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How not to get pregnant

I.

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Degree for which submitted: Ph.D

October 2019

Keele University



## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisors, Emma and Ceri, for their expertise, guidance and patience.

Thank you also to my wife, Charlie, for being so supportive.

The Keele Dawdlers have been an invaluable source of camaraderie, cake and enlightening discussion over the years.

Last but not least, thank you to the Keele Writers for their great company and all the amazing workshop feedback.

An early iteration of this novel was submitted for my MA Creative Writing thesis as a short story.



## Prologue

It's Mrs Hellier's idea: an evening of prayer and reflection – that's what she's written on the posters. 'Friday 18th May 2001: An Evening of Prayer and Reflection.' I help her choose photos of Clare and light candles. At 6.55 we dim the lights. Apparently this is all it takes to transform the school hall into a church.

For twenty minutes, no one comes. Some of the tea lights go out and have to be replaced. Laura Ewing is the first to arrive. She simpers at Mrs Hellier for having such a lovely idea. What a suck-up.

'Thank you. I simply knew I had to do something. I hope she knows we're thinking of her.'

Mrs Hellier teaches English and loves a crisis. This year she made us keep journals and call her by her first name, Jean. I've been stealing Tippex from her desk drawer.

'Wherever she is, I'm sure she'll be grateful. You've gone to a lot of effort.' Jean Hellier smiles, all teeth.

'Briony helped. She chose the pictures.'

She tries to put her hand on my shoulder, but I shrug it off.

'You're having a tough time, aren't you? I know you and Clare were close

friends.'

'We are. She's not dead.'

'Of course not, my love.'

'She's going to come back.'

We used to talk about leaving together, Clare and I, moving to London, maybe. Or Manchester. Exeter, at least. Getting jobs and renting a flat and holding hands in the park. It was a fantasy, I knew that even then, but Clare collected bus timetables and maps, circled job adverts in *The Express and Echo*. I said we should wait until after A-Levels.

Some of our classmates and their parents are starting to arrive. Several gravitate towards what Mrs Hellier has labelled the 'Well-wishers book'. This is a black hardback book, a blue Bic biro tied to it with garden twine.

Some parents stand in groups and talk quietly amongst themselves. Others, with shiny eyes, look at the photos. It was hard to find enough to display. Hellier wants to show Clare 'in a good light'. This means no photos with too much eyeliner, none of her smoking, none where she's wearing exclusively black. It doesn't leave much choice.

Every entry in the guest book says basically the same thing, as if they copied the first entry over and over.

'Be safe.'

'Come home soon.'

'We're all worried.'

This evening is the sort of thing Clare would absolutely hate. It's so over the top. I try to imagine her here, complaining about the photos, the stupid candles that won't stay lit, but it looks like there are people who actually want to talk to me, probably hug me and hope for tears, tissues at the ready. I decide to make a quick escape and

head out the back via the fire escape. I push on the door, entering a narrow alley and follow it around to the car park at the front of the building.

It has rained for most of the day, but now the sun has broken through the clouds, leaving cracked mud on the football field and deep puddles in potholes. Bluebells poke through the soil in the flowerbeds and birds call to each other from budding tree branches. The flat edge of the moor is tinged with pink. All across it, webs of lights betray the positions of small villages. Smoke drifts into the evening sky, unfolding endlessly upon itself.

The main school building sits, isolated, at the top of the hill. In the background, the new 'Classroom of the Future' development remains half-built, with cranes sticking up from the landscape like giant birds pecking at the ground. It will stay that way until the school raises enough money to finish it.

This is a small school, in the middle of nowhere. No one here is truly strangers. I know most of my classmates from Primary School. I can't stand it; there's no time to be alone, and no space for secrets. When you grow up together, people stop being interesting. Gabriel's mum used to cut my hair, and Clare's parents were friends with mine from the PTA. They also used to deliver our milk. It was her dad who came by in the van, but at weekends Clare did the deliveries on her mountain bike. I remember watching her cycle up to our gate, leave her bike on the ground, and approach the front door. Her black hair spilled down as she bent over to retrieve the bottles. She put the empty bottles, rinsed out by my mother the night before, into her rucksack and placed the new bottles gently into the cage, so they barely clinked against the rusty metal.

