, even generations, of practice. If it happened to show, it just looked like a singlet.

Monica was ready quicker than I was, and rushed me from the corridor. She put her head round the door.

“What’s taking so long? Oh Charlie, don’t fuss over that. How often do you take your top off in public?”

It wasn’t even the thought of someone catching a glimpse, it was that I had to go back out there knowing what had happened and acting like it hadn’t. Not much was the same as it had been before. Suddenly my back was dangerous, my skin should be hidden, family history was bizarre, birds were relatives, and the world was a different place to the one I’d known before. It was the first day I had my period amplified one hundred times over, and even though my mum convinced me no-one would guess, and I wouldn’t stain my skirt, I knew I’d become a different person and how do you hide that kind of evolution? I watched anxiety mark my features in the mirror.

We grabbed rain jackets from their hooks by the front door and stepped out into the dark. It had started pouring and I pulled my hood down against it, following the beam Monica’s torch cast through the haze. She knew the field to make for, and hurried down the valley towards it. As the ground became more soft and slippery, we leant backwards like pregnant women trying to stay upright.

As I followed behind Monica and her torch-lit trail she threw short sentences back to me over her shoulder. She had to speak loudly so I could hear over the rain on my hood. They were half warnings and half commands. I wasn’t to get too close to any of the cows, they were likely to be riled up and might be dangerous. I wasn’t to get frazzled, that would

only make it worse and they needed us to have clear heads. We were going to have to pull by hand most likely. Under no circumstances was I to get near the river's edge.

A ute was parked in the field, floodlighting the scene. The Fortescues were there, and Fred and Jude too. It was hard to look straight at them. I hadn't seen them in at least three weeks and they must have known I'd been avoiding them. When I braved glances towards where they stood they were deep in discussion but always glancing round in quick movements, like grazing animals who sense a predator nearby. That's when I realised they didn't give a rat's about me or our estrangement; they were scared. When Tully turned to face Monica and me her eyes were starkly white; they stuck out in the pre-dawn pastels of the field. Her staring eyes contrasted with her small thin mouth. It was the same look I'd seen on my parents' faces when my brother had his first asthma attack. I realised I should feel scared too.

Jo raised her voice above the rain and we gathered in a crescent around her. As she spoke she gestured often to her right. Following her hand I caught sight of a group of cows, about fifteen of them, and one big girl a couple of metres in front. I guessed it was Newsome. She was chunky, her colouring black and white, and she was swinging her head up and down, moving so violently I imagined her bones cracking. In front of her the bank descended into thick sloppy mud, hole-punched with deep hoof prints that disappeared into the water. The two cows weren't far out but they were deep. Reeds grew up around them and only their necks, heads and tops of their backs were visible above the water. They cast strange moving shadows onto the river beyond them from the light of the ute. They reminded me of the horses' heads in the waves of children's books. The larger one had the same colouring as Newsome, but the other was a pale red, with a small white mark between its eyes.

Jo gave instructions, throwing water droplets with her gestures. The rain had picked up and she raised her voice over the thunderous chaos of the river behind her. I squinted through the rain trying to see her mouth better. Don and Jude had the risky job of wading out and attaching the ropes, thrusting them over the cows' withers and down under their girths, then securing them in knots. While one was working the other would stand just behind and hold onto a shoulder or an elbow, braced against the tide. Fred and Jo made a chain to haul them back out, Don saturated in mud and Jude a half-dunked biscuit.

We made two lines behind the two saturated men. We began with the bigger cow, as she was deeper than her nephew. Tully was on a quad bike, a rope attached to her bullbar. We began to pull. It had to be done firmly but gently, forcefully but smoothly. Instead of yelling through the rain we kept rhythm by watching each others' bodies, pulling in time as a rowing crew does. We slipped, stumbled, and grunted. Likewise, the quad's wheels spun in the mud, sending it straight back on to the frantic animals, landing in coin sized blotches on their faces. Tully gave up and joined between me and Monica. I was on the end of a line, not adding much muscle, but pulling the rope back when it went slack. I was glad of my weak muscles then and the position they had brought me, where no-one could touch my back.

My sleeves were becoming dripping wet, and I pushed them back from my hands to grip the rough rope. Drips fell over my hood and into my eyes or caught on my eyelashes. With no free hand or free time to wipe them I either blinked them away, or let them hang there. The water was in my ears too. The drops landed endlessly on the shoulder of my rain jacket. They tuted loudly like an untrustworthy clock.

We made ground with Newsome's sister, who I later found out was named Roanie. After ten minutes of gentle coaxing and pulling, Roanie had been brought forward until she was freed to her knees and could step wearily forwards. Jo slapped her on the rump—half aggressive, half friendly—and the cow ambled shakily towards the rest. I caught the movement of them leaning their necks in her direction, their eyes mapping her. Newsome didn't go after her sister, she stood watching her son.

He was younger, and lighter, and we hoped easier to free. As we made our two lines once more Jude stretched out his hands from the tense grip they'd been clasped in. They came away from each other stiffly and he flexed his fingers, rubbed his palms together wincing. When we began again, calls of encouragement made their way back to me from the men at the front, deep voices with soft words. I watched the raw determination of their bodies, heaving in smooth surges, much harder to keep up than quick pulls. The lines were two beasts of burden, a resilient clutter of arms and legs all straining together. The calf was a yearling, a stocky little thing, and it was still sinking, and too exhausted to keep labouring against the water's pull. Every now and again he would give a sudden struggle, his neck straining out towards his mother. I caught his little cries to her when the wind blew the

right way. She'd try to come closer to him too, but one of the collies was there to guard her. In response she'd groan and paw. It would have been thunderous on hard ground but her desperate hoofs squelched lamely into the mud.

The calf sunk while we pulled, until it was just the top part of his neck and head above the water. He became a hunting trophy resting on the surface. It was nothing like the busts of placid antelope and bison, or ferocious tigers, that line the walls of hunting lodges. The taxidermist captured the perfect look of terror upon his reconstructed face.

With the calf this deep in the river, the farmers became desperate. It was Don who snapped first. From his position at the front of the other line, he used the rope as a handrail and strode into the river towards the calf. I watched dark water running over the top of his gumboots and then their disappearance beneath the water line. My own toes curled. Step after step put him deeper under until half his torso was gone. The ute's light emphasised the convulsions of his shivering body. Once he got that far in, his family began to urge him back. Flood waters might just seem like rivers, especially when you can swim, but they all knew how dangerous they could be. The river *said that*; it told us how easy it would be.

Don ignored the warnings, lunging towards the flared nostrils and unblinking eyes. Then they were just two bodies, the man and the calf, using what strength they had left to survive. The farmer reached an arm out to the terrified face, and stroked a finger tip down his cheek. I felt it with him, remembering the soft hide of the other cows I'd touched. The pink of Don's hand blended with the soft copper of the calf's face and I blinked raindrops away to make out their shapes. Two animals in the mud together.

But still the others were calling the farmer's name, Jo's voice shrill and desperate. Nearly as deep as the calf, Don leaned towards him reaching for something to grasp, but there was nearly no neck left to grab. Jo's voice rose to a new pitch, a screaming call that sounded like it ripped at the inside of her throat.

The farmer's head turned towards his wife and then back to the calf. Neither the back of his body or his head gave any suggestion of what was going on inside it. He was a frozen man. It was clear the creature was no better off. Eventually he saw it too. He took the rope in his hands and pulled himself back onto the grass, slow and furious. Ruthless swearing came out of his mouth, so loud it blasted through the drilling rain. Hands reached out to meet him and he emerged with his head down, not looking back.

I looked back at the calf. Blinking through the rain I could pick out his eyes. They were wide open and too big for his face. The newly rising sun made them shine like marbles. What did his marble eyes understand? Did he know he was dying right then? Did he know we'd been trying to help? I looked at him and saw something I could read as easily on his face as on any human's: he was begging us.

I turned around. Up the hill the sheets of rain were backed by the rising arc of morning light. I felt the rope go slack and drop from the others' hands. Don's voice punched through the morning, so harsh it stung to hear it. "Fuuuuck."

I stood still and quiet. After a minute I felt a body next to me, heard the scratchy noise of our coats touching and then Monica's voice.

"We should go inside."

The others were walking up towards the farmhouse. Except Tully and Jude who were herding the rest of the cattle towards the paddock over the lane. I walked with Monica back up the slope. As we got to the top of the field I braved a glance back. Newsome was still standing at the water's edge, despite Jude waving his arms and slapping her rump. I followed the line of the cow's obstinate gaze. There was nothing left above the surface except two stretches of rope trailing down into it. They were shrinking, snaking their way down.

When we trudged through the farmhouse door, all of them except Don had already sat down at the table, Jo standing at the kettle, facing the window. Their bodies were droopy like old flowers. Monica and I leaned against the kitchen bench.

I stared at a painting on the wall next to me to keep my tears from them. The painting was of a chunky, red bull, made of blurry lines and geometric shapes. The picture seemed to say that the herd outside wasn't enough for the farmers, that without the image they'd miss them each time they came inside. That was the thing about the animals in Westhill: they might keep mostly to their paddocks and the barn, but their presence was ubiquitous. Their smell, their noise, their milk, their shit on our shoes, their hay bales on the hills, their names rolling off our tongues, their pictures inside on the wall. The painting was part of the awe that existed there for natural things, and you could see it in their gestures too, even hear it in their voices sometimes. Tully said that coming down into

Westhill was coming into the real world. I could feel what she meant, although I couldn't figure it out. What did 'real' mean anyway?

Lily broke the silence of the kitchen.

"That poor boy."

Jo leaned out and brushed her hair with a hand. "He was a jolly little thing."

"I always thought that tiny mark on his head looked like a bird had just shit on him. It made me smile every time I saw him."

"Nice Fred," said Tully.

He shrugged. "I thought it was sweet."

"We should have done something else," said Lily.

"What else was there?" asked her sister.

"I don't know. If we'd checked the forecast later last night we could have closed off Riverway."

"Come on, we can't stop sleeping everytime it might rain. We'd never close our eyes. And it was bloody biblical, a fucking deluge. How could we have known that would happen?"

"I know, I know. But Christ, his little face."

"Then don't dwell on it." Tully had run out of softness. "This is farming, accidents happen out there and we can't always stop them."

Then Jude spoke up. "You know what Grandma May used to say, 'If you've got livestock, you've got deadstock.'"

There were nods around the table.

Tully stared hard at her sister until Lily looked up again.

"Let it go, Lil."

"It seems like we're doing the wrong thing. How can we be making good choices when stuff like this happens? Maybe the Douglasses have the right idea, I don't know. Maybe we should try and keep up, let go of the old ways a bit more, keep them in the barn year round."

"Don't start with that again. If we did keep them in, there would just be different problems. We'd have to use more drugs for one. And they'd never feel the grass, couldn't roam like they do, eat what they needed, explore. We couldn't Lily."

Lily sighed, looked out the window. "Then it's lose-lose," she said, without turning round.

After a minute Fred asked a question. "Do you reckon it was Roanie who led them that way? She likes to drink the running water."

They fell into jargon and names that went well over my head. I made eye-contact with Monica.

"I think we'll get going," she told the room.

They thanked us as we left. The rain was belting down again as we walked into the weak morning and up through their garden to the lane. We both swished our hoods on.

"What a waste," Monica said.

I waited a second before I asked, "How long do dairy cows normally live?"

She turned to look at me, to read me for a second, before she answered.

"As long as they yield enough milk."

"And what about the boys?"

"It depends. Sometimes they're kept for bulls, sometimes sold for meat."

Something sharp surged up in my chest like reflux.

"I think it's kind of bullshit that I got dragged into this whole mess. I'm not part of this village."

Monica turned to look at me again. She lifted an eyebrow.

"Well, it's true. I shouldn't have to get covered in mud and cow shit for some desperate cause that wasn't my problem."

"I'm going to assume you didn't mean that."

"What a fucking futile way to spend a morning."

"Take a breath Charlie."

"Why didn't they just shoot them? It would have saved us all some time."

"We wouldn't have got Roanie out if Don had shot them."

"What does that matter? Surely a shotgun's better than an abattoir." I stopped walking but she carried on. "Isn't it?" She wouldn't look at me. "How do they do it? It doesn't make any sense to me."

"Do what?"

“How do they choose when to care? That calf would’ve ended up at the butcher anyway, so why care about it now?”

“But that’s not their job. Their job is to keep them going until then. It’s no use to anyone for a calf to die now.”

“Either way they look after it then they kill it. I don’t see how it’s that different. Tell me, how can they know them, and you know, give them names, when they’re just gonna end up on a plate? Either they’re sociopaths or that’s torture.”

She shrugged. “That’s just how it is. That’s farming, Charlie.”

“Then why do it?”

“Because that’s what they’ve always done. I guess they feel that someone has to do it, so it might as well be someone who’s going to do it properly.”

As we came down the lane towards home some movement to the left caught my eye. A barn and a couple of stables ran down from the farmhouse, and Don was pacing outside a stable door, with long strides and quick turns. A loyal collie at his feet didn’t know whether to sit nearby or pace with him. As we came past a stone caught the side of my boot and went skittering down the tarmac. When he turned towards the noise his eyes were wide as marbles. Don was standing out of the rain, but dampness caught the light on his cheeks.

Chapter Eight

The loss of the calf was a blow; a hoof kick to the stomach we all stumbled back from. I noticed its prints when we walked through the village. The locals' greetings depended on the weather or the happenings there. Mostly it was a cheery kind of "alright then?", said like the answer was already known. After that morning the answer was uncertain. "How were we?" But while the people of Westhill stayed sombre, the rest of the village went about everything as before. The swallows perched on the outdoor table in the early morning sun; Mrs Brown barked until she was walked; Muffin the Shetland grazed through our garden and our neighbours'; and the cows droned on.

Tully and Jude told Monica they'd spent two days alternating time with Newsome. Though not normally an affectionate cow, she took to waiting outside the barn for a scratch in the afternoon. They said it was a kind of physical therapy for her grieving. She let them give her the attention she could no longer show her baby, and after a couple of days she began to groom them in return, with nuzzles and soft teeth.

Monica and I went out walking during the day and kept an eye out for her in the fields. I could identify her by her square head and fully black face. Her character grew each time I got glimpses of it. She was curious like most of the cows, but also especially stubborn. She would stretch out her nose or even walk over when we came by, and she always wanted to be the closest to us, warning others back with tosses of her head. She was a matriarch in the herd, and none of them much questioned her. Monica would narrate the cows' interactions as we passed so that their simple movements and soft noises suddenly had meaning, like I was watching a foreign TV drama with a translator. There were feuds and friendships, cliques and loners. I grew to like Newsome because I knew who she was. I added her to my list of favourites alongside Moonie and Pineapple. Monica had cows she liked too. Whisky, she said, had warm eyes.

Beyond checking in on Newsome, a walk meant a couple of hours where I didn't have to avoid people who might call at our house. I wasn't ready for pretending that nothing had happened to me or for being a friend again. The locals knew I was avoiding them, and I knew that eventually they would stop trying.

We were out walking one afternoon when we came down a slope covered in fir trees and out onto a footpath I'd never seen before. We'd emerged into a tiny valley. The two highest sides of it were steep, the path cutting across the more traversable side. It was a long thin gully, with a pond at the bottom. At a far end it flattened out and there was a stretch of grass which met a slope of woodland leading back up. At the other, an impossible incline joined the two hills. From where we stood we faced directly across to the other side of the valley. In some places it was sheer chalk, completely exposed. The way the plants crept down the sides of the stark walls gave an insidious feel to it, like a playground that's overgrown with weeds.

I caught Monica turning to watch at me as I followed her along the path. She twisted her face round but kept her torso facing Mrs Brown on the lead.

"What?" I asked.

"What do you think?"