My parents and I used to come for walks in the woods near the school. Before construction started on the 'Classroom of the Future', the land was an area called the Wildlife Garden where there were giant ponds filled with algae and frogspawn. I



would dip my fingers into the black water, imagining its endless depths. We had one of those

I-spy books and would tick off the different kinds of birds we could see in it. Wrens and starlings and, if you came at the right time of year, at dusk, you could see the starlings performing murmurations across the moor. They made amazing, beautiful shapes, and the sound – of hundreds of wings moving together – was like the wind blowing or the tide crashing. Other times, my parents took me to the woods for picnics, or to run around and climb trees. On the way home, we pulled over at field gates to feed carrots to the horses, their warm soft mouths brushing our hands as they took them from us.

Everything is different now. The woodland trees were pulled up to make way for the Classroom of the Future site. The newly naked land smells of fuel and flesh, and the smoke from the pyres twists into the sky. I cover my mouth with my school tie so I don't breathe it in, because it makes me retch. It gathers in the valleys, in the isolated villages that no one can enter or leave, and in the farmyards where dogs stand howling at the gates.

I am the only one who knows where Clare is. She doesn't know that I know. She didn't tell me herself but I figured it out. Should I tell?

Her dad rang me, asking where she'd gone. Apparently, her sister Becky doesn't know. And as to her mother, no one's saying anything.

Our form tutor took me to the staff room, asking questions, and gave me Rich Tea biscuits. Even the police came to school. They pulled me from English, and said I was the last person to have spoken to her.

There were only six of us in the lesson and, instead of learning about *Howard's End*, we were talking about Foot and Mouth. The policeman knocked once, entered, whispered to Mrs Hellier, then took me to the headteacher's office, where a

policewoman was already seated. The policeman didn't say a word, simply gestured for me to sit. There was a glass bowl of sweets on the desk between us. He sucked a mint crême and pushed it against his cheek when he finally spoke.

'Got lucky there, missing English. Boring huh?'

'I like English.'

The policewoman took out a notebook.

'Briony, you're not in trouble. We just want to ask you some easy questions so we can get an idea of what Clare might be up to.'

She spoke in a soft voice. I guessed it was supposed to be comforting.

'I don't know.'

She smiled.

'Before she disappeared, did Clare mention any future plans, boys she was going to meet, maybe?'

'No.'

I replied too quickly. The woman leaned over the desk, toward me. They do that when they want to be your confidante. I saw it on *The Bill*.

'Nothing at all? Best friends tell each other everything.'

I wanted to pick up the bowl and crack it over her head.

'What I mean is, if you know any secrets, you have to tell us now. You'll be helping her out, really. And us.'

The truth is, Clare and I are more than best friends. I haven't told anyone about our relationship.

'She won't be angry with you.'

'You don't know her.'

The policewoman nodded to the man, who left the room. 'So, tell me, what kind of person is Clare?'

I twisted my hands in my lap.

‘Is she a happy person? Does she have a lot of friends?’

‘Not really.’

How can I do Clare justice? She’s the sort of person who will do anything to help you out, but never accept help herself. She writes poetry and smokes all the time and sends letters to my house, even though we see each other at school every day, but puts the stamp on the left-hand side so it doesn’t get franked and can be used again. She knows how to sew a dress and kiss in the dark, and it seems like everything she owns is scented: watermelon gel pens, scratch and sniff stickers, body spray and lip balm. I keep them like totems, the stickers on my books and the smell of her on my wrists.

I keep walking to stay warm. I know this network of lanes like my own house. They’ve transported me, enveloped me, been places to explore, on foot and by bike, throughout my years growing up. A little way up the road, is the lay-by full of disused buses. Like a bus graveyard, where they come to rest after they can no longer be fixed. I stop and stare at the one in the middle, where I first kissed Clare. The night is chilly, but not dark; the thin grey cloud spread across the sky. I sit on the stone wall and look at the stars.

## Chapter One

Clare and I have known each other since we were tiny. Nevertheless, I was surprised that she happened to be the first person I came across on our first day at secondary school. My parents took a photo of me that morning and wrote the date on the back: 3rd September 1995. I'm standing in the garden, rucksack at my feet, squinting into the sun. My shirt is tucked in and the tip of my school tie meets the waistband of my skirt. My blazer, new and stiff, is too long for my body.

We live on the edge of Dartmoor, in a village where, 'Cows block road' makes front-page news. The only sign of civilisation is the number 25 bus, which stops twice daily by the war memorial: first in the morning on the way into Exeter, and at 5.30 on the way back.