"Of what? This walk?"

"No, not the walk. The valley."

I looked around again.

"I don't know. A bit grim. Why?"

She was smirking at me.

"See that hill?" She gestured at the chalk slope. "That's what we're going to hang glide from."

I felt my eyebrows raise and was glad I'd turned away from her to look. I imagined running over the edge and felt my stomach drop into my toes. Monica had come to stand beside me.

"It's a beauty, isn't it?"

"It's a deathtrap."

"It's not." Her tone of voice shifted us so that I was the crazy one. "It's perfectly safe. This is actually a great place to learn. There are other spots we can go but we'll start out here, build up your skills and confidence." She squeezed my arm then kept walking ahead. "You'll see."

I did think then that she was insane, and how terrified I was, but she liked it that way. When we got back to the house she took out a glider from the garage, laid it out on the

back lawn and began explaining it to me. The first thing was the colour. I'd seen a couple back in Australia, out over the bush behind the house. They were always bright primary colours that stood out in the sky. Monica's was a plain cream. I asked her why. To answer she knelt down next to the glider on the grass and reached up the side of her blouse. She gave a quick glance up the path to the road and down to the field behind the house, before she pulled up her undershirt and exposed the pointed tip of the feathers underneath. She shifted her hip closer to the fabric of the sail and sat the wing tip on top. The sail was a lighter colour than the feathers, more uniform and brighter, but it picked up on the bright flecks in her wing and the pale hue, and if I squinted they became one and the same. It was strange to see her feathers in such visible contact with the real world, like she was only checking if her fingernails suited a dress.

"It's not a perfect match I'll grant you, but no-one's going to see it up close. If people look up from the ground they'll just see the sail."

"But what if there were other gliders in the air with us?" I asked. "They'd see."

"Well, two things. One, we don't see that many, let alone mid-week when we go, and the spot where we'll start you off. And two, I think it's worth keeping in mind Pea that even if someone did see us, even if a glider came up right next to you, or you landed with you wings out or, I don't know, something went wrong and we were seen, the very last thing someone would think of would be the truth. Any number of explanations would be more plausible. They'd likely think we were loonies wearing costumes."

"Mmm okay."

"Trust me, I've been doing this for longer than you've been alive."

This was how it worked, how she had learned to fly as the wings were made to do, but her body couldn't manage on its own. Science stepped in and broke the bizarre limbo of my creatured ancestors.

She explained the parts of the glider to me, the slope of the sail, the frame, the harness and parachute, then the updrafts and thermals it relied on. I nodded and tried to take it in, but as soon as she'd placed her wing on the sail, and the two things had fused in my head, it was futile. My mind's eye was full of the image of what she was, and what I might be too.

We had to wait until the weather was right, when we could rely on thermals to keep us in the air for longer. First Monica had me practicing on the ground. There were specifics about control and safety; these were the things you needed to know, the very basics. On top she'd added her own experimental maneuvers. Having wings was having your own propulsion and that changed hang gliding entirely. She was a revolutionary and now she had someone to whom to hand her knowledge. Normally it would be insanity to let a novice glide alone, but Monica had learnt that convention wouldn't work for the exceptions. The best thing was to throw yourself into the deep end, like a mother with her fledglings. Wings knew what to do, you just had to let them do it. And if anything went wrong, the glider would make up the difference. And if even that failed to hold me in the air, then I had the parachute belt at my hips.

I practiced the feeling of lifting off from the ground by running down the gentle hill at one end of the little valley she'd shown me. With the metal frame on my shoulders and the sail held straight, the front tilted slightly up, it would begin to rise, taking my weight with it. The most difficult thing to learn was to loosen the grip of my hands. If I kept them too firm on the downtubes while I ran, then the nose wouldn't rise, and if I held them too firmly in the air then the sail wouldn't soar like it was designed to do: I'd go down and not up.

When we decided to go up the first time, Monica went before me, jogging calmly to the edge of the drop so that the glider lifted and by the time she reached the edge her feet were already off the ground. She'd assured me it looked easy because it was easy. She told me if I didn't go then she would be off, disappearing from view, and I'd have to sit and wait during the hours she might stay up there.

I watched her in the air for a moment, her body hanging beneath the sail, her black clothes heavy against the brightness of the geometric fabric wings above her. I looked down to my feet, then over to the grassy edge a few metres away. Now was the time to be brave.

The first step was slow and lazy, then gravity pulled me further and faster, until the only thing to do was lean into it. I could feel the glider being drawn up, and forced my shaking hands to loosen their grip, and lean my weight back. The nose crept steadily towards the blue sweep of sky. A moment later, the longest and shortest moment of my life,

there was only empty air below my feet. I didn't dare look down again, but out in front. I was up.

There was a kind of half sleeping bag attached to the harness and I slipped my feet into it so that my body could hang horizontally. That felt better. The straps attaching the harness to the frame of the glider had been adjusted by Monica, so that instead of connecting between the shoulderblades like a normal glider, we hung from the waist. This left space for us to open out our wings. It was difficult in this position to even out the weight, and my abs were working overtime to keep my body flat.

Monica was in front of me and slightly higher. She was a target I was aiming for, something never to lose sight of, and the link to reality that pulled me out of the panic in my head. The thermal pockets were lifting me upwards and I began to feel the glider balancing quite easily on thin air. It was something like floating in salt water when the surf's calm. The wind flooded through the gaps between my fingers, finding any space to fill. The feel of the wind on my skin whispered to me how much air hung between the glider and the ground, an immense and empty abyss for me to fall through with not a thing to grab hold of. Like the deep water near my aunt's beach house, off the wharf. It was midnight blue and cold and endless. I hated the feeling of floating in something that I couldn't see the bottom of, that could have anything hiding in it. The air below me was clear but I surprised myself by wishing it was dark like the sea, so I couldn't even guess how deep it was.

When we reached the right height, we could let out our wings. She'd made shirts to wear, having perfected the art of camouflage long ago. We each had one of these with a zip down the back. Two long pieces of ribbon were tied to the tag, a red ribbon which came up my back, down over my left shoulder and through the fingers of my left hand, and a blue ribbon which went down my back, between my legs, back up along my stomach and through the fingers of my right hand. To undo the zipper I pulled the blue ribbon, and to do it back up I pulled the red. She'd glued the teeth at the ends together so the zip would never fully come undone and we wouldn't flash our naked chests to the countryside. I began pulling the blue ribbon. I was watching Monica out in front of me while I did it, following along behind as a duckling with its mother, matching her pitch. I'd seen her blue ribbon become longer, until the strand trailed from her hand and stretched down the length of her body, tickling and lifting from her side in the air. Pulling the ribbon was slow and clumsy,

and it slipped through my sweaty palms. I teased it through my fingers so I didn't have to drop my hold on the bar. The longer the ribbon got the more I felt the air begin to slide down my back.

I waited to see what Monica would do. It was a smooth, measured movement. One wing, then very soon after the other, folded itself through the gap in her shirt and stretched out from her torso. I could see the feathers ruffling in the breeze, fluttering despite Monica holding the wing still. I watched her turn her head round and signal for me to copy.

The left wing was folded on top, and I uncurled it first, letting it stretch up and out of the gap in my T-shirt. The tricky maneuvering had the feel of trying to do up a bra behind your back for the first time. I'd practised it on the ground but still shifted and sighed with the awkwardness. I wiggled and twisted my shoulders to encourage it out. The wing stretched out into the strong push of the wind. I did the same with the right. Now the waves of wind broke not just on my face and through my fingers but my feathers too. The waves of air rippled like hands drawn along them, groping for, begging for, my attention. A shiver swam down my spine.

Monica looked back at me again, and then began. They were gentle movements, limited and controlled, but the impact was immediate; she started to climb. I had no real choice but to follow her. I didn't look down, or out beside me, or even question it. My wings began to beat. It was clumsy and strained. I had to think hard about the up and down, how to compensate for the power of the breeze hitting me head on. The frame jolted with each movement and I cringed, sweated, in the panic. I made myself stop hyperventilating when my vision got fuzzy. I counted my breaths, 4 beats in, hold 2, 4 beats out, and without meaning to, my wings matched the rhythm of my lungs. It became smoother. It got easier the less I thought about it. The way the things were made encouraged them to move as they should, and the muscle memory of generations, of thousands of years of evolution, knew better than I did. I longed to feel the pride of it, but didn't dare look behind me at them. Instead I looked to Monica's wings and imagined them on me. They were so fucking beautiful. I pretended this was a video game, or a film, or better yet a dream. That the hundreds of feet of air below me were only fictional, so only the pride and the adrenaline were real.

Monica's wings were hardly moving now, and I slowed mine too. They just hung, like tiny bits of fishing wire strung them to the glider above. Every now and again there would be a brief lift and fall, visible most at the outer ends of the limbs, and then they would rest lightly on the breeze again, seeming to weigh nothing.

I was watching her wings when Monica changed the pitch suddenly. She leaned her body dramatically forwards, tilting the nose, and she sped towards the ground. It was a quick change, done in a second, and she was gone. The space that was the second before filled with her, was now just blue. I had no choice but to do it. I leaned my body forwards, swept my wings back behind me, and let the frame tilt forward. I dove down fast, gaining on Monica, and watched as she just as suddenly changed tack, leaning the sail up, and cutting smoothly to rest on the air once again, but now much closer to the treetops. I copied her, shifting my weight and encouraging the sail to even out, but I was speeding up. The wind forced my cheeks to widen, and my sweaty hands slipped. The bar was less easy to shift than before, my fingers couldn't grip. My body was a deadweight. I couldn't tell if my shaking was coming from inside my body or made by the buffeting wind. I descended past Monica and didn't slow. I was closer, closer, too close to the ground. There was nothing to hold on to, no handrail or hard things, only thin air. I heard Monica's voice force its way through to me as I sunk past. She said, "Your wings. Your wings!" It was a high pitched ringing voice, the one she used to call Bernie the Shetland. It carried to me and worked like a voice command. My wings beat hard and sloppily. I felt the frame of the glider lifting and falling with each movement. I strained and forced them to move. Each push forced more air below me. I stopped dropping. With propulsion from underneath, and my hands madly pushing the bar out and up, the frame began climbing, and the trees shrunk back to the broccoli stalks they'd been before. The poles still shook with my petrified hands. When I'd climbed back up to my grandma's altitude, I looked over at her face. The white of her teeth was echoed by the stark brilliance of the sail above her.

We banked left, then right, hovered on thermals, dived down then back up again, beat our wings constantly until we climbed as high as we dared, Mon higher than me, and then waited until the gliders stalled and we felt ourselves pulled back to the earth again. If these were ocean depths, now I had learned to swim.

When we coasted along I built up the nerve to look down. Up this high, the smaller details of single trees and tiny lanes faded into nonexistence, and the whole stretch of pear-hued hills became one body whose shape I could begin to understand. The undulations of the hills were like the curves of a woman, and tangible to my hands. I could cup a hill in my palm. The rounded tree tops and bushes were lines of curly hair; permed trails along her body. They were chaotic at first, but the longer you looked the more some order seemed to form, a map of fields and woods, fields and woods. The roads were too pale to be veins, they were dusty and chalky, more like the marks of scratches on dry skin. The river wandered across her body too, falling into the dips in her form. I looked back at the small valley we'd taken off from, as we circled slowly back towards it, and read it as the line made by her closed legs.

Westhill was only a small cluster of roofs, so concentrated and neat it looked like one of those miniature villages you walk through with the buildings coming up to your knees. There were imitations scattered around the Downs. I could see it was Westhill by the church spire and Monica's house next to it. The village looked more than just tiny; it was cluttered with little gardens and sheds and fences. Tiny details and full lives intertwined.

Up here the world was simple. It was terrifying, visceral, serene. Being up in the sky was as close to euphoria as I'd ever been, and the feeling built up so quickly and so fully I didn't know what to do with it. It came out as hot tears. The first few were quick and flew off my cheeks like they'd never existed, then more welled up in their place, blurring whatever I looked at. When I sobbed, the frame of the glider shook. I imagined the tears falling to the ground under me like rain and guessed how many seconds they'd be airborne before they reached it. I yelled out into the air. Just noises, not even words. I could hear snippets of Monica's voice, calling out to me, but when I looked over and smiled she realised it wasn't panic but something lighter and joined in too. We hollered and screamed and hooted, like birds with confused identities.

I screamed so loud I could feel the ringing in my jaw bone.

Monica began to descend lower, drawing her glider closer to the valley we'd come from. As we started to drop down I saw her wings fold themselves away. They tucked back into place so she could pull the red ribbon. I folded my own back into the shirt, making myself hold on with one hand when I needed the other. She'd told me to keep the shirt

unzipped, just in case, at least while I was practicing landing. It was unlikely anyone could see, and surviving the descent was something worth risking it for.

Monica had shown me the best way to land, having drawn diagrams and used hand movements and stories. When she dove down in front of me, she landed on her feet and kept jogging to a steady stop. She unclipped herself and set the glider down on the grass. When the ground came closer and closer to me, its markings growing back to their true size, I pulled my body into the shape Monica had taught me, slipping my legs out of where they'd been hanging. My feet hit the ground hard, and then the glider. I was upright for less than a second before I landed on my belly and was dragged along the grass. The halt was jolting and clumsy. I struggled on to my feet a little woozy and unstrapped myself. When I was free I turned to Monica and jogged toward her with words already spilling out my mouth, hands out in front of me like I was worshipping her. She strode straight up to me and placed her index finger down my lips.

“Sit down,” she said.

I had no choice but to listen, she wasn't going to humour me. She sat cross legged on the grass and I copied her.

“First, red ribbon,” she said.

I zipped up.

She began speaking slowly. “Now, what you just did was miraculous. You are gifted, undeniably so. You just did what humans have been wishing they could ever since we first looked up at eagles and wondered what it was like.” She paused for a second. “Having said that, you are a freak, you're an anomaly, inhuman. What I'm saying is, that up there,” she pointed to the sky and her voice became heavy, “it's incredible, it is, but don't let it make you someone you don't want to be down here. Everyone has gifts Charlie, and most don't have to hide them like we do. I don't know what would happen if we were ever found out, but I think you can imagine the scrutiny, and very likely the hate. What we've been given is extraordinary, but it's not ideal, and you'd do well to remember that.”

Monica finished and held out an encouraging hand towards me. “Now you can gush,” she said, and I could tell from her face that she was going to enjoy it.

Chapter Nine

When we weren't gliding, we leaned into more sedate tasks. Having two feet on the ground and two wings tucked away was the recovery we needed to survive it and the encouragement we found to go again. Primary amongst our distractions was wedding planning. We'd sit in the kitchen with the largest teapot filled to the brim and work through Monica's to-do lists. Under the guise of this work she'd invite other friends into our kitchen-come-office. I knew what she was doing and part of me resented being forced to play friends, but then if she hadn't I don't know when I would have made it happen myself.

"I still can't decide on food," Monica was saying. I poured our tea.

"Fish?" suggested Lily.

"And what?" asked Tully. "You can't have fish and chicken."

"Mon doesn't eat chicken anyway Tul," said Lily.

"Oh right." Tully nodded. "I always forget about your weird thing."

"The texture is off-putting," Lily and Tully said together. Then after a second
"Nothing with feathers."

They laughed at each other, and at Mon, who only smirked back at them. So they knew her mantra as well as I did, if not its origins.

"Fish and steak?" she said, "I think that's safe."

We all nodded.

"Now, back to our colour scheme. I'm still not convinced about lavender and white."

"I think pastel is elegant, fairly easy," said Lily. "Not too feminine, not too strong."

"Not pink though, pastel is fine but pink's too far," Tully added.

"D'you think? Pastel pink is so weddingy."

Tully gagged. "More like so vomitty."

"Vomitty? Bit harsh."

"You can't have forgotten Aunty Carol's cake? The colour it was on the way back up?"

Lily's face was moved by memory, disgusting and sweet.

Lily turned to Monica. "Definitely not pink, Mon."

"What about pastel green and white?" I suggested. "That's classic, a bit rustic."

After a minute she said "Done," then made a scrawled note on her pad.

On the day of the deed I stood watching her smoothing the fabric of her wine red suit and looking at herself for the last time as a widow. The suit was tailored linen, the jacket cinching at her waist then flaring out again to sit softly over her hips, the sleeves three quarter length to reveal her long forearms and elegant hands. Her ring-less fingers caught my eye, the nudity soon to be addressed. It was strange to see her so put together, but I could recognise how it suited her. It was seeing a version of her from a different life some place more urbane than this one. She used her right hand to encourage the loosely permed curls up from her face, a gesture that was half practical and half habit. I handed her the bouquet of white carnations from the garden and she stood a moment to look at the finished picture.

“Any cold feet?”

“Not in the slightest Pea. Perfectly temperate.”

“Get going then?”

“One thing first.” She handed me back the bouquet and moved over to her dresser. On top of it were little jewellery boxes, stacked up in a pyramid. She picked up a small pearl one and took from it a simple silver necklace with a single stone. She put the stone on her palm for me to see. It was flecked with deep orange, the rest a pale apple juice colour. I could see the lines of her palm through it.

“It was my grandmother’s. I don’t know how she got it, but it must have cost her an arm and a leg. You can have it for today. The colour will bring out your hair.”

I turned round and lifted the hair from my neck. Her fingers were hot as she fastened it.

“A little family thing, in the absence of the rest of them,” she said.

Monica held her hands on my cheeks for a moment.

“You could have asked them to come, they would have you know.”

“I know, Pea. Better things to spend their money on though.”

I dropped my hair down and moved to the full length mirror to see. The stone hung in the centre of my chest, in the space between my collar bones and navy dress. The colour of the amber picked up the dark ginger streaks in my blonde hair like she’d said and brought out the weak olive of my skin too. The stone sat amongst the freckles on my chest like their prettier friend.

Monica came and stood behind me, looking over my shoulder.

“You can have it one day. When I’ve kicked the bucket.”

“Soon then.”

She smirked as she smoothed her skirt and neatened her hair again.

We left the house just the two of us. It was three minutes to two o’clock when we arrived at the wooden gate into the churchyard. We went in along the gravel path, trying to walk quietly like it was a surprise. I could tell from outside that there were people waiting in the church from the little scuffles of shoes and coughs. I stepped inside the entrance and signalled to the organ player. Then when we were ready I followed Monica’s slow footfalls in through the stone doorway, into the cold air, and along the deep navy tiles. The procession was calm and understated, not like the weddings I’d seen in films. It had a quiet dignity, just as Monica did when she was in the right kind of mood. The congregation was standing as we entered. It was a sea of grey and pastels. The couple had kept it small, and the gathered crowd was the village plus a couple of other important friends. The tiny church was half-empty and echoey but as we came towards the altar it began to feel fuller. Most of the women wore either hats or fascinators, and the millinery perched atop their heads rested like a flock of tropical birds bringing life and vibrancy to the dim interior. At the end of the aisle Monica took Philip’s hand and her place before the priest, and I sat down on the pew behind her with the Fortescues. Philip wore a pale grey suit with tails and a grey top hat to match which transported him back a century.

Reverend Meadowsweet began the service in his deep drawl. My eyes drifted up to the lines of the beams that ran across the inside of the ceiling. I hadn’t been in the church before, even though I walked past it most days. The inside-of-a-boat roof hung high above our heads, like we were underwater and the upturned vessel held us in its immense air bubble. The church was all stone and wood, hard and cold, with stained glass indented here and there.

As the reverend’s voice rolled on I relaxed into the stoney air and thought of love, but not of the bride and groom. Nick had emailed me. It was only the day before but my head had been saturated with it since. It was the first communication we’d had in at least three months, the first civil sentences since we’d broken up. They were more than civil though, they were warm and they were drunk.

“C its bern ages. why r we lie this? I MISS YOUY”

Opening it was picking up something I didn't know was hot. I'd sat back from Monica's computer taking deep breaths, then read it over and over again. It must have been after a night out, not just because of the mistakes but because that was when he got sentimental. That's when he'd said the kindest things he ever had to me. Memories of tender moments appeared in my mind's eye.

We'd been at a party, one of his footy friend's, and had stumbled back towards his parents' place in the early hours. The surf club building was on the way, its glass and white wood front looking out onto the sea; the face of a watchman. His dad patrolled with the club sometimes, so the building was a familiar place to Nick. He took my hand and drew me over to the balcony stairs without asking or explaining. The balcony rose above the shrubs that bordered the beach so now we could see the black nothingness beyond them and match it with the sweeping thunder. It was cold, even up there out of the wind. The tentative fingers of first light were beginning to grasp the horizon. Even though it was cold and dark, I didn't want the sun's hand to grip just yet. I just wanted Nick's in mine.

There weren't chairs out there that time of night but it didn't matter because we could see the horizon from our seat on the wooden boards of the deck. They were damp on the back of my legs. That's when he said,

“I wish we hadn't met now.”

I said, “What the hell does that mean?”

“I mean that it's shit timing. I'm too young to love you like this.”

I replied by looking at his face to see what it said. There was softness and a little pain in it. He squeezed my hand hard and turned to watch the ocean, like he didn't want to think about it anymore, like he couldn't change it anyway. I remember looking down at his hand and memorising the way his fingers interlaced with mine, like this image was the symbol of us. His tan was darker, my nails were longer, that he had a freckle right beside the crease of his thumb's knuckle, like a crumb a mouth was about to eat. That made me smile. It was better for him to tell me he loved me that way, the look and the words had more soul in them when there was regret alongside. I knew he was telling the truth. But was he now? I couldn't look into his face to check. I hadn't had any more emails. I couldn't even know for sure whether he remembered sending it.

The reverend had stepped up into the pulpit. He read the famous passage from Corinthians, and professed in his even drawl that “love is patient, love is kind.” Out of the corner of my eye I kept catching heads among the pews casting glances towards the bride. Her head was turned up towards the vicar, her right cheek catching the green and red tinged light of a stained glass window and mingling with the scarlet of her suit.

Livio, from two houses over, was called upon after the first reading and stood up, unfolding a piece of paper which crinkled loudly in the silence and the people around him laughed. He held onto Philip’s shoulder as he passed. Jude was seated behind Livio and I avoided his eyes when I felt them on me.

During the hymns the stone building was filled with thick noise and hot air. I hadn’t been in a church much and there was always an embarrassment around religious things growing up, like conversing in a language I knew so few words of, but here there was something about singing with the village. It was in the way I could hear them smiling while they sang and how the full sound was made up of their voices together. I could hear Philip’s soft deepness and Lily’s falsetto. Tears pricked up in the inside corners of my eyes. Their voices filling up the structure, using the air we shared to make music, was so different to the stuffy bedroom and stuffy air I’d existed in not long before. I filled my lungs greedily and sung louder.

After the hymn the couple knelt before the vicar, the soles of their shoes pointing out towards us. As they bowed their heads in prayer, I saw Philip take off the dark glasses that he always wore and hold them by his thigh. I couldn’t see his eyes, his face was held low, but he seemed different without them, sort of uncanny. He replaced the glasses as he and Monica stood and took each other’s hands. I read the firm straight back and set of his jaw. He stood like a veteran accepting a medal. Monica was more whimsical in the way she stood. She smiled often, cheeks blushing.

The procession followed the newlyweds back along the lane towards our house. We folded back the French doors in the dining room, and dragged wooden chairs from the shed out on the patio and lawn, looking up at the clouds passing overhead and making guesses about how dangerous they were. Tully, Lily and I sat down the hill from the house, dangling our legs over one step of the terraced garden and facing out across the valley. The two cousins sat on the grass in front of us. I picked flowers and plucked off the petals one by

one. The tiny white ovals drifted off in the breeze. That was easier to look at than their faces.

Fred had his loud clowney voice on, making the others snigger at him. They were updating me on Newsome, using her as an anchor between us.

“She’s definitely got more vim and vigour than this time last week. Loads of vim, vim coming out her ears.”

“You’ve got something coming out of somewhere,” said Jude. “Bollocks and mouth in case that wasn’t clear.”

“Crystal thanks Oddie,” said Tully.

“Anyone want a top up,” Lily asked as she got up.

When everyone nodded, she and Jude went back up to the house.

“I hear you’ve been out trying to kill yourself,” said Fred

I looked down at my hands in my lap and felt my face get hot. “What?” Without wanting to I could see the blood on the kitchen tiles, the saw in my hand, the half-cut feathers.

“Mon said she took you gliding,” Fred clarified.

I heard myself breathe in and realised I’d been holding my breath.

“You all right Charlie?”

“Yeah sorry, I just felt a bit dizzy for a second there. Funny that you mentioned gliding.”

“You’re enjoying it then? Are you an adrenaline junky too?” Tully asked “Must be genetic.”

“I didn’t think so but I guess. Heights have never scared me that much, but I still nearly wet myself everytime.”

“You’d never get me up there,” said Fred.

“You haven’t ever gone up with Monica then?” I asked.

They both shook their heads. “I don’t think she’s ever offered,” Tully replied.

Of course not.

“Are you proud then, Charlie? A grandmother married.” Fred paused. “Are you proud when it’s an older relative? Is that how it works? This should really be the other way around.”

I laughed. "Monica was never conventional. Yeah I'm proud. But it's not like much has changed; they might have been married before."

"And that's why weddings are pointless in this day and age. An excuse for a party and nothing more." It wasn't the first time Tully had said that. I could hear it in her voice and see it in Fred's eyes.

"I'm going to have a brilliant wedding," he replied. "Punting on the river, crochet on the lawn, bottomless booze, throw in a couple of swans, and we'll have a right knees up."

"You're planning already?" I asked.

"You've got to have dreams Charlie, absurd dreams."

When they spoke to fill the silence I wanted to fill it too, but always at the front of my head were the lies I told by omission, and anything I could say seemed thin and unimportant in comparison to them. I was made more shy when I kept catching them looking at me. With sunglasses on I suppose they couldn't tell where I was looking and thought I wouldn't notice the long stares at my face and body. Not eating or moving much for days had changed me. I was starting to build myself up again, but I stretched my shoulders out and straightened my back to try to compensate for the smallness.

When the sun was shedding off its last rays, like superfluous satin garments, Fred called everyone up around the patio. The couple stood in a champagne-glow that competed with the salmon sky behind them.

Fred gestured to the couple. "The new love birds." He waited until we'd finished clapping. "We've organised a surprise for you. If you'd like to move up to the barn, something is waiting inside. Cheeky yes, I know. You know me Mon, couldn't help myself."

"Hang on a sec," Monica said. The new bride turned from the gathered crowd to look at Philip properly. "I want to say to my new husband." She paused and took his hands in hers. "I am so grateful for you. Grateful for your soft heart and your strong feelings, for your careful love and your reckless humour."

I'd heard her practicing it the night before but now the confident roll of her voice was lost and instead it caught and wavered. Then her face shifted away from its earnest posture and back into that typical thin smile. "Now the surprise."

I leaned across to the patio table to set my champagne down but Jude put a hand under it.

“If it’s what I think it is, you’ll need that.”

I pulled the glass back towards me and tried to read his face for more. But he made a gesture of zipping his lips shut.

Fred elbowed my side as I passed. “Get excited,” he instructed not suggested.

The barn was up the lane, behind the Fortescue’s place, and we walked through the house’s garden to it. Bees and midges burst from bushes and into twilight around us as we came past. We waved at them in lazy swipes. The air felt warm and heavy as it does before a storm and the bugs seemed to swim through it like a too hot bath.

Monica turned to me “Did you know about this?”

I shook my head watching her skeptical face. We entered the barn by a small side door and as the first footsteps sounded on the floorboards they were met with music. I saw Philip jump then hunch dramatically at the sudden noise and Monica hold onto his shoulders while he recovered. Without any preamble, there was the full, round sound of fiddles and percussion. We looked around. The band was at one end of the room, while the rest of the space was empty, besides a few tables and chairs down the two long walls. They’d decorated the barn, who ever had colluded with Fred, with wild flowers and bunting. The stalks of petals hung in bunches on the stone walls, and the bunting stretched in smiling loops across the beams.

There was one member of the band who stood before the others, with only a microphone in hand. When we’d all arrived inside the barn Fred raised his voice over the now soft band, and introduced us to Jack, our caller. He was a cheery, chunky man dressed in jeans and a checkered shirt. When Jack began to order the crowd around, directing us with a wave of his hand into lines of men and women, I leaned towards Monica.

“This has to be a joke. Fred’s taking the piss isn’t he?”

“No, no piss taking.”

“So we’re all going to do this?”

“Of course we’re going to do this. Where’s your adventurous spirit?”

“Skipping around a barn isn’t what I’d call an adventure.”

“Charlotte, are you being a chicken? Are you?”

“Not a chicken, just showing basic self-respect.”

I stopped her just as she started making the warbling noise, before her elbows had come all the way up.

“Okay, alright, yeesh. You have a real habit of taking my dignity from me.”

“What are families for?”

I looked around the barn to the other faces. They were smiling and laughing and raising their eyebrows at me. Monica and Philip were the head couple to begin with. Jack explained the movements of the dance slowly first off, and we watched them practice the shape of it for us as he dictated their steps. They were to start at the top of our row and then move gradually down to the end, dosey doeing with other couples as they went, and then the second couple would take their place and so on. It was more about where your body went than what your legs did, and while Monica skipped lightly on the balls of her feet, Philip was low and steady in his movements.

Now the band lifted the music back up to us, the fiddlers sawing dramatically at their instruments and the steps began in time with the ditty. Jack called them all the way, his laughter or encouragement filling the gaps, echoing up into the beams overhead. Words spilled out of him like he wasn't even trying, as if he was an instrument too. They weren't bad at it, Monica with her good memory and Philip with his propensity to follow her. The rest of us stood clapping along to them, smiling when they were elegant and then delighting when they failed. As they drew towards the end of their routine Phillip swung round in the wrong direction and the newlyweds collided chests first, then wobbled dramatically in opposite directions. For a second there was worried silence, but when they'd gathered themselves we laughed so hard that there was no band at all and they were just dancing to our voices.

The next in line were Flo and Don, then Tully and Jo. I looked across from me and saw Jude. He was smiling. His face was flushed and swaying with the music. Being in his gaze, with that look in his eyes, was to stand inside an eclipse. I had to look away before I did myself damage.

I slunk backwards from the line and went over to one of the tables near the wall. I kept my back to them so I didn't have to see the look on Jude's face. They were calling for me but didn't turn around. A bottle of champagne had been left on the table in a wine cooler. I grabbed a glass and half-filled it, foaming bubbles flooding the rest of the flute. I

lifted it to my lips and drank, slowly. When I finished the sweet stickiness lingered on my top lip. I looked back to the line and Jude was already dancing down the middle of the lineup, paired up with Julie, the Reverend's little niece. He was leaning down and she was dancing on her toes with her arms stretched straight up.

When I'd finished my glass I joined the line with Fred. He was smirking at me, and smirked harder, laughed, whenever I got it wrong. It was messy, our limbs flying in strange directions. His spins threw me round the room but he'd catch me when he could. We dosey doed down the line. "Shake that booty," Lily called out, slapping Fred as he came past her. When we'd come down the line, made an arch for the rest to come through, and taken our new spot at the end, I had to bend down, hands on knees, and gasp for breath. The floorboards were warped by the tears in my eyes.