Our cottage is called 'Hill View'. On clear days, we can see across the valley to the coast, where the nuclear power station sits by the shore. Each year, we receive potassium iodide tablets in the post, with instructions to keep them in a safe, accessible place in case of emergency. Despite this, I like being able to look out of my bedroom window at the squat, grey buildings. Its steadfast presence is comforting. Both my parents work there: Dad in security and Mum as a manager in the canteen. She's in charge of a team of six, but the money isn't great. Mum and Dad hardly see

each other and spend each day counting down to the end of it. I am supposed to be different; go to university, earn more money, see the world and have a better life.

During the summer holidays before I started in Year Seven, there was a visiting day for employees' families. We all wore hard orange hats and ear plugs, and took the lift to the reactor level to see how it worked. The tour guide explained how the steam is made through a process called nuclear fission. At the end of the day we were given orange stationery to take away. I had packed mine to take to school with me. I was so proud, then, that my parents were responsible for keeping the electricity running for the whole county.

Mum walked with me to the stop to wait for the school bus. It was not quite light and a thin mist sat over the fields, hiding the tors. Two boys were already at the bus-stop, using cigarette lighters to scorch the Perspex pane meant to protect the timetable.

The bus was late and all the good seats were taken. I sat at the front, right behind the driver. There was pink chewing gum stuck to the window. We arrived at 8.50, after registration had started. The corridors were empty. I got lost on the way to my tutor room and started to panic. The school seemed bigger than I remembered from open day. My shoes were loud on the hard floors. I worried I wouldn't be on the register. My mind went spinning; I'd never get my GCSEs or a job and I'd have to live with my parents forever.

Afraid I was going to cry, I ducked into the nearest bathroom and locked myself into a toilet stall. The bell went and people came in and out, chatting and laughing. As time passed it seemed too late to come out, and I was stuck. I comforted myself by reading the confessional graffiti: the secrets written large on the wall: 'I lost my virginity last night.' The secrets had clearly been painted over multiple times, colours built up in layers, a bit like the rock in the coastal limestone cliffs. I picked at paint

chips with a nail.

‘I’m scared I might be pregnant.’

‘I cut myself.’

‘My boyfriend hit me.’

Who wrote these? I thought about adding a confession of my own.

Thinking the coast was clear, I left the cubicle. But I wasn’t alone. A girl was standing by the farthest sink, scrubbing at something on her rucksack with blue paper towels. Clare. I knew her, but didn’t want to say hello. I tried to sneak past her without being noticed.

‘Are you okay? You don’t look good,’ she said.

I stopped by the door. ‘Thanks a lot.’

She was in no position to judge my appearance. Most of her uniform looked second hand. Her shoes were too big, her blazer miles too long, and her grey rucksack had fading doodles all over it addressed to her sister, Becky. She pumped hand-soap on it and scrubbed especially viciously at a section which said ‘Becky loves Tom’. The soap lathered up, briefly, into a blue-grey scum. Everything from the bag had been dumped on the floor: pencil case, some loose change, a notebook, lip balm. She frowned at herself in the mirror.

I went to a sink and splashed cold water on my blotchy face.

‘Why weren’t you in registration?’ Clare said. ‘I couldn’t find it.’

She looked at me in the mirror, took in my new bag, my tucked-in shirt, the skirt my mother had taken in for me.

‘Did you polish your shoes?’

I looked down at them. ‘My mum did.’

‘You’ll get teased.’ She seemed to soften. ‘Becky gave me some advice. First, don’t tuck your shirt in like that – pull it out at the back. Undo your top button, but

make it look done up by pushing your tie up to it. And scuff up your shoes – they look stupid.’

‘It took her ages to get them like this.’

She shrugged, ‘Just trying to help.’

She went back to scrubbing the bag. Her efforts weren’t making much of a difference. Giving up, she threw all the stuff back in her bag and held it under the hand dryer. She said something, but the noise drowned out her voice.

‘What?’

‘I said, show me your timetable.’

‘Oh.’ I handed it to her.

‘You’re in the same Maths group as me. We can go together.’

We set off while the hand dryer carried on blowing hot air into the toilets behind us.

She found the room easily. We had missed the group introductions and the chance to tell everyone three interesting facts about ourselves. Later, we collected our planners from the office and textbooks from the backs of cupboards. They were the most dog-eared ones, bypassed by others. I didn’t mind, because I felt sorry for them, and also because they contained other people’s notes, which made homework much easier.