Eventually I was hot and breathless. I excused myself, grabbed another drink, and stood against the wall, leaning on the cold stone. Dust came up from the wooden boards and smelt like things in museums do. There was rhythm in the floor too. The shaking encouraged movement, like a double bounce on a trampoline. It was a feeling very different to the church service but they were parts of the same body. The barn was chaotic and whimsical, while the church was solid and stern. But the same structure, wood and stone, sturdy and ancient. These timeless things, like dancing and singing and worshipping, made Westhill what it was. Maybe that was why I felt it in my chest, like a memory of a feeling, something like nostalgia, something hidden in my ancient blood.

I looked across the room at the spinning bodies and imagined them with new faces. These people weren't my neighbours but their ancestors, villagers from centuries before. They took on the names I'd seen on the gravestones in the churchyard. They were Tom Willoughby, May Fortescue and Daniel Keats. And there was a woman among them, perhaps with my freckled skin and strawberry hair, that was hiding the same thing as I was. The shapes of the world were blurring together; past things and present ones, their bodies with each others', the light with the music. My skin crawled with the vividness of it and it weighed down in my lungs.

I made my way towards the barn door. It was drizzling outside and much cooler. This side of the barn looked down towards the village, all the houses nestled behind the Fortescue's. I put my champagne glass down on a step and walked through the drizzle

towards an oak tree. It was an umbrella. The bark of it was rough on my forehead. When I'd stood there a moment the world obliged and began to drift away, like I was only speeding past on a train. The barn, the dancing, the rain, seeped away together so I was just left with my own breathing. In and out was much more ordered, much less complicated, than secret things.

Then I felt a hand on my shoulder. His long fingers stretched down the top of my bicep.

"You okay?" Jude asked.

"Yeah, fine."

He stood beside me.

"What are you out here for?"

"Just getting some air."

It was harder to breathe it now. I could smell his aftershave. It smelt cool like mint and clean like linen.

"It's stinking hot in there."

I could feel the heat of his body next to me.

"Want to go back inside?" I asked him.

We both turned and moved up towards the barn, but then he stopped and faced me. If I looked up at him we'd kiss. I knew I had no right to kiss him. I looked up anyway.

It was a sip of scotch kiss, punchy and lucid. His tongue was coarse on mine, his lips firm. His hands cupped my face like horses' blinkers. The heat of his cheeks crept over into mine and I felt them blush. For a second we were like the midges, tiny things, floating in the night. All my senses lived in my lips.

When his hand trailed down my shoulder I knew I had to stop him. He watched wide eyed as I dropped my hands from his chest, and stepped way back. Our lips were the last thing to leave each other.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Sorry."

He held his hands out in front of him. I don't know what he thought he did, or what he thought had happened to me.

"It's okay," I said, to take the strained look off his face.

We stood a moment looking at each other. Looking properly. The square shoulders of his grey morning suit were mirrored by the sharp jaw above, but then his slanted eyes, soft mess of hair made the lines of him rougher.

“You wanna sit?” he said, already bending down to the damp grass. He stretched his legs down the gentle slope then leaned back onto his hands.

The rain was easing, and was now a delicate coolness, so I came over next to him and did the same. I left a gap between us. We didn’t say anything and I wondered whether to speak. But I could see the smile on his lips out of the corner of my eye and that made me feel like it was all right to stay quiet. I felt myself smile too, just because I knew what it was to be near him again.

I wriggled my toes inside my patent heels then reached down and tugged them off. The damp grass was an icepack on my feet. Jude sniggered as he stretched down and picked up one of the shoes. He bent his knee to bring his foot up the other thigh then held my shoe against the bottom of his. His foot was at least one and half the length of mine.

“Were you hoping to borrow them?” I asked.

“Was, but stilettos never fit me right.”

He passed it back to me by the toe and I grasped the heel, threw it down next to the other one.

“Your feet are absurdly small, look at them.” He laughed. “How do you ever get anything done with those tiny trotters?”

“Trotters, that’s flattering.” I looked down at our legs. There was half a metre between our hips but our feet had somehow migrated to be near each other. “I could ask the same of those flippers.”

“Flippers, how dare you.” Leaning down he said “Don’t listen to the mean woman.”

“You have a weird relationship with your feet.”

“I like them. And ya know, it’s never a bad thing for a man to have big feet.”

“It is if you want to wear stilettos. At least your flippers are in proportion I suppose, imagine Fred with your feet.”

His laugh was a rumble in his chest. “He’d be even more of a clown.”

My laugh came out as a snort as I thought then said “Or Fred with my feet, that would be even better.”

“At least you could share shoes.” As he spoke he stretched out to lie flat on his back. His speech was lazy and heavy like his body.

“So what did you think then, of the wedding?” he asked.

“It was kind of beautiful. I mean the weather, and the flowers in the church, and the barn looks like something out of a movie.”

“Pretty as a picture.”

“You’re probably used to it.”

“Not like this. It’s different when it’s people from the village, not just someone hiring out the barn for the day.”

“Did you ever go to church much?” I asked.

“A bit. Mum took me to Sunday school. I had a crush on one of the other kids.”

“Of course you did.”

“You?” He shifted his head onto the side to look at me and I stared at the star-freckled skin of space.

“Nah, my parents aren’t like that. It’s all a bit weird to me if I’m honest.”

“Oh? Which bits?”

“Like that people still read bits from a really old book, over and over again. And they seem to think it’s the most profound thing that’s ever been written.”

“Some of it’s pretty profound.”

“Maybe, I guess I wouldn’t know.”

There were a couple of quiet beats that were full of other things. The shape of his hands folded across his chest, his smell, the way he was humming under his breath. Für Elise. He often hummed. It made the silences gentler.

“We’ve missed you being around. Not much, but a little,” he said.

“I may have noticed not seeing you, just a tiny bit.” I let the ambiguity of whether the ‘you’ was singular or plural hang there, like a kiss blown in the dark.

“Did you get our notes?”

“I did.” Scribbled pages pulled from an exercise book, with pen line stratas, built by each of their different hands. Sentences of everyday things that made me feel normal for a moment. “Sorry I didn’t reply. There wasn’t much to report, and I was pretty out of it.”

“No worries mate.” He said, leaning into my twang. “My sister had glandular fever once, it was pretty grim. Loads of whinging, that’s my main memory.”

“You haven’t mentioned your sister before.”

“Haven’t I? I think about her loads ‘round here because she used to love Tully and Lily’s horses. Tully loved it because she’d rope Tess into the shit jobs like mucking out, and Tess didn’t even mind. She’s up in Edinburgh now, studying.”

“Studying what?”

“Engineering, she’s the smart one.”

“Right, and you’re the idiot?”

“Exactly, a poor old thicko trundling round the farm.”

“Yeah you’re dumb as.”

He laughed, like he did every time I used some Australianism. “Dumb as mate.”

“Accent’s getting better.”

“Cheers. Feet better yet?”

“A bit.”

“High heels are such weird things. Putting your whole weight on a little stilt just to try and look nice.” A pause here. “They do look nice though.”

“Nice save.”

“They do though, god they do. And that dress Charlie, it’s something else.”

He was staring up at the sky instead of me, but he seemed to know it without looking.

“Your suit’s pretty alright too.”

I heard rather than saw his hand move onto the grass, the soft rustle of it like a botanic whisper. It edged closer to me until his hand met the edge of my thigh. It was an easy slope down from where my palms were held on my lap, effortless with gravity’s help. His fingers didn’t interlace with mine but instead his hand formed a basin into which my hand poured itself. He closed his fist around my ball of palm and digits. We were wrist to wrist.

He held me there, in our cocoon.

I broke our clasped grip to stretch out my fingers and run my nails along the inside of his hand, up his arm and down again. His sigh was low and nearly lost under my own

breathing, such soft sounds beneath the thrum and knock of the barn up the hill.

“You’re like blackberries, Charlie.” His voice was soft and heavy.

“I am?” I asked.

“The over ripe ones that have been warming on the brambles in the sun all summer. And when you taste them your head nearly explodes.”

“Blackberries?”

“Yes.”

The turning of our bodies towards each other was swift. My lips swept onto his, without thought or hindrance, like nothing easier, more wholesome existed in the world. Our fronts brushed together, our feet intertwined. Why be two bodies when you can make them one? The question thrummed in my skin and my muscles found no reasonable argument against it. I wanted to be close to him like I’d never been to anyone before, like our souls might touch as much as our shapes. Perhaps I could keep my top on, he’d never have to know.

But then, no. I’d have to be careful, hidden, wrong. That would be worse than none at all. The front of my body swelled out to him impatiently, while my shoulders shied away, like a creature petrified of human touch. I couldn’t be both.

I leaned my face away from his and took a steadying breath.

“I can’t do this right now. I’m sorry.”

“Okay.”

“I shouldn’t have done that.”

“I’m glad you did.”

He was smiling, but gradually it drew down and closed to form an echo of my own face. We both sat up and I leaned down to pull my shoes back on then stood up. I didn’t say anything to mend the brokenness and neither did he.

He angled towards the barn and took a step. Then stopped and turned back to me again.

“Right now? Or ever?”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay. I’m not sure what’s going on.”

“Well neither am I.” My words came out angry so then his did too.

“What’s going on with you Charlie? I don’t get this. Ignoring me, kissing me. Is there someone else back home? Is that it?”

“I don’t know how to explain.” I stopped. Everything honest I couldn’t say.

“If it is someone else then either you have made a commitment to them and you should walk away now, or else you’re free to do as you want. Who cares what’s going to happen, who cares what happens a week, a month from now, you don’t live then, you can only live in one moment at a time, only this one, this exact one. So what are you going to do with it, with me?”

He was leaning down towards me.

“I know what I want to do with it but I don’t want either of us getting hurt.”

“It’s a bit late for that,” he said.

He couldn’t mean that. They weren’t feelings between us, just inclinations, a desire to be near each other and see what happened. But then it wasn’t just physical with him, I wanted his thoughts too.

“I don’t know what to tell you, I just know it’s not a good idea.”

I was looking at my feet, pushing about a patch of clovers with my pointed patent toe.

“There’s something you’re not saying,” he said.

He had this way of getting people to talk, and if I’d had one more champagne I think I would have told him, have sat him down and explained everything. The history, the wings, the email, the incomprehensible explosion of it. Telling him would be that first day after a fever, all fresh air and coolness. Instead I turned away from him and towards the dark nothingness of the valley. The stars were the only lights out in that direction, except when a train ran past down by the river. Then all was dark and still.

“You can tell me anything, I hope you know that.” He was whispering, like he knew his chances were easily shattered.

“There isn’t anything to tell,” I said.

“Right then,” he said as he turned and left.

Chapter Ten

The night of the wedding I stayed at the Fortescue's. In the hazy world made of a long day of champagne we'd slipped into being easy with each other again. I woke up in their spare room, the one right above the kitchen, to the sound of a teaspoon in a mug.

Caffeine would help. I got up, still wearing my dress from the day before, and followed the maze of the corridor through the old farmhouse, under tiny alcoves and past other spare rooms, then downstairs to see who was up. The floorboards creaked under my bare feet and the house smelt of the dusty wooden floor.

Lily was standing at the sink, staring out the window and stirring. Her hair was wet and drips made dark raindrops on her navy T-shirt.

"Can I have one of those?"

She jumped and her spoon clattered against the china. When she looked towards me her eyes were wide.

"You crept down those stairs didn't you?"

"Sorry Lil."

She leaned over and flicked the kettle back on.

"You alright?" She came and sat beside me on the cushioned seat in the nook at the end of the kitchen.

"Could be worse, you?"

"Yeah I'm okay. I was up milking at 4. I think I'm through the worst of it." She yawned through the sentence. "What's Mon up to today?" she asked.

"Just hanging around I think. They go tomorrow."

The kettle had boiled and Lily got up. As she moved to the bench I noticed next to her, beside the sink, were 4 mugs lined along its edge. One of them was a cream mug with a watercolour fox on the side. Its crimson tail curled up and round with the mug's handle. It was effortless to imagine Jude's striding form coming casually up the driveway into the kitchen and picking up his mug.

"You know what Lil, thanks for the tea but I think I'll head home, see how Mon is."

"Okay, no problem."

It was already quite hot outside, and the sky was cloudless. I looked at my watch and saw it was 11. I walked quickly and lightly down the street, carrying my shoes. I came down the flagstone steps then through the side door straight into the kitchen. The tiles under my feet and the air inside were cold. It was dark in there until my eyes adjusted. I flicked our kettle on and sat myself down again carefully, feeling fragile.

Monica heard the kitchen door and came in from the garden.

“Morning Pea.” She was wearing her gardening gloves and a ludicrous smile.

“Morning Mrs Keats.” It came out like a croak, and I coughed.

“Bit worse for wear then? The Fortescue’s all right?”

“I only saw Lily, but yeah.”

There was a pause as she surveyed my pitiful appearance.

She said, “And Jude? Have you seen him?”

“Not today,” I said, pointedly.

“I didn’t see much of him yesterday,” Monica said. “He seemed on good form though.”

I shrugged at her. “Yeah, sure.”

She watched me for a minute more. I picked at a sticky patch of something on the kitchen table.

“Charlie? Did something happen? I saw you two outside together.”

“Nothing happened.”

She came and sat beside me and picked up my hand.

“I don’t want to talk about it right now. I don’t even want to be awake.”

The champagne seemed to have drilled a hole through my brain.

“Did you two have a tiff then?”

I lifted my head up and it lolled heavily towards my right shoulder to look at her.

From Monica’s perspective, I didn’t need to open my mouth for us to have a conversation.

“Have you been shutting him out? That’s it isn’t it? You’re keeping your distance and he doesn’t know why.”

“Urgh Grammy. You want to talk about this now?”

“My guess is he’s just feeling confused and a bit vulnerable. Did he say something to you? Something harsh? He’s probably hurt.”

I shook my head. She got up and went over to the boiling kettle and began filling the teapot with leaves. When the tea was brewing she stood with her back against the bench. She was thinking; her features were tight, and she kept fidgeting with her hands, putting them in her jeans pocket then taking them out again. Her new ring caught the soft sunlight subtly, like a polite suggestion of their marital bliss.

“Have you thought about just telling him?”

Only in daydreams.

“You can’t be serious.”

She raised her brows and her shoulders at the same time.

“You’re going to have to tell someone one day, unless you plan to be a nun all your life.”

Of course I’d eventually tell someone, *someone*.

“You’re being crazy,” I told her. “Are you still drunk?”

“I don’t know, maybe, but the thought of him knowing doesn’t worry me. If this were some random chap from down the pub I would be warning you against this very thing, but it’s Jude. He’s like another grandchild to me.”

“He could blab if he wanted to, just like anyone else. Where would we be then?”

“But he wouldn’t. You don’t think he’s trustworthy?” she probed.

“I don’t even know him that well.”

“I think you’ve seen enough of him to understand who he is. And I can tell you he’s trustworthy.”

“But surely the more people who know, the more danger we’re in. I thought you of all people would be telling me to keep my mouth shut.”

“Well yeah sure, like I said, if this were out there in the world, with other people. But this place is safer than anywhere I’ve ever been. You must have felt that, the difference here? I know he would never say a word, so it makes no difference to me at all whether he knows or not.”

“If it makes no difference, then I’ll choose not.”

“Suit yourself, I just think deep down you know the benefits of choosing for him to know.”

“If you’re so keen on him knowing, you tell him.”

“Your wings aren’t my secret to tell.”

“They were your secret to bestow,” I said bitterly.

“Is that the problem here? You’re still furious about it all?”

“Well would you blame me?”

“Fine, fine. I just thought you might like to tell someone, to own them a bit more.”

“That’s not even the point.”

“Oh? What is the point?”

“That maybe I don’t want to show anyone anything. Just lay off, will you?”

“Don’t get snappy Charlotte. All I’m saying is if I were you I’d be brave instead of scared, especially when it’s someone you know is kind.”

I got up and left the kitchen before she could keep arguing with me.

*

The newlyweds were to keep separate households, like wealthy gentry unwilling to give up their estates. In reality it was more about the effort of it. Their houses were so close, their lives already so entwined, that they figured why waste the time and energy on moving objects from one place to another. What they weren’t saying aloud was that they were both too set in their ways and too attached to their own spaces and daily rituals to give them up. They were swallows, destined to migrate. I saw the way they would disappear from each other’s lives at certain times of the day and happily reunite later. I guessed that Philip slept at our house; he was always around in the evening, sipping brandy until he couldn’t move far. I never saw him in the morning. According to his new wife, he was up before the dawn and back in his office, shuffling through pen-saturated papers by the time the sun rose. It brought a different feeling to the house, having him around more often. There were an extra set of footsteps in the hall, an extra towel in the bathroom, an extra mug to brew for, a cat always waiting to be tripped over.

In the week after the wedding they went honeymooning for a few days in a holiday cottage a couple of hours west. They went to do the things they normally did, like watching docos, reading books, and going on walks, but somewhere more novel. The day after they left Fred and Tully set up plans for a picnic lunch, like they thought I might be lonely. Actually I loved having the house to myself. It was quiet and still, which helped make me

feel that too. The only noises inside were the soft whimpers and begging of Mrs Brown at dinner time and the grandfather clock in the sitting room.

For our picnic lunch Fred had brought with him cherry tomatoes from Sandy's vegetable garden and scotch eggs; Tully packed cold meats from the farm shop and a sharp cheddar cheese, and I said I'd bring a thermos of tea. We settled on the crest of a hill up behind the farmhouse. Long lunches were one of the perks of milking at the crack of dawn. They'd already worked a long day and there were others who could pick up the slack for the afternoon.

It was hot and bright, and I pulled on my sun hat to keep the glare off while the others were plants basking in it. The floppy sides of my straw hat made my view of the Downs only long columns of hills. It was picking up and looking at a different postcard each time I faced a new direction. I thought about what each postcard would look like from hundreds of feet up, tried to remember. I was looking down towards the village when Jude made his way up the hill in his big strides, head down.

"Here's the old Oddball," said Fred.

I'd asked them about the nickname before, and all I'd gotten from them was that, well, he was an odd looking guy. The logic had been lost long before. He was certainly taller and broader than the rest of them, and the way he moved seemed to accentuate it. I suppose that made him odd. The ludicrousness of them thinking that about him instead of me made me smile.

Jude sat down on the picnic rug next to Fred and helped himself to some tea. When he'd had a few sips he kept his hands busy by picking at the label of the plastic mug. We kept our eyes away from each other.

A group of cows wandered over to us. They were mostly black and white, and all female. Tully stood up and moved towards them. I didn't recognise any of them. One cow came right up to Tully and rested her forehead against Tully's torso. Tully began scratching behind the cow's ears, one side and then the other, leaning her body with the cow as she shifted her attended ear down with pleasure.

"That's Beatrice for you," said Fred. "Complete diva."

I laughed, then pointed to the cow on her right. "And that one?"

"Nel," he replied. "Nosy, less cuddly. Smart."

“Not the smartest though,” said Jude.

It was the first time he’d spoken and his voice was defiant. We all turned to look at him.

“No, not the smartest,” Fred conceded.

“Who then?” called out Tully.

“Billy, evidently,” Fred answered.

Tully threw her hands up. “God, that’s so like you. Of course you think a bull is smarter than the cows.”

“I’m not going to change the truth just to suit you Tull.”

“That’s the thing though Fred, you’ve changed the truth already to suit yourself, you’re just too stubborn to see it.”

Their tone was easy, but there was a sharpness lurking underneath.

I asked, “Well who do you think it is, Tull?”

“It’s obviously Bramble.”

Fred started to tease her and Tully spoke up over him. “Who is also a bull, but that only shows how much I’m not letting myself be biased. Why would I say it’s a bull calf unless that’s what I knew was true. Kills me a little to admit it, but he’s the smartest. And I guess it’s only fair, given the cleverest *people* in the village are all women.”

Her comment hit its mark and Fred was up on his knees now, arms out towards her, voice loud. The cow backed away from Tully as if it didn’t want to be a casualty.

Jude spoke up over them. “Can you two stop bickering for one nano second, please?”

They did, out of shock. In the quiet between us were the cows’ movements and moos. Hooves thudded to shake off flies, flies buzzed to each other.

“It is Billy though,” Fred said.

“You’re taking the absolute piss now mate.” Tully had come to sit down but was now up on her knees, facing Fred.

“Accept it and we can move on. Just put down your feminist agenda for a second Tull, yeah? It’s getting a little boring.”

“You snarky little twat.”

“I’m the twat, am I?”

“Well, yes, yes you are.”

Fred reached for the closest thing and threw it at Tully. It was a mound of grass he had been picking. The grass confetti-rained down over her, little green strips settling into her hair.

In one typically sweeping movement she was up and coming straight for him. Her foot caught the plate of scotch eggs and they rolled off down the hill. They followed each other's trajectories, like ducklings trailing after a mother. Fred was quick on his feet. His legs were shorter than Tully's but they could move. They were both off down the hill, striding over the eggs, some of them crushed under their trainers.

I felt Jude watching me watching them. Before I could turn around to speak to him I heard him moving on the picnic rug and when I looked he was standing up.

"Will you be alright here with the cows?" he asked.

Where he stood, the sun was Jude and Jude was the sun.

"Yep, they're friendly aren't they?"

He nodded then headed off down the hill.

Against my better instincts I called out, "You okay?"

He turned around and seemed to be thinking a second. "I'm fine," he said. "Thanks."

And though he didn't sound fine nor grateful, the smile on his lips said he was trying.

A couple of minutes later Fred came trudging back. When he reached me he was panting hard and had grass stains down his T-shirt. Tully was close behind.

"Jude's gone home then?" she asked.

I nodded. They settled back on the rug. I picked up a bottle of water and took some long sips. I thought the sweet cold of it might help the painful heat in my chest, but they seemed to be in different layers of me. The sun was lowering itself, still bright but not so warm. I could see the long afternoon stretching out before us and then the lazy sunset, the kind that seemed to take so much longer in England than Australia.

By then I thought I'd come to understand what it was like there in the summer. Westhill smelt how green looks. It was round oak trees. Being there was feeling small next to the long hills, the chalk cliffs, the rings in the trees. Westhill was tiny, intricate details set against waves of green. It was the way you could hear the past in the murmurs of the cows and feel the people in the bark of the trees, the ones that had made the fences. It was softness and hardness together. It was thistles, stinging nettles and thorns amongst soft

grass and dandelions, whose time was counted by a curious breeze. It was stone walls that caught on your hands, muddy walking tracks, splintering old stiles. It was wind, rain and thunder which turned suddenly into soft sunshine, so gentle, like it thought we were only infants with naive skin. There was something melancholy about Westhill too, like it was all slowly seeping away, like soon all the dandelions would be bare. This place was a subtle kind of paradise; an answer to a question I never knew I was asking.

“It’s a true thing, isn’t it? The rural idyll.”

It was the kind of question the kids back home would have laughed at me for. The locals both nodded, like they’d answered it before.

“It’s just, when you read about it, it seems like it can’t be.”

“It’s not real because it’s in books,” said Tully. “It’s in books because it’s real.”

She stared down at a daisy chain she was making, oblivious to her eloquence.

“And the farm’s part of it,” I said, not sure if it was a question or a statement.

“Well there wouldn’t be the fields, or the cows, or hedgerows without the farms.”

It was an ancient task, made from living things.

“That’s why we have to keep doing things the old ways,” said Fred.

Tully nodded, smiling at Fred, memories of their altercation forgotten. She began rummaging in her bag of picnic food. Tully reached in and pulled out something to eat. She held it with both hands and it took a moment for me to realise what it was. She was nibbling on a chicken wing. My shoulders rose up towards my ears. She was a quick eater, not savouring the meat just getting through it. She had eaten most of the flesh from the meatiest part of the wing, and was now breaking apart the bones to get what else she could from it.

“You okay?” She was looking at me.

“Yeah.”

“Want something to eat?”

I shook my head.

“We’ve got drumsticks too.”

Better. But then, I had thighs too didn’t it? Tully carried on.

“They’re Jane’s chickens. From her back garden. So delicious.”

“No thanks, not right now.”

Was there something on me? On my back? What was that feeling right then, so strong? Nausea? Pain? Deep pain. What was happening to my wing? What could I feel hanging in my body without knowing before that it was there? Had the blade I'd used to cut myself ever really been taken out?

I wiped my forehead with a clammy hand. I stood up and left, making excuses about feeding Mrs Brown, and then walked round to the house the long way, cutting down across the bottom paddock and up through the garden. As I reached the top of the garden steps I found a reflected version of myself in the dining room doors. Clouds had set in and it was dark inside the house - my portrait had a stormy background. The French doors' showed my hair being swept behind me by the wind. The waves of it blended with the leaves of a chestnut next to me. They both moved in the same way as the earth's breath touched us indiscriminately. In the reflection, the leaves were my hair, and my hair were the leaves; I could have been the Green Man's daughter. A face looked back at me that was different to the one I'd come with.

I went inside and straight up to my room. I stripped down like I was drunk, throwing layers off and tumbling around until I could sit cross legged on the bed in just my undies. I unfolded one wing, using my hands to guide it and brought it round to my front to rest across my thighs. It curled slightly, like bark peeled off a tree. The boney underside looked up at me.

When my wings had gone from alien things to compliant limbs, ones that I could tuck away, all my feelings about them changed. Suddenly I'd begun doing something I hadn't expected; I preened over them. I tidied and smoothed their feathers, careful to only bend them the way they liked. I checked them for dirt, dusted them with my fingertips, and was anxious never to catch them wrong on clothes or doors. I watched the water run off their top side in the shower and cling in tiny droplets to the underside. I discovered how they felt, where they could bend and where not, how they were soft, and hard and compact. I pawed over the feeling of the bones and muscles, more exposed underneath, like ribbing on a tailored dress, then smooth and uniform on the top side. I discovered the neat pointedness of the feathers. I held them at an angle to the light coming through the window to learn how they shone.

In empty hours I sat cross legged with a wing curled around, holding it. The downy feathers and hair were dreamily soft; a reward for the hours I spent grooming them. The velvet hair grew all over the wings and then out across my shoulders, around where the joint met my back. With my arm stretching round I could touch it.

When I held my wings I held myself. I was someone no one had ever seen or touched or passed around photographs of. My wings were endearing things, like a favourite pet, but they were intimidating too. They were creaturely, not domesticated but wild. They weren't anything like the rest of my body; they were built for survival. Sleek, aerodynamic, strong. It was incomprehensible that they belonged to me. And if they were me, then my body was those things as well. I was an animal too.

Chapter Eleven

The cursor blinked at me. It wasn't a wink, there was no feeling in it. I reflected the same thing back at it. Nick's email sat below the empty space and beckoned for me to write something. I imagined Nick typing his words out to me.

"C its bern ages. why r we lie this? I MISS YOUY"

He'd have sat at the family computer, on the small square desk next to the kitchen bench. It would have been late, well early, by the time he'd gotten back home. Maybe he'd sway in the chair, perhaps hiccup, as he turned it on and logged in. The Windows startup sound would be loud in their small, dark house. Then he'd sigh, probably swear, as he realised he'd need to unplug the phone and connect the dial-up. When he'd finally come to type, his fingers would tap across the keyboard, pressing hard the letters that stuck from that time his sister had spilt Fanta on them. What did he think as he typed?

Nick was that old T-shirt I slept in. We had holes and we'd been stretched and we were comfortable. Then maybe some holes are too big to mend. He'd seen the picture too, the one from that night at the beach, I'd watched him handing the rectangle of photo paper round the group on the bus, one of the line of boys who'd passed it between each other. He'd looked at the picture then up at me. He wasn't smirking quite like the other boys were. His look said that this was what I deserved, a slight rise of the brows. He'd said it out loud too, so I knew it was what he thought.

I'd walked round to his house at night, when my parents were asleep. I'd come through the backyard and heard him listening to music and smoking out in the shed. The song was Grinspoon's "Champion", one of the last songs on the album and probably his favourite because most people hadn't got that far. "You wanna champion or be a homeboy/ You're a macho fucking number one champion." I could smell the weed, the stuff his uncle grew out on his farm, under gutted out old cars so the cops couldn't see it from their surveillance helicopters. It made him dozy and kind and I hoped he'd had a couple of joints by then.

When I knocked on the door he knew it was me somehow because he turned down the music a touch and said "Go away, Charlotte." I spoke to him through the shed door, my hands up against the corrugated iron, my fingers falling in or on the grooves of it. It was still

warm from a day in the sun. I asked him to get rid of the pictures. He didn't move from where he was sitting, I'd have heard it. The floor inside the shed was dirt and sand.

"No," he said, quickly and easily. "I don't even know where they'd all be."

"Can't you find out? Just get them and give them to me then I can burn them."

"Give it up Charlotte. They'll be lost and gone by now."

The way he said my name made me someone I never wanted to be again.

"I've already apologised to you, so many times. What more can I do? Just tell me what to do."

If he didn't want me, then I didn't want me either.

"Nothin," he said. "Give it a bloody rest."

"I still love you. Doesn't that mean something?"

"So what?"

But he'd emailed me. Something had changed in him. Reading kind words from him was to be in his bed again, laughing, arguing and finally agreeing about what our children's names would be. It was old flannelette sheets, hot milo, kisses all over, books read aloud to one another, moments so pure I don't know how we, such messy beings, made them. Between us was a sacred softness, one that seemed like it could redeem anything, survive anything, even the brutal beatings we would give it. He'd been right; we were too young to love like that. What kind of mistake might it be to give up on all we had? Could we grow into who we wanted each other to be? Some choices had been made already, and not by me. The things that had grown on my back; they asked new things of me.

I wrote a single line, an honest and potent one, and then left it waiting there to see if I would regret having written it. "I miss you too."

*

I came in the door at five and the farm shop smelt like strong cheese and deli meats. There was something else in the mix too, sweeter, stronger even. As I walked towards Lily, I realised it was the hot coffee she was holding.

"You all right?" she asked.

"Yeah good, you?"

She put down the coffee to hug me, even though we'd seen each other that morning.

“You’re a treasure.”

“It’s no problem.”

“I’m having a mare of a day.”

“A what?”

She laughed. “Like a nightmare but in the daytime”

A customer came in and Lily walked towards them. “Help yourself to coffee,” she told me, “it’s in the back room.”

I made coffee with a shiny plunger, and poured it into a bright blue mug that felt heavy and expensive, then Lily showed me how to put through a sale. Each item had a sticker marking the price and I punched it into the till. It was the cash that slowed me down. In shops I usually gave over notes to avoid using coins. I stood a while looking at the different pieces of metal, trying to remember their weights and shapes. 20ps had lots of sides, pound coins were thick and gold rimmed, 5 pence was smaller than 1 penny. They were cold from the blasting air conditioning but grew clammy in my hands. Strangest were the 1p coins, so incredibly pointless, and tiny, and mostly a dull, looking copper-greenish-brown. They’d gone a nature colour not a man-made one, like they’d been grown. As I poured the coins back into the till, every now and again there was a strikingly shiny silver coin. I looked up. Lily was shiny, all over and right through the middle of her. If I’d talk to anyone about Nick’s email, it would be her.

She was crouching down at the lowest shelf, talking to a small old woman. Lily was saying words like “aroma” and “imported” while the woman’s eyebrows stayed low and skeptical. As she walked back towards where I was standing her face transitioned from a smile into an eye roll and gaping open mouth.

I asked, “What’s the deal tonight then?”