## Chapter Two

Five years later, it is 6 am on the morning of my 17th birthday, and I'm standing at the threshold of the kitchen, fumbling for the light-switch. Being born on November 21st means it always rains on my birthday, and every time it does, slugs end up in the kitchen. They are washed, in small waves, underneath the back door, which doesn't quite meet the floor below. The wind whines through the gap and the slugs are thick and black, like chunks of liquorice. The lucky ones escape and leave nothing behind but tell-tale silvery tracks. The others, beached on the linoleum between the sink and the oven, make entering the kitchen a risky business.

I'm up this early because I couldn't sleep, again. Today is my first AS-Level mock paper. It's for English Lit, and I've been revising non-stop. Gabriel says it's a waste of time because they're only mocks. I've long had the day circled on my calendar and spent last night packing and repacking my bag with my spare pair of glasses, a see-through pencil case and de-labelled bottle of water. And even though this is childish, it's also my birthday and I'm a little excited. Our birthday tradition is to have pancakes and open presents at breakfast when Dad gets in from his night shift.

I tiptoe into the kitchen and my feet splash in shallow water. It's freezing cold and up to my ankles. I shriek, which summons my mother, who comes running down



the stairs.

‘What is going on down here?’

Despite the hour, she is already fully dressed in her work uniform with slippers.

As far as I know, that’s how she sleeps – I’ve never seen her wearing pyjamas. In the light the extent of the damage is obvious; water has crept up the cupboards and not all of them are finished with baseboards so, when Mum opens the cupboard where the baking supplies are kept, we see all the packets of flour and sugar are wet on the bottom. When she picks them up, the packaging disintegrates. There’s water in the biscuit tin and slug tracks all over the potatoes. We open the other cupboards to find virtually all the food ruined.

‘Well, I can’t make your birthday pancakes now.’ Mum stands in the middle of the kitchen, water soaking into her slippers. I’m lingering by the door, where water has reached the carpet at the edge of the dining room and it’s squishy and wet like moss.

‘That’s okay,’ I say, though to be honest, I am a little disappointed. ‘We can have them later. Or tomorrow.’

‘Jesus wept, it’s got in everything. All the cereal. The rice. It’s ruined.’

Dad works nights and is supposed to sleep during the day, although he usually can’t and ends up doing something to the house, like buying new curtains that are never put up, or putting up shelves that are too weak to keep anything on. It’s been six months since he started work on the kitchen. When his key turns in the front door I know there will be trouble. He comes in shouting ‘Happy birthday!’ and produces a bunch of cellophane-wrapped flowers from behind his back.

Mum meets him in the hall. ‘Come here and look at the mess in the kitchen. I told you to finish it before winter.’

‘And I told you I’m waiting until we can afford the new floor.’

‘There must be £80 of food there I’m going to have to throw out.’ She storms up the stairs and I can hear their raised voices through the ceiling. It’s dark outside and freezing even inside, because my dad refuses to put the heating on for more than two hours a day. ‘What’s the point,’ he always says, ‘when you can light the fire and get warm for free?’

After ten minutes, Mum comes back down.

‘You might as well have your presents,’ she says while I’m putting my school tie on in the hall. I look at her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes are red and swollen even though she’s smiling.

‘Shouldn’t we wait?’ I ask. ‘What for?’

She must see me looking upstairs because she continues, ‘Never mind him. Don’t let him spoil your day.’

‘He didn’t,’ I reply. And then I’m out of the door, letting it slam behind me.

Maybe that’s immature of me, but it’s not because of the lack of pancakes or presents – I don’t really care about those; I already know what I’m getting. Mum and Dad clubbed together with my grandparents for a course of driving lessons. Meaning I won’t have to get up early to take the school bus. Meaning I can go wherever I want, whenever I want.

I mull over the possibilities on my way to the bus stop. Where will I go once I can drive? I’ll be able to go into town whenever I like. I can go shopping and visit friends without having to beg a lift. My world expands beyond walking and biking distance.

There are no street lights here, and I make my way using a small torch on my keyring. It casts a pale circle of light, no more than a couple of steps ahead of me. The road is revealed in bits and pieces. Luckily, I know the way; I could make it in complete darkness, if I had to. There are no surprises here, the tall hedges, the deep

ditches running along the side of the lane, have been the same for centuries. The road is bordered on one side by fields and, on the other, by the river. Reeds grow tall and thick in the riverbed. Before me, there were farmers and merchants, toll-keepers and robbers walking the same road, frost slippery underfoot. Samuel Taylor Coleridge regularly walked this same route, tramping down to the beach underneath the darkest sky, that starry wilderness on high.

The only thing that's changed since then is the addition of the nuclear power station on the coast. Two squat boxes, grey and foreboding, illuminated by floodlights. I wonder what Coleridge would make of it?

Up ahead, the bus stop is lit by a single lamp. Anthony waits there, smoking and throwing the lighters from a multipack hard onto the ground so they explode with a pop.

He looks up as I approach, says, 'Alright?' then goes back to his task. The ground is covered with broken plastic. Our breath rises in frozen clouds.

The bus is late as usual and most seats are already taken. I walk up the aisle, looking left and right at couples sitting together and bags on seats. One boy shakes his head when I attempt to sit down. It's Clare who finally relents, moving her bag so I can sit next to her.

We've known each other for as long as I can remember, wiled away long hours together in front rooms and boring cafes, but since her mother left – six years ago, now – it's been different. Clare stopped caring about schoolwork and there is an unspoken rule between us that we act like strangers. It happened naturally and I never questioned it. We might acknowledge each other in the halls but that's it. We're part of different crowds. Sometimes, though, she sits next to me in lessons, or I catch her looking back at me after we pass each other by, and when she does a little thrill runs through me.

'Hi,' I say as I sit down.

She acknowledges me but is listening to a tape in her Walkman, so doesn't chat. I watch her roll a cigarette and slip it into her blazer pocket.

It's a forty-minute ride to school. I want to ask how much she's revised for the exam, but instead I look out of the window and listen to the tinny sound of guitars and screaming coming from her headphones.

We are delayed by traffic. The narrow, icy lanes can't really handle buses and we spend most of the journey waiting for cars to reverse so we can pass. I stare at the hedgerows as we inch past; they are thin, twiggy and lifeless and too high to see over the top of them, just a high wall of twigs scraping and squeaking against the plastic windows.

When we come to the junction, commonly known as the Triangle because of the way the three roads intersect, I see the bench where I used to stop and rest when I cycled around. There's not much else to do around here, so that's how I killed time. The bench is dedicated to a 'Graham Roberts' who, the plaque says, loved the view across the moor. I can't think of any worse way to be remembered.

Finally, the bus reaches the main road, which skirts the coast. The tide is out and I can see flocks of gulls gathering on the mudflats. The flats are dangerous, punctuated by huge signs warning walkers to keep close to the cliff, but there's almost always someone out by the water's edge; a lone figure bundled up in coat and scarf, a tiny silhouette against the fickle sea.

After turning inland, the main road takes us through villages, industrial estates and the sad retail park on the edge of Bridgwater, where piles of pallets rot outside warehouses and only the Greggs isn't boarded up. I look at my watch: 8.45. If I had a car, I would be at school already.

The bus is so late that, by the time we arrive, the exam has already started and the

halls are quiet. There is a sign on the door saying, 'Exam in progress, do not disturb'. The remains of sticky tape that held up the previous sign is still there, in the form of lines of fluff and dirt stuck to it, forming a hazy rectangle.

I'm anxious about being late for the exam, even though it is only a mock. I wish I was more like Clare, who enters the exam hall without hesitating, just walks right in. The door bangs shut and sounds impossibly loud. Everyone looks at us. We've missed the first thirty minutes but, after a whispered conversation about the bus, Mrs Hellier decides we can sit.

I lay my pen and pencil on the table, along with my calculator and all the spares I brought along. The desk is covered in writing, things like: 'I just flunked this exam', and 'good luck!' mixed with doodled drawings of students with their head exploding, phone numbers and workings-out.

The first question, about foreshadowing in *King Lear*, is easy, but I can't get my head around the next question, which is to do with mapping in *Translations*. In English last week, Mrs Hellier asked us to imagine how we would feel if someone came to Devon and renamed every village, erasing our local identity.

Clare said she wouldn't mind. 'It's a dump. They would probably improve it.' Mrs Hellier said she was purposefully missing the point.

The question asks, 'In what sense is the transliteration of physical landscape to map a translation?' and I don't even know where to start. Not quite an hour later, I turn in a half-completed exam. No matter how long I stared at the page, it remained blank like my brain, and I couldn't help thinking back to this morning and the way I'd stormed out of the house. I leave the exam hall, already regretting my decision, and people look up at me as I pass along the rows. Mrs Hellier closes the door behind me and I'm alone in the deserted corridor.