“We keep the shop open late one night during the festival. We don’t do anything fancy, just keep the doors open. But because Jane’s on maternity leave and Mandy’s in France with her aunt we’re short staffed. I only want you to help out with the till when there’s a rush and keep the shelves tidy. Sound okay?”

People brought glimpses in with them of the festival going on outside in the street; bags with logos for signature gins and handmade candles, or humming a song the band had been playing, or painted faces with butterflies and spiderwebs, or complaints about how

fucking difficult it was to park the bollocking car. Peering out the leadlight windows I could see people gathered round a group of dancers skipping to a string quartet. Beyond them the street was lined with bunting, strung all the way up to the castle at the hill's crest. Kids trotted down cobblestones, men with red faces drank pints on cast iron benches, and dropped ice creams melted into sticky pavement pools. The sky strip of blue and white above the street was darkening into the night.

As the dusk was settling and the shop was about to close a customer came in who was different from the wandering festival tourists. He was strongly built, sloppily dressed, and had a thick black beard. As he came round from behind a shelf I noticed he had a little girl with him, clinging to the back of his leg. She peered around his thigh at me while I said I'd fetch Lily to slice the meat. The girl's eyes were wide and unblinking, made more so by looking up at me. She had a freckle just above the arch of her right eyebrow that looked like it might have been placed there by an artist's pencil.

I stayed behind the deli counter with Lily while she prepared their ham. When Lily pulled out the meat I pretended to yawn to cover the involuntary gaping of my mouth. The round, glazed chunk of meat, that had once been a working thigh muscle, still stretched down to a thin little ankle, so slim I could have reached my forefinger and thumb round two of them, and that led to a fingernail coloured trotter. It was pointed downwards, like the pig had been on tiptoes. It was a whole complete leg which told of the whole complete animal it had come from. I glanced down to the little girl wondering if someone should cover her eyes. She was less of a limb of her father's tree now, and was leaning out on her own, looking up at the counter. Her face was easier to read than before, the features were open and animate. Her teeth were still too small for her mouth. Lily was asking a mundane thing, like how many slices or what it was for, I didn't notice. I moved across the shop to neaten some jars, but couldn't take my focus away from the girl. Lily was quick at slicing and warm with the customers. They both laughed at a little joke she'd made, the man's a humming noise and the girl's a brimming, bell-like giggle. They paid and were out of the shop a minute later.

"That's Glen Marshall; he has a farm the other side of town." Lily said it as the door swung shut.

"What sort of farm?"

“Poultry, and some pigs. That was probably his pig I sold back to him. I gave him a discount.”

Lily went over to the chopping block where she'd left the leg. She grabbed it, wrapped it back up, and placed it back in the fridge cupboard beneath the counter. The wiping of Lily's hands on her apron left smeared marks of I don't know what. I wondered if the leg had ever been out under the glass like the other meat, if there was a reason it was kept in the dark. There was something indigestible about it, and it sat in my stomach waiting to be dealt with.

The feeling came with me when we closed the shop at nine and headed across the street to the Red Lion. That little sweet face, the amputated leg, the easy conversation, how could they fit together so seamlessly? Was it better that the tiny human knew where her food came from, saw it at all stages of life and death? Or should she be ignorant like I had been, about how the chicken on my plate came to be there, what it might have been before? Why did my gut say it was worse for her to see the truth of her food?

Whatever understanding of the world these farmers had I still didn't get it. Perhaps you just had to be born into it, and breathe it from your very first breath, from your first memories when you were sitting out on the quadbike watching the cows eat their dinner. The way it worked wasn't a thing of theory. It might be that the relationship between farmer and farmed wasn't mapped out in ideas. It was in the things I'd witnessed: their gentle hands, their old culture, their sober heads, and their dwindling bank accounts.

Lily bought me a drink to say thank you, a generous pour of red wine. She chatted at me about Monica's wedding, about how much she wished we could go back and do it again. She was good at talking, at taking hints and making them into conversations; she could grow tangents like flowers off a vine. Often I let her talk more because I liked hearing what she thought about things and even just listening to her voice, but that night I wanted to talk to her about something.

“The day before the wedding I got an email from Nick.”

“Oh heck. What did he say?”

I told her exactly what it said; his words were memorised by repetition by then.

“And what did you say?”

Her posture changed, before we'd been facing each other at an angle and leaning on the bar, now she'd twisted to look at me straight on. I twisted a little the other way, keeping my eyes down on my wine.

"I was thinking of saying I miss him too."

"And?"

"Well I do."

"How long have you been missing him?" She was thinking of Jude.

"I've missed him since we broke up, but I thought that didn't mean anything since he hated me. I figured I would just ignore it and it would go away. I don't wanna ignore it so much anymore though."

"What does that mean then? Are you thinking of getting back together?"

"I don't know what he's thinking." I paused a second. "The thing is, there's so much history between us, it feels like it would be a waste to give it up."

"History is hard to let go of. It also holds you back from new eras."

"It's not just that we have history; it's what that's made up of."

All our memories stacked up behind us as a library of stories we'd written, of first times and fights and declarations, and together they made our coming of age. I wouldn't mind leaving some stories behind, but I think you have to take the whole bundle and it seemed worth it for those precious ones, the manuscripts written in rose ink and printed on sepia paper. I blushed at the truth of the things I'd said to him in those pages and hated the thought of having to learn to be like that again with someone new. He ran so deep in me that I thought if I were to carve him out I would be left with nothing but empty skin.

"So it's important history," said Lily 'but part of that is what he did to you. He should have done better by you Charlie, surely you know that. I mean he, well you know what. If he had an ounce of decency he wouldn't have passed on those pictures to the next guy."

I'd only told her scant details. Was the version in my head, the one coloured by countless other betrayals and redemptions, was that clearer or less clear than the one she had?

"We've both fucked up before, it's not like either of us is perfect."

"That's not what I mean. It's about who *you* are, underneath all that other stuff, whatever happened with him. Who you are now. You should be adored, not, I don't know..."

not merely forgiven." Her voice was thick and face was flushed. She turned it away from me. "I might go to the loo. Is that okay?"

I nodded. While she walked away I replayed our conversation in my head.

"You're thinking hard."

It was a new voice. It came from behind me. Instinctively I turned towards it. One of my hands swept over my shoulder then down my back. Small lines of bones were just tangible under my layers of clothing, but safe, hidden. I shifted away. The face the voice belonged to was friendly, and tanned, and lined. He was standing close, leaning down on the bar, his forearm spread across it. The rugby jersey he was wearing was large and stretched, so when he came down further to speak again the hem of it brushed against the top of my knee.

"Haven't seen you out with Lily before. You a newcomer then?"

He swayed a little. His jersey hem flowed up and down my knee like a wave on the beach, or a tongue licking.

I shifted in my seat, trying to make it look like I was turning towards him but actually moving my body further away.

"I'm just visiting," I said. "Not here for long."

"Ah I hear a twang. Where are you from? You sound like a kiwi."

He held his pint in his left hand and as he moved it to his lips his hand brushed my arm. A little vomit came up my chest into my tight throat. I swallowed it.

"I'm Australian."

He was looking towards the group of friends behind him when I answered. They were gathered around a table by the door, next to the end of the bar. There were five of them squashed into a booth, their shoulders all touching. The booth's benches looked like pews, the same sort of wood, and with a high back. The men cluttered the space and fitted with the rest of the pub, so filled with pictures, and trinkets, bright regal colours, polished wood and dark green leather. The smell of the men, their sweat, beer and smoke, seemed to seep into the surfaces and out of them at the same time.

I didn't know if he'd heard me speak or whether he even wanted to. I spoke up and cringed at the break in my voice.

"Lily and I are just here for a quiet drink."

“How long are you staying for?”

“We’ll probably leave after this drink.”

He laughed full in my face, then looked over to his mates to see if they were laughing too, though they weren’t watching him.

“I meant here,” he said, “in England.”

“Right, well, same thing, not long.”

I caught our reflections in the mirror behind the bar, picking us out from the liquor bottles that sat in front. In the reflection of us he wasn’t doing anything much. Our images missed how strong his aftershave was, how small the inches between us had become, how fragile my body seemed in comparison to his squareness, and the bitter sweetness of the beer on his breath, the hint of smoke too. It wasn’t an unpleasant smell; it had memories of good nights out, sweet memories that fought with how I felt just then. I could imagine without any trouble exactly what it would be like to taste the inside of his mouth, or for his hand to reach down from its place on the bar and slide onto my thigh. I shivered.

I made to speak but he got in first.

“You could be a model, you know that?” I felt my cheeks blush. That made it worse because he thought I liked it. “You look just like Cindy Crawford.”

He flashed a thin self-assured smile. The pint in his hand was mostly finished. The froth had made marks up the side of the glass as he’d drunk it, two sweeping white lines towards where his mouth had been. The way he held the glass, the lines seemed to point up to his face in an arrow.

“I’m just trying to have a quiet drink with my friend, would you mind leaving us to it?”

“Am I too loud for you? I can talk in a quieter voice if you like.” He laughed to himself, loudly. When he smiled there was kindness in it, hints of a softer face beneath his bravado.

“No one sitting at the bar and looking pretty just wants a quiet drink.”

“Maybe you didn’t understand. I’m really sorry, but we don’t want to talk to you right now.”

A dark red colour seeped into his cheeks, crept up the sides of his nose.

“No offence,” I said, hand coming up in front of me. “Just if you wouldn’t mind. We were talking about something kind of personal.”

“Well, all right then. Girlie stuff is of no interest to me.”

He said it while walking away, already with his back to me. I was still looking at him when there was another hand on my shoulder. I jumped and spun round.

It was only Lily. She caught up.

“Want to go?”

She took her bag from the arm of the stool and took my hand, leaning back to the bar for a second to take a few gulps of her wine. We passed by the men heading out the door. She didn’t say anything to them, although there were words in her look and body language.

“Sorry about him,” she said when we were on the street. “He’s got a bit of an ego. It comes out when he’s had a few. Jake’s actually a decent bloke when he’s sober.”

“Aren’t they all?” I said, but she didn’t reply.

We walked home from the pub because it was still warm outside. There wasn’t much light to see by, too many clouds. We could make out the two hedges on either side of the road and followed those. It was like walking into an abyss, the road a dark and empty black, until a cloud would shift and then it was stainless steel instead of bitumen. At times we walked over things in the black and decided not to think too hard about what they were. Some of the locals aimed for rabbits rather than avoiding them.

When I got to the house I went up to my bedroom to get out of what I’d been wearing at the shop. The deli counter lingered on it so I chucked it straight in the wash. When I was in my pajamas I sat down on the end of the bed and let myself think. I imagined scenes into existence, painted on the open space between my seat on the bed and the pine door of the bedroom. The empty air morphed into the computer downstairs, words typed on the screen in neat black letters; then Nick’s face as he read the email, biting his lip; then myself on the plane back, thinking of him; then a reunion...

I’m standing on the wooden floorboards of Nick’s bedroom, or maybe on the rug next to the bed, the orange and blue one, because my feet are cold with the fear of it. I’m wearing jeans and nothing else, my hair is up in a messy bun at the nape of my neck to keep it out of the way, and my hands are down by my sides. At first I’m facing him and he’s looking at my breasts, even though he’s seen them countless times before and could likely draw them from

memory. He's smiling. After a few seconds of deep breaths I turn around, letting my wings unfold as I do it, so that he can see the whole beauty of them; not just their shape but the way they move, and that they are a part of me. And then... then he reacts.

I closed my eyes tighter trying to call a reaction into being, one I could feel the realness of.

I'm urging his limbs to move, urging his face to do something. The reaction that comes out is shocking and also exactly right. I am someone he doesn't want me to be. It's the same as then but ten times worse. He scrambles backwards, bringing the dark blue doona across the bed with him. He falls over the edge legs first then stands on the other side of the room.

"What the fuck is that?" he asks, but not really.

When I step towards him he leans away, wide eyed. I step further to try to make us close together again, in the space and in feeling. He backs up against the wall and when he can't go any further he lashes out, saying "Stay away. What the fuck are you doing?"

A fair question. I sat on the bed and thought on it. There was no other reaction of his that was more vivid and believable than that one. In his room I'd be alone and ashamed, just like I had been before. We might just be able to scrape things back together if he was willing to accept me, but I felt the doubt of it truly as I felt the bones of my wings.

I fell back onto the bed and closed my eyes, pummeled my fists into the doona. After a minute I was tired and relaxed back into the softness of the bed. Hot tears pooled in my eyes, then slipped down the side of my face, down my jaw. Why would anyone react differently? They were complicated, difficult things, but they still deserved kindness and softness. My next thought was a dangerous one; it poked me in the chest like a branch stretching into my path.

I slipped boldly back into my dreams.

I stand in the bedroom in Monica's house, next to the bed and facing forwards, with my arms crossed over my chest. I turn around the same way, and let my wings fold out. I hear a gasp. There's no other noise. I twist my head to look at him. The way he moves, and the look on his face, is exactly as it was when the first calf was born in the barn, weeks ago now. There's pity and worry in his eyes. Jude pauses for a second, shocked, anxious, then he comes over to me with a body made deliberately gentle. He kneels down behind me, then his practical hands

reach out to hold one wing, my right one, and stroke down the feathers with the grain. When his face moves up to mine it is like the calf who looked up at him as if he was the sun.

I got up from my bed and went downstairs on my tiptoes. The computer lived in the study, a small room next to the kitchen with green walls, darker than emerald, and old antiques lying here and there. The computer always looked strange among them, like the only way it would make sense was if the room was a museum from a thousand years in the future displaying all manner of old human things. When I pressed a button the icon on the screen showed how long it would take to turn on. The colour gradually moved across the bar. It measured how long I had to make myself sure.

When I'd logged into my email account there were two new messages waiting there for me, one from my friend Maeve and one from Nick. He had replied to my message, as I'd replied to his, so the subject box was still empty just like the first email he'd sent. When it appeared on the screen I saw that this one was much longer than the single line he'd sent last time. I skimmed over it. Everything he said was warmth and jokes, ones just between us that no one else knew. That time he slid onto his arse outside his house, he'd thought of that yesterday, and how I laughed so hard I nearly pissed myself. Without saying it, his email said it could be that simple, that it was tantalizingly possible to be as we had been before. There was a flicker in my gut. It would be so completely easy to go on loving him. But flickers don't last, they're not darkness, they're just the second before the light comes back on again. And how incredibly lucky that was. I made myself steady before I went on and read the other email in my inbox, and although while I looked over it other emotions tried to overpower my relief, it still stood before them all, sturdy as a milestone.

Maeve was awkward from the first line. There was something she had to tell me, it read, something she didn't want to have to tell me, but she thought she needed to, even if the others weren't going to. Her preamble made my eyes, my reading, my heart beat faster.

"Nick slept with Steph. It was at a party a couple of weeks ago. Everyone knows about it; someone walked in on them."

I exited the window and scrolled back. My heartbeat was loud in my ears and I registered it like a sound effect coming from the computer. The 10th, that's when Nick had sent his first email. He'd fucked my friend and then emailed me a love note. The thought

that I hadn't just sent one back, the sheer relief of it, was a whole body sigh, so thorough I felt it in my scalp.

He'd never truly had my back, and now he'd never see it.

Chapter Twelve

I wanted to go gliding again. I couldn't go while Monica was still honey-mooning; she'd told me not to and I didn't have the guts to do it anyway. I sat in the kitchen at the bench and tapped a biro on the open newspaper. A calendar lived on the wall in there. It was a locally made one, and this month's picture was of the castle in town, drenched in golden hour light. It was bizarre that a photographer and a camera had taken the picture when it belonged more in the middle ages than the modern. They must have found just the right angle to pretend that cars and planes and power lines didn't exist. Below the picture were square days, significant ones circled in pen. The wedding, the day they left, the day they came back. That was still one full day from now. I wanted speed and adrenaline and the feeling wasn't patient.

When I left the house I set a note on the kitchen bench for anyone who happened to come by looking for me. It was what people did there and that was part of the problem. In a village that made relatives of its neighbours, how was I supposed to let them in without ever letting them close?

An old mountain bike was propped against the back wall of the shed. I reached for a hammer and used it to draw off the spiderwebs. There was a helmet sitting in the basket. I took it out and replaced it with my book. I sprayed the helmet with my water bottle to try and get rid of some of the old dust and sweat. It was tight but would do. Any direction I rode in would mean hills, so I made my way up the sloping lane towards the first bridlepath that came to mind, meeting it where it joined with the top of the village and ran north-east. I was standing up on the pedals and leaning into the breeze. It was a warm day until the wind breathed its coolness onto my damp neck. The hotter I got the more welcome it would be so I pedalled on. There were dangerous looking clouds ahead but I pushed on up the hill towards them.

The path ran through the middle of two fields. The one on the right had some cows in it. I saw Newsom and Roanie were there. I followed the bridlepath round the curve of a hill, and into a small wood. I took off my sunglasses so I could see better in the dappled light. Inside it smelt like wood fires and damp and sweetness. The hands of plants trailed along my legs as I peddled past, sweeping me with their scents and pollen. I jolted when a

wood pigeon darted up from the undergrowth, and its warbling, silky call mapped the shape of its flight above me.

As I came through the wood the trees ended in a hedgerow and on the other side of it was the road. The path continued over the road and I let my mind wander down it for a moment, until a memory encouraged my mind's eye in a different direction. The single road that came down into Westhill split off in two directions about a mile out of the village. In one direction it led to town; in the other it met with the river and followed it on to another village, about twice the size of Westhill, called Corsmill and by all accounts its pub was a local gem. I twisted my wrist to see; it was 11:58 am.

The White Rabbit sat nestled into the side of a hill, the chalk cut out to make room for the building. The bold white of the chalk stretched up behind it, vertical and stark, like it was the canvas on which the building had been painted. The pub's outside was a Tudor revival. It had the white-washed front and black beams, subtler than other buildings around there, like the post-office in town with its bright white and deep-space black. This wasn't trying so hard. The beams had been bleached and weathered to a deep grey with flecks of black hanging on, the colour like the coat of my aunty June's blue heeler. Inside I ordered a cider and a sandwich. I waited for my accent to make them curious, but they didn't ask.

Outside the pub was a small garden, mostly open grass and picnic tables and beyond that was a pale wooden deck, jutting out over the reeds of the riverbank. On the deck was a mismatch of furniture, some had the curls and flourishes of antiques, others the sharp lines of scandi design. I chose an ash bench, with the hue of a spotted gum, and settled under one of the massive shade umbrellas.

I took the book out of my bike basket, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and opened it up. On the flyleaf was Monica's maiden name and the pages were brown, darkest towards the edges. I lifted it and sniffed. It had that barky, honey, library smell. I flipped through to my bookmark and stepped into Wessex. The paddocks across the river in front of me were coloured by the world built in my head. The bank blended into the Valley of the Great Dairies, slow and pixelated at first and then clearer. Tess' slim figure strode along the path on the far bank, Angel Clare three steps behind her. The wind blew her dark hair back towards him, and he reached out a hand to grab it. For a second the end of a curl was caught in his fingers. When she turned to look he flushed red and drew his hand away. Despite his

hot cheeks and sheepish smile he wouldn't look away from her, perhaps he couldn't. She turned and kept up her pace, staying just out of arm's reach. I knew there was a secret inside her, I recognised it, and watched her turn her face away to hold it in. There was guilt in her, and underneath that, the vague hopeless hope that if he knew what she kept from him, he might want her anyway.

I ate my lunch and drank my cider thinking about them, thinking about us. I resisted moving for a while, but the flies were beginning to pester me. Instead of going back the same way, I cut down through an open field and onto a footpath beside the river. Flies buzzed in the reeds which swayed in tides when the wind inhaled, exhaled. There were crickets in the long grass, sometimes launching themselves across the path when I came near. The river was an impenetrable green that gave no hint of depth and it rushed along beside me, racing to see who would get home first.

As I came back towards Westhill I turned away from the water and peddled up a rise towards another bridle path that would lead me to the village. At the crest of the hill it sloped suddenly down again towards a gully, before the final stretch home. The path down to the gully was sharp and wound through a tunnel of trees. The sides of the path sloped up towards the trees, a bank of dirt and moss reaching up towards the bark. The shape was mirrored in the way the trees met above. It was a closed in place, a thriving, cylindrical world. It was steep here and little indentations in the dirt path showed where thin streams had rushed the last time it rained. There were twists in the tunnel and when I'd gone a few metres inside I couldn't see out of either end.

It was irresistible. I stepped off the bike and rested it on the dirt. Then I unzipped the rain jacket I was wearing and draped it over the seat. After one glance around, seeing nothing but green and brown, I tugged my T-shirt over my head so I stood in the zip-up nude undertop and my shorts. Now I pulled my jacket back on, but this time with the open zip at the back and my front covered. I was high on the knowledge of what I was about to do. I giggled nervously and bit my lip to quiet myself. When I glanced down the avenue once more, both ways, nothing stirred. I held my breath, listened for a moment. In an attempt to convince myself I was being safe I let down my hair out of the pony tail at the base of my neck, and shook my head. Before I had time to be rational, I pulled straight down on the zip

of my undertop and the fabric fell. I shoved it in the basket and clambered onto the bike. It moved forwards without me peddling. I peddled anyway.

As it picked up speed, working at all became pointless, they're weren't enough gears for me to catch up with gravity. I was coasting straight down. I rose from the saddle. That was when I let my wings begin to stretch out. First they extended back and down, pulled behind by the force of the air, but I made them come out next to me, like I had done with the glider, and gradually I started to move them. The bike began to slow down now, my wings acting like a parachute, and I peddled harder against it, pushing my whole weight down on each side. I found a way to move my wings in time, down when my right leg peddled. It wasn't like flying, there was never that dropping feeling in my stomach, but it was fast and terrifying and insane. When I'd got the hang of it, I felt the bike lift a little each time I beat my wings, it became lighter in my hands, clenched hard on the handle bars. The tunnel sped past, a mossy blur registering in my peripheral vision while I dodged dips and rocks. Midges liked the atmosphere of this little world and I kept my mouth shut against them. It was riding through a force field made of the light, the smell, the heat, the bugs. It was the tumble of the wheels on the ground and my gasping breaths that made up the sound of the world, nothing else.

The last bend of the tunnel curved round into subtle sunlight, sneaking through gaps in branches. The warmth of the sun reached down to my cheeks. When I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand I could smell sweat and sunscreen. The brakes squeaked when I applied them and I didn't trust them much. I brought my wings round into a curled shape, like I was about to wrap them round my front. They slowed me like a sail. Before it got too bright and the Downs appeared again I slid the bike to a halt. My wings clasped quickly over my back. I pulled the jacket straight off, fumbling and rushing to try and cover myself, then threw it round behind me, put my arms through the right way and zipped it up.

Before I peddled off, my eyes travelled back up the hill, climbing it like a pedestrian. That's when I saw Jude, standing in the middle of the path. Beside him was a small gap in the trees, a hole through which he'd just stepped. He held a toolbox at his thigh. He was still, not a muscle moved, and he was smiling. The lines beside his eyes stretched so far out that they were an unimportant distance from the mass of curls that fell down the side of his face, and I could see small dark triangles where his lips stretched out further than his teeth.

My foot pushed off from the mossy slope. I twisted too fast for my eyes to refocus and peddled on without seeing clearly. The path was blurry and shapeless, I suppose because I was crying. I had to get home. I came past the back of the farmhouse, then cut down the side of the village through the bottom field, and left the bike outside the garden fence. I legged it up the steps to the dining room doors. Locking them behind me, I pulled the curtains across. Then over to all the other doors and locked them too. When everything was shut I slouched across the kitchen bench puffing hard, and a second later my body sunk downwards, limbs filled with cement, until I was a hunched pile on the kitchen floor. I dragged my knees in towards my chest.

That smile. The smile was greater than anything, worse than the thought of him having seen. It was incomprehensible. He hadn't smiled at me in days and now, at the moment that made the least sense... It could only mean one thing.

Questions piled up. Was it possible? How could it be possible? If it somehow was then how many of them did? Why would they? How long had they? Why hadn't she told me they did? What was I missing?

In a cluttered second I realised why Philip wrote in shorthand. It dawned on me without preamble; it was just immediately and definitely true. I got up from the kitchen floor, jogged up the stairs and into Grandpa's room. The notebook was where it often lived. The sun from the open window cast a beam onto it, like it was a revelation from the man upstairs. I picked it up and, as I had the first time, flicked through for the pages that were lighter than the others, the ones with sketches. The one closest to the front was the village, then came the women with the roe deer. They had different body shapes, one an older woman with childbearing hips and the other a young, slight girl. The colour of their hair was impossible to tell, the sketch done with a grey pencil, but something about their postures was familiar, and as I looked closer I recognised the slant of their noses. The young woman's wrist stretched over the hedge and her long fingers reached out to the deer's slender nose. The shape her arm made, the lines of her body, seemed designed by a dancer. I flipped over to the next drawing and saw a man with a sleek dog at his feet. He stood with his feet spread so his legs made a triangle with the ground and his arms were crossed on his chest. On his lips was the merest suggestion of a smile, and above them, eyes full of daring. I'd seen the falcon, and I already knew what it meant. The last drawing was the owl.

It was close and complex. The bird's body filled the entire page. Meaning was held in the posture of the animal. Wisdom seeped through every angle, every feather, of the barn owl.

It was like Fred had said on their wedding day, love birds indeed.

VI

Down at the river, the young pregnant woman ambles back to her place in the circle. When she has taken the hands of those beside her, the cloaked woman stands in the flickering glow of the fire, and signals for another figure to come forward. A short strong man strides into the ring. The thing he takes out from under the hessian cloth is small. This man, much older than the young woman before him, brings forward the animal he's chosen, a bird, and places it on the altar. Again the woman takes out the athame and again she cuts along its chest and chants its blood into flowing. She wipes her already bloody hands on the cloak she wears and when they are mostly clean draws them along the new cut. The woman taps a single drop onto the man's tongue and then drags her dripping fingers across his face. The man closes his eyes as red rivulets of blood drool down his cheeks, his nose, over his mouth. Like some lurid irrigation, they are caught and directed by the lines around his eyes. When he opens them a moment later, she reaches across the altar and takes him by the shoulders. They stay like this until the beads of red stop running and the blood dries onto his skin.

Again and again it is repeated, villagers presenting their cold offering then wearing lifeblood as their masks. On the altar lies the owl and the falcon, and next to them a large, tan hound, a weathered hare, a copper fox, and a young roe deer. Like a hunter's larder, they lie orderly and still.

The dancing and humming begin again, this time the circle moving anti-clockwise. Once the dancers are in rhythm, the cloaked woman approaches the fire and kneels beside it. She folds back the green sleeves of her gown, and throws the cloak behind her with two quick flicks of her shoulders. White-blond hair spills out from under her hood and frames her hollow face. She reaches into the centre of the flames and hauls four logs into her arms. Unflinching she carries them to the altar, placing a log beside each one of its legs. She steps back and pats out the fires that have crept up her sleeves.

On the ground auburn leaves sprout up the altar's legs and flourish hungrily across its surface. Soon the structure is engulfed, and the dead sacrifices with it, chilled bodies warmed back to the heat of life. The warmth encourages a bright red blush to appear upon the pale woman's cheeks. Meanwhile, the dancers continue their steady circuit, as if set on a

track, and inside it the fire burns, the woman sings of sacred things, and the animals turn to ash.

The swaying body of the circle is broken when a dancer falls to the grass. The old man lands hard on his knees, and crouches forward. The cloaked woman sweeps over to him to whisper soft words, until he lets out one cold gasp, that rings through the quiet like a scream. After a minute of held breaths he sits up and looks around him. Firelight and smoke stream onto his face and he blinks. Already his eyes are lined with black.

Chapter Thirteen

I was sitting in the bay window with Philip's notebook open on my lap when I heard the metal of the letter slot clang. After a minute of nail-biting I got up and looked. It wasn't a letter, but a note, sitting on the carpet. One piece of white lined paper, folded once in half. I checked the door's lock, then opened the paper in the hallway, where there were no windows. The sharp snap of it unfolding was loud in the empty house.

Jude's handwriting was like him, long lines, messy, legible.

Charlie, I don't know where to begin. I don't know how to write this quick enough and with all the honesty you deserve.

Most important first; I know you saw me watching you, and you should know, Charlie, you are magnificent.

Never have I seen anything like you, it's unwritedownable, unbelievable. I think you might be sublime.

Please, meet me at the bottom of the garden, say 8?

J

Sublime? I sat in that thought, floating round in its sweet eddy.

At 8 it was nearly dark but colours still existed. They were more alive just outside the patio door, and faded from oil on canvas into pastels and watercolours the further down I stepped from the lamp in the window. I could make out the terraced steps clearly near the door, and then stepped down into the darkness with rhythm instead of sight. There was an old candle lantern down the bottom of the garden, that swung from a high post on the fence. I had matches in my pocket. When I was a little girl and we lit the lantern at night it was as high and bright as the moon, part of the grownup world that big people like Grandpa could touch. It was strange that I could reach it now too.

The grass and gravel underfoot was cold but not damp. It might have been a cool night but there was no wind, so the chill seemed to rest and warm around me. In the stillness, the crickets' noises were declarations.

I reached the bottom of the garden, where it flattened out into an open lawn, and lit the lantern. The wooden fence kept the cows from wandering in. I leant my elbows on it. Suddenly there was a shape right near me.

“Jesus,” I said, and clutched my chest.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to creep up.”

I picked wood off the fence, shuffled my feet.

“Can we sit down?” he asked.

I moved over to the picnic table. Mrs Brown had come down the garden and when I sat she floated over next to me and rested her chin on my thigh. The curls on her head were soft comforts on my palm. Jude swung himself over the fence. He stepped silently down the rails and onto the bench. I felt the wood shift with his new weight. I wouldn’t look him in the eye.

I said, “Well, are you going to explain yourself?”

He laughed, then stopped. “I would probably ask the same question to be fair.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Okay, straight into it then. Well I didn’t know,” he said. I looked up, incredulous, and he continued “I only had an inkling.”

“An inkling? That’s bullshit. How could you not have guessed? I couldn’t see you for weeks.”

“Mon told us you were ill. She said that you must have picked up glandular fever on the plane. Plus you went to London during that time, to stay with your friend.”

“I what?”

“When you caught the train to London, from the station in town. I passed Monica on the road and was asking after you and she said she’d just dropped you off.”

“I never went to London.”

He paused, then bit his lip, smiled. “That woman. She didn’t tell you about that?”

“I hadn’t the foggiest.” That was such a Monica thing to say and I wished I hadn’t said it then.

“Before you came she went on and on about how if it happened it would be your secret to tell not hers, and then once you were here she got even more tense about it,

tight-lipped as anything. If we even asked after you too much she'd get crabby as hell, and her mouth turned into a 'cat's arse' - Fred's words."

"I didn't know that," I replied.

"One time she even started sobbing. It suddenly came bursting out of her and she had to excuse herself. So of course we assumed it hadn't happened and she was heartbroken."

"There was a lot of crying in our house, but for the opposite reason."

He watched me hesitantly, scanned my face, and eventually looked away.

"And Lily had mentioned stuff about your ex," he continued, "What's his name?"

"Nick."

"Yeah Nick. I thought that could be it, why you were so hot and cold."