This isn't like me. I'm usually the kid at the front of the class, stretching an arm

insufferably high in the air, begging to answer every question. I spend my weekends reading and always complete my homework on the same day it is set. Even though we're in the same sets, Clare is basically my opposite: she sits at the back, is often in trouble, and slopes off to who knows where during lunch break. She's smart, but she doesn't apply herself.

I wander the quiet corridors. At the end of the main corridor, a doorway covered with tarp leads to the incomplete 'Classroom of the Future'. Construction began last year, using grant money from Hinkley Point. The vision was that, by now, the classroom should be a shiny new pinnacle of technology containing banks of laptops with internet connections – one of the very first in the country – light-reactive windows, and a flat-screen TV built into the wall at the front. When the headteacher, Mr Andrews, announced the project in a special assembly, we filed into the hall and sat in silent rows. A representative from Hinkley Point, a neat woman with a huge smile, stood next to him.

'We want to give something back to the community,' she had said. 'After all, we couldn't work without you. We recognise the importance of multifunctional spaces where you can relax and learn. Therefore, we are funding a 'Classroom of the Future'. Here she paused and waited for two Year 7s to carry a large board onto the stage. They struggled to hold it up while she pointed out its features. 'A glass-walled classroom looking out onto a garden. The windows can be folded back, allowing complete access to the outdoors. They contain technology enabling them to react to different levels of sunlight, preventing distracting glare. And finally, the room will contain a suite of five computers connected to the World Wide Web, enabling you to practise your IT skills.'

A smattering of polite applause filled the gap while the board was removed from the stage. The woodland was cleared the following week and construction started

shortly after that. We're not supposed to go in there, but of course everyone does: to bounce footballs against the echoing walls, to hide out and skive off lessons, to make-out in private. I've only ever peeked through the windows, but right now the lure is too great and I go in, ducking underneath the tarp covering the door.

It's a wide expanse of space and white plastered walls. The would-be desks are piled up in pieces against the back wall, where a tangle of wires spews out of a socket. I sit, stewing, for a while, with my legs crossed on the floor, and press the heels of my hands into my eyes to stop myself from crying. Time ticks by slowly. The exam must be finished by now, and I can hear people walking the corridors, talking and laughing and comparing answers. I hope no one else will come in here, but then there's a rustling sound and someone else ducking underneath the tarp. I stand, preparing to leave. I recognise her by her mess of black hair; it's Clare.

'Oh, it's you.' I say, sitting back down again. 'What are you doing here?'

'You look like shit,' she says, pulling an envelope of baccy from her blazer pocket and rolling a cigarette that she's not supposed to smoke indoors.

'You'll set the fire alarm off,' I say.

'You think it's actually wired in? Nothing in here works. No one would know if there was a fire.'

'That's even worse. I don't want to die in a fire.'

'You want to be 110 years old and die in your sleep, I guess.'

'Seems like the best way to go. Falling asleep nice and cosy in bed.'

I go to a window and pull a corner of the tarp back to get some air into the room.

A spider falls out onto my arm, causing me to squeal before it scuttles away. Happy birthday to me. Clare and I used to invite each other to our birthday parties; at first I was happy to do this because she gave good birthday presents. She presented Laura Ewing with a 50-piece art set at her seventh birthday party. My mother told me

off, saying that was not a good reason, and that we invited people because they were our friends. And, when she came, we did have a good time. She was the absolute best at Musical Statues.

‘Isn’t it your birthday today?’ Clare says, surprising me. I briefly wonder if she can read my mind.

‘Yeah.’

‘Having a good one?’

‘Not really.’

‘Well,’ she shrugs. ‘They’re only mock exams. Not worth stressing over.’

I watch her lick the paper and roll it up. ‘Maybe not for you.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘I need to do well to get good predicted grades to get into a good university. So, actually, they are worth stressing over. At least if you plan on ever leaving this place.’

She looks at me, taking in my neat ponytail, my tucked-in shirt, my tie which is exactly the right length. Then she looks away, shaking her head. ‘Whatever. Just trying to help.’

After a moment I hear the click of a lighter. I pull the tarp further across the window, bringing clean air into the room, while she smokes.

‘Anyway, happy birthday.’

‘Thanks. I guess.’

‘I hope it improves.’

Then she leaves, and I’m alone with the spider.

At lunch, I meet Gabriel in the music room, where he’s practising on the drums. He stops when he sees me. Despite the cold weather, he has the window open.

‘You’re chilly,’ he says when I kiss him.