"And you never once thought of asking me outright?" My hands came out in front of me, tears welled up in my eyes. "Why didn't you ask me?"

"How could I? I would have had to explain everything to be able to ask you, to have told you about all the others too, and I couldn't do that to them unless I knew you were a part of it as well." He reached his hand across the table, but I drew mine away. "I wanted to, I just didn't know how. I'm sorry."

"The others?"

"Yeah the others? You didn't know? Bollocks."

"No, I know."

"Oh, so Mon did tell you?"

"No, I figured it out. Phillip has a notebook."

"The one in shorthand?"

"Yep, but it's got pictures. But what do you mean 'the others'?"

"You just said you knew?"

"I do, but why did you say the others, don't you mean us?"

"Ahh I see." His broad shoulders shrugged. "Well, now you know why they call me Oddie."

I stared down at the picnic table because I couldn't look into his face and think clearly at the same time.

"You're odd because you're not?" He nodded. "That's bonkers."

“Normality is relative, I suppose.”

“This is a screwed-up place isn’t it?”

He laughed, raised his brows. “You could say that.”

The anger in me quivered, loosened. It began to ease out with each exhale.

“Who is then?” ‘Creatured’ I mean. Is that what you say?”

“Tully and Lily are, Jo, Philip obviously, Mon, Fred.”

“And you’re not... not anything?”

“Nope, plain old nothing.” There was an unsteady deepness at the end of the phrase, an involuntary hurt that snuck out.

“Surely you can’t wish it the other way?”

He shrugged.

“Don’t be crazy,” I said.

“It’s not like that. I know there are hard bits to being so, I don’t know, bizarre. But the chance to know what it is like, to feel in your body, what it is to be wild, I mean how could I, how could anyone, not envy that?”

“Maybe it’s not what it looks like.”

“To me it looks like wisdom, and strength, and like absolute magic.”

I stared at him, but really I was looking at myself.

“Why aren’t you?” I asked eventually.

“We’re not genetically related, me and Fred. Fred’s dad was my step-dad’s brother. My real dad, wherever he is, has none of the eccentricities of Mum’s second husband. He has his own ones, involving drinks and smokes. Not the sort you want to inherit.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Mrs Brown shifted around in the darkness nearby and I realised the cold patch on my thigh was from where her head had been. The rustling of her sniffing and movement through the plants were soft, innocent sounds, so different to the ones we were making.

“What do you think Mrs Brown would think of all this?” I asked Jude.

“She couldn’t give a monkey’s.”

“I think you’re right,” I said. “I could strip down right here, spread out my wings, and she wouldn’t bat an eye.”

That was the first time I'd ever said it outloud to someone - 'my wings'. It ran like liquor down my tongue. Though I was still looking at Mrs Brown I thought I could see Jude smiling out of the corner of my eye.

"What about the Fortescues?" I asked. "What happens to them?"

"They're deer creatured, a roe deer."

"Like the ones on the Duke's estate?"

He nodded. "We used to go up on a quad and watch them moving about. Lily would kick off her hunter wellies and prance around in the mud barefoot, imitating them." That glow was growing in his face, the one that lit up his features when he spoke about something he loved.

"So gracefulness, that's their characteristic?"

"Yes in a way, it comes from their feet. Have you noticed that they're never barefoot in public?"

"Why?"

"They have this kind of rough skin on the ball of their foot. It's a hard, dark circle, as if they'd dipped the front of their foot in tar. The callous is their creatureing, it's like the underside of a deer's hoof."

"You're kidding me?"

"It's true."

I looked at him through squinted eyes, sizing him up against his words. He straightened up and I was reminded how big he was, how he could be intimidating if he ever tried.

"It really is true! It makes them able to run like they do. They're better without shoes, the fastest, most agile things I've ever seen. You should see the way Tully throws herself down hills sometimes, vaults three bar fences. It's insanity."

"The first time I saw them I noticed it. They were the most elegant people I had ever seen."

"The most elegant not-quite-people."

I filled my cheeks with air then let it out my lips in one long gust. "Fucking hell."

"That's about it."

I swung my legs up from the ground, twisted my body round, and stretched my whole length back onto the picnic table's seat. My wings that were compressed under the stretchy top but could still feel the hardness of the wood. They were pressed into my back. Me, my wings, the wood, the earth.

The bench creaked as Jude did the same as me, and we both looked up into the sky. Stars punctured pinholes of brightness through the black curtain of space.

"And Fred?"

"Fred's got a super sniffer."

I heard Jude's words clear as day while looking up into the dark, like they'd been written in the sky.

"A super sniffer? He can smell stuff?"

"Yep, crazy things. D'you remember that first night in St. Ives?"

"Yeah..."

"When we were sitting outside that pub and you and Fred were talking about smells."

"The types of fish? He was serious?"

"Tully near belted him to shut him up."

"Urgh, it was bad enough for me in Cornwall."

"He's used to it."

I imagined Jude shrugging, knew he had as he spoke, even though I couldn't see him. I wondered how often I might have had bad breath or been in need of a shower when I was in Fred's company, cringed at the thought.

"The weirdest part is the stuff he can smell that you wouldn't expect."

"Oh, like what?"

"Fred thinks he can smell people's feelings."

"You're taking the piss now."

Jude's laugh was silent but made the whole frame of the picnic bench shudder. "He said he could smell the fear in you around the cows when you first came, but that you're not so bad now."

"What does fear smell like?"

"You'd have to ask Fred."

I looked over to find Mrs Brown sitting on the lowest step of the garden terrace and wondered what she could smell on us right now. Stronger things even than fear perhaps.

“So his creaturing isn’t visible then?”

“That’s right. He’s hit the jackpot, jammy bastard. And the things he notices, god, like how fresh something is that we’re eating, or which tree in the vicar’s orchard an apple has come from, which cows are pregnant. Then again so much of what he notices he can’t even say out loud in case the wrong people are near.”

“His world must be so weird. I can’t even imagine it.”

“So different. Like synesthesia, I don’t see how moods can have smells but to Fred it’s like sniffing flowers and smelling spring, so obvious and clear as day. Sometimes I get so bloody angry I didn’t get his genes I wish we’d never met, because then I wouldn’t know what I was missing. It nearly drives me crazy.” I heard him breathe in, breathe out. “But I can always have baked beans for dinner.”

It took a beat for me to figure it out. “That’s disgusting Jude.”

“It was so bad once we had to leave all the windows open while Fred took himself out for a walk.”

“Bloody hell.”

He laughed first, a sound like a deep rumbling. Then we howled together, wobbling uneasily on the thin planks of wood. I laughed so hard I had to cross my legs to stop from wetting myself.

“Poor Fred,” I said.

“Ah save your pity.”

I sat up and wiped under my eyes, swiping away old mascara.

“So Philip then. What’s under the glasses?”

“Nothing.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Nada. Zilch. Zero.” He sat up and made a zero with each fist and put them in front of his eyes.

I sat up too.

“What’s there then?”

“Just two deep, black holes. If you look close enough you can see his brain.”

“Fuck off.” I swiped at him across the table and he smiled his crooked smile.

“You should ask him to show you when they’re back,” he said. “It’s worth the wait to see it for yourself.”

We looked at each other in silence for a moment.

“It’s such a fucking relief to know that you know,” he said.

“You reckon?” I laughed like I was breathing out after a deep dive in the dark, cold ocean.

We saw each other straight on, and with our new honesty old truths showed themselves again. In the warm flickering of the lantern Jude’s steady gaze was solid. His hand reached up and onto the table and lay palm up. I reached over and filled it with mine. He spoke softly to me to ask,

“Would you show me?”

Jude’s bedroom, out in the old garage of Fred’s Mum’s house, was full of stuff, both his and that of generations before. His CD player sat on a clawfoot dresser next to vinyl albums with worn corners. Dust settled on this clutter, while his parts of the room were bright and new. His bed and its forest green bedding lived in the light beneath a hanging ceiling lamp. There was no headboard, and beams of reclaimed wood ran down the whole wall behind it. Their texture looked smooth, sinuous.

For some seconds we stayed still; auguring moments. I held the undrunk tea in my hand and perched on the barstool. I was tuned in on him, but still pretending to have a life of my own. David Grey sung in the silence. *Please forgive me, if I act a little strange.* I imagined Jude’s lips and could feel them in my memory. They tasted like champagne. When I caught his eye I blushed. *I know not what I do.*

He was leaning on the chest of drawers. I couldn’t stay still like him. I stood, placed the mug on my seat. The bed was three meaningful steps away but I walked the distance then sat down on it. The springs sighed. I felt him watching me and looked over. The front half of my body was full of hot blood, *Running through my veins.* Each swell of my chest lifted me out towards him and I didn’t want to breathe out because then it would come back again. *Help me out here.* I might have believed that he could hear my heart, despite the music and the metres between us. *All my words are falling short. And there’s so much I want to say.*

“Comfortable?” I asked him.

He shook his head. “No.”

I ran my hand along the bed. “Is this comfortable?”

His eyes deepened. *When you look at me that way.*

“Maybe. I don’t know how you like it.”

His face tilted to the floor. He was biting his lip. His mouth was wide, soft, incendiary. More long seconds beat out between us. I looked down at my bare feet on the rug. My toes squirmed through the thick pile.

I heard the chest of drawers creak and looked up. He took two strides to the bed then pulled me upwards. I was on my feet then on his lips. *Deep into that mystery.* His kiss was like grapefruit; strong, full, fresh. How was his mouth so cold? We had to be closer, closer. My fingers twisted into his curls, soft and tangled sheep’s wool.

His hands were in my clothes. They were quick and smooth. I stopped kissing him to lean back and pull at the hem of his top. I moved it up his torso and he swept it off. Contact with his body warmed my chest, my neck. Looking up to his face I saw a bead of sweat on his forehead. I reached up and caught it with a finger, swept it into his hair. Then my hands reached up further. I stretched towards the ceiling. He didn’t look at what he was doing but at my face and that tether between us was the only thing holding me together. When he’d pulled it off I stood in my undershirt and skirt.

In a cluttered second something blew the fire out. I stood shivering and confused. My hands began to shake.

“You alright?”

I looked up and nodded though I didn’t know.

“Shhh, shh, shhh,” Jude whispered. He stepped back, but kept his hands clasped to mine. “Do you want to sit down?”

I didn’t.

“Sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be,” he replied.

A long breath out was gentle on my tingling lips. My fingers played with his.

“We could just..” Jude began.

“No.”

My heart was a palimpsest. It had been written on over and over, and it had learnt that fear was its boldest print, but now it was time to write something new.

In Jude's eyes, and their colours made of trees, there was sturdiness. He lifted a hand and kissed it. His lips, his tongue, trailed along my knuckle.

"Keep going," I told him.

He reached for the zip of my undertop and I lifted my arm. The fabric fell down from my back. *Every time I look at you, Every time I look at you, Every time I look at you.*

When I woke up his hand was trailing along the topside of my wing. I'd done it countless times, the hand doing it was new. I opened my eyes slowly to look at Jude. He was lying with his head propped up by the pillow and my wing stretched across his chest. I was face down, and my other wing fell over the side of the bed onto the rug. He was gentle with the feathers as his fingers moved over them, like an awestruck kid. I realised my way with them was blasé now I had a comparison. His hands swept away from my body and out towards the very end of my wing. He teased the tip through his hand, trailing the arrow point across the sensitive bit of skin connecting his fingers. The speckled cream of them trailed through the rough, calloused hands, with their crackled knuckles and bruised black fingernail, and instead of looking strange together they seemed to suit. They each had purpose in them. They were butter and bread; one soft, one course, together mouth watering. He held the wing out straight with his left hand, supporting it so it wouldn't fall down limp. Still trailing the tip through his fingers I watched his face soften like he was meditating.

I waited a couple of seconds before I twitched. He jumped. I shut my eyes as his face turned. A minute later he took up the rhythm again. I heard his slow, deep breaths. This time when I twitched his head turned faster.

"You're awake, aren't you?"

I let myself laugh.

"Don't stop," I said.

His hand began to move again, his fingertips swaying along the underside, his hands a tide. The waves had the power of ablution.

We lay in a swollen silence, as the sun crept gradually lower and the shadows of his bedroom grew out longer like stretching cats. I didn't want to move yet. I let little slits of memory play out. Jude standing in front of me, breathing deeply as if he'd been running. His hand reaching down my body and mine reaching down his. Then his face above me, those curls held tight in my hands and escaping like insects through my fingers. That thing he could do with his hands. Us hearing the endless murmuring of cows outside his window. Our own sounds. That second when he first did it, and all the air left my body and I didn't care about breathing anymore. A breeze coming in from outside, its touch so thin compared to the firmness of Jude against me. My body curving around him; my legs, my arms, my wings.

I opened my eyes again to look at him in real time. His face was soft with sleep. When we spoke it was in honey tones. In the warm haze I had time to wonder:

"What about the Meadowsweets?"

"What about the Meadowsweets?"

"Do they know?"

"Everyone knows."

"So they're creatured?" I sat up on my elbow and turned to face him.

"No, not anymore. They couldn't have any children, and it only passes to women in their family because his ancestor was a woman, like in your family. Vic's mother was the last."

"That's sad," I said.

"It is sad."

I thought for a moment.

"What about Jane and Livio?"

"Jane's father was creatured, a hare. You should have seen his ears, the furriest things you've ever witnessed! Worse than Philip's eyebrows. He had to keep his hair long all his life. And the man could hear a pin drop. Once Sandy and Monica were having a good old whinge about the parish council meeting they had that afternoon and Mark came past the front gate of your house and called out down to the kitchen 'Lighten up ladies, I'm bringing biscuits.'"

"No. From the road to the kitchen? That can't be true."

"It is, ask Monica." He paused. "Truer than most things."

"So Jane's son?"

"We'll have to wait and see."

"You'll have to email and tell me."

A minute later he sat up, turned to look at me and said, "What happens next?"

His face was serious and I knew what he was really asking.

"Some more of this, I hope." My palm trailed down the line of his body.

"Good. And then?"

"Then, life. I suppose"

"So this is it?"

"This is everything," I said.

"Everything," he replied. "A mouthful of blackberries."

His kiss was so ambrosial I might have tasted them.

We would stay there while we could, and I'd be grateful that love doesn't always care about its brevity.

VII

The sun is setting. The last rays strike across the tops of trees, sweep over the barn, and sink into the village green. Some come to settle on our faces. From where we meet in the lane, Monica leads us past the church and through a gate near the churchyard. The path through the woods is thin and forgotten, remembered by only badgers and rabbits. A low branch is passed between us. We stoop under and step over. Out on the river bank a slope rolls down into the reeds and the water.

In the dusk the sunset on the river is brilliant. Our feet follow the memory of a track until we've made the circle. There is no altar, but a pile of kindling is waiting to be lit. Monica takes a gas lighter from her pocket. The bright orange of its plastic is lost for a moment in the twigs. The wood catches. We watch the vivid worship of young flames brought to life.

In the glow we begin to dance.

There's a soft breeze, rushing water, footsteps, crackling twigs - all percussion. The Fortescues bare their feet. Philip takes off his glasses, allowing himself to see the minute details of the dark. The kohl-like rings around his eyes are black as the night. I shake my jacket off and feel the wind on my wings. One stretches out and curls across the back of Jude and round his ribs. The same with Monica on my right.

We close our eyes.

My feet are beating, beating hard, beating across the grass, beating down on air, hovering. My eyes are closed and they are open. My body is another's and we are the same. We are soaring above. Up there the darkness of the Downs is a thick black fabric. The fire is a luminous bead embroidered onto it. I see the light of houses, the darkness of forests, the tangle of streams and footpaths. I taste the moon on my tongue.

It is tangible as air, vivid and elusive as a dream.

We are creatures and we've come back.

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