‘What song was that?’

‘Just messing around.’ He flicks the red elastic band he wears on his wrist. Before we got together, his life plan was to be a drummer in his now defunct band, Peristalsis. The first time I went to his house, he took me upstairs to watch him play a drum solo that lasted ten minutes.

‘I got you a birthday card,’ he pulls a slightly bent card from his pocket. It’s hand-drawn, with the words ‘Happy Birthday’ on the front and, inside, a drawing of me sitting at a desk and staring out of the window. He even remembered to include small details like the gemstone necklace dangling over my shirt collar and the pattern of swirls I’ve been doodling over the front of my homework planner.

‘It’s nothing really. I was bored in Maths.’

‘This is good. Really good.’

‘I think you look nice when you’re concentrating.’ He hands me a small box.

‘Sorry it’s not wrapped.’

Inside is a silver ring set with a pink stone. For a horrible moment I think he’s going to propose, like Terry Cocker did to Kate Baker on her birthday last year at Gabriel’s New Year’s Eve party. But then he says, ‘My mum thought you’d like it.’

I try slipping it onto my middle finger but it’s too small, so I put it on the third. Now it might look as if we actually are engaged. And would that be so bad? We’ve been together nearly a year, and we’re applying to the same universities. I twist the ring and the pink stone sparkles in the cold light.

‘It’s beautiful, thank you.’

Gabriel moves closer to me, putting his arm around me and cinching my waist.

‘You’re shivering.’

‘It’s cold,’ I reply stupidly. ‘Hey, how did your exam go?’

We have revised together according to a schedule I put together at the start of the

year, but it's been difficult – Gabriel can be distracting.

‘As well as I expected. Not that it counts for anything, it's just a mock.’

‘Your predicted grades are what the universities will look at.’

‘Nah. They don't care about us, only league tables. And anyway,’ he says, poking me in my side just underneath my bra, ‘If I don't get in to uni, I'll go to work with my dad.’

Gabriel's dad works off the Cornish coast as a fisherman. He only comes home at weekends, and makes it sound like paradise; being his own man, earning more money than he knows what to do with. Each time he comes home he brings a present, leaving Gabriel with a collection of tacky souvenirs and a desire to follow.

Many of the other kids in school already have their futures decided for them; they'll run the family farm, as their parents and grandparents have. I guess a similar plan was in store for Clare, before she, like her sister, decided to go to university instead. My plan is to go to university together with Gabriel. He will study Philosophy and I, English – because that's my best subject. We'll rent a flat and help each other out with coursework in the evenings. We can come home at weekends. After we graduate, we'll buy a house, get married and have our first baby by the time we're twenty-eight.

‘I've been thinking...’ Gabriel starts, then hesitates. He pushes his hand through his hair and bites his lip. ‘You know I really like you, Briony, and I think about you all the time.’

I pick at a corner of the carpet and peel it up to reveal the wooden floor, where someone has carved, ‘Mr Andrews is a knob.’

Gabriel continues: ‘And I'm wondering if you'd like to take it to the next level. Because sometimes it seems as if you don't actually like me at all?’

A group of kids come past, talking loudly. They squash their faces against the

window of the door. The shapes of their mouths are imprinted in steam after they've moved on.

'What I mean is, if you're ready, we could – you could come over to mine and it would be special.'

I look out of the window and my breath mists the glass when I speak. 'Is that why you gave me this ring?'

'No! God, no. It's just – look, it's just an idea. It's been a year... a man has needs!' He laughs weakly, and I laugh too. He's probably right; a year is a long time.

He pulls a book from his bag, 'I've been reading this.'

It's a faded, sticky taped together copy of *The Joy of Sex*. There's a bearded man on the front, kissing a dark-haired woman who, I think, looks a bit like Clare. The subheading promises, 'A gourmet guide to lovemaking' and Gabriel has marked certain pages with post-it notes sticking out of the top of the book like small tongues. 'I found it in a charity shop,' he says, letting it fall open. 'And I thought it might be inspiring.'

I take the book and glance through it. The illustrations inside are quite off-putting, but at least he's trying. I placate him by saying, 'It's a nice idea.'

He wants to make out, but luckily the bell rings.

My parents are a little less impressed with the ring. The band has turned my finger green and they worry that Gabriel is distracting me from schoolwork.

'This stone looks like glass, don't you think Rachel?' Dad says to Mum. They hold it under the lamp in the living room and inspect it together until I snatch it back.

'It's the thought that counts.'

At least they're agreeing instead of arguing. In the late afternoon light I help them mop out the kitchen and clean the cupboards. We keep the window open in an attempt

to get rid of the smell of damp and, as night descends, it becomes too cold to carry on. Before Dad goes to work, they sing Happy Birthday to me and cut the cake. I open my cards and my driving lesson vouchers; my first lesson will be the following Saturday, 25th November. Gran has also sent me a box of Milk Tray so I have 'something to unwrap'. Mum and I light the fire and eat the chocolates while we watch paper and envelopes burn. I imagine the smoke curling up the chimney and meeting the sky, dissipating into the air, maybe travelling as far as Clare's house where she can breathe in the same air I breathed out. I tell myself to stop being silly.

It is the day of my first driving lesson, I've set my alarm for 7 am, so I have time to read through the Highway Code before the lesson starts at 9.30. I'm in the living room, flicking through the book with one eye on the road to see when the instructor arrives.

On TV, Richard Tweddle is interviewing an angry old woman about immigration when I hear an engine outside. The instructor's car is tiny, and resembles a bright red shoe, with its long narrow bonnet and curved window, but it's polished and sparkling and I will be the one driving it, so to me it's beautiful. The sign on the top says the 'Wheely Good Driving School'.

I shout to my parents, 'See you later!' and run outside, leaving the TV on – that'll get me in trouble later. The instructor is standing next to the driver's side door. She shakes my hand and introduces herself as Erica. She doesn't even have a coat on. I stare for a moment at the sleeve tattoo she has along her whole arm. It's dark, dense and difficult to make out the pictures in it but there's definitely a skull and, I think, an ammonite.

'I don't feel the cold much,' she says when she sees me looking. She hands me the key and we get into the car, which smells of cherry air freshener. Erica chews gum

while she shows me the accelerator, the brake and the clutch and waits for me to adjust the mirrors. And then we're off. But I stall the first time.

'Never mind,' she says cheerfully. 'Everyone stalls their first time.'

With patient coaching, I am off again, down the lane and towards town, although Erica keeps warning me about pulling to the right.

'We're going to stick to quiet roads today,' she says. 'Industrial estates and stuff.'

We drive out to the old airfield on the main road between the village and the town. After the Second World War, this became a public airfield, but it was sold for development when I was ten, much to the chagrin of some locals who camped out on the site to protest the sale. There was a small village of tents there for several weeks, and I went with my mother to give out coffee and sandwiches. Clare's mother was part of the camp and she chatted with my mum for a while, while I milled around the airstrip, kicking stones. It was a sprawling camp, with its own Portaloo, a cooking tent and kids running around barefoot. But they moved on once the weather got cold and the real battle was fought in paperwork, when dozens of complaints against the plans led to the housing development being shelved. Now the runway is choked with weeds.

Erica takes me up and down the runway which stretches far across the field. We practise starting, changing gear and doing three-point turns. When her mobile phone rings, she asks if I mind if she takes it.

'You okay? No it's fine, my current student can manage without me,' she smiles at me. 'Okay sure, that's not a problem. I'll make pizza. See you later, love you.'

After about thirty minutes, we leave the airfield and head towards the town along the main road. It's a busy route, used for transporting stuff to and from the power station. I follow a lorry for several miles while a queue of traffic piles up behind me.

When we pull back up outside my house, Erica tells me I did well.

## Chapter Three

December arrives in a bitterly cold wind. This morning, I open the fourth door on my advent calendar, revealing a chocolate snowman shape. It melts in my mouth as I walk to the bus stop. It's Monday and the exam results are due back. Our form tutor, Mrs Hellier, passes them out in white envelopes with our names on. At first I think they're early Christmas cards, but each is stamped 'CONFIDENTIAL'. I've done okay, a couple of 'A's, mostly 'B's and 'C's, but a 'D' for the mock English Lit paper I was late for. I watch Clare open hers. She pauses over the page, then folds it up and tucks it into the back of her Maths textbook. At least I will have done better than her.

In the evening, my parents ask about my results. Dad reads the sheet of paper first. I hold my breath and prepare excuses.

'How did you get a D for English? That's your best subject!'

'The bus was late that day, remember?'

'That's no excuse.'

Mum takes the paper from him. A line forms between her eyebrows, before Dad snatches it back.

'This exam was on your birthday. Did you even try?'

'Richard, it was only a mock,' Mum cuts in.

‘You let her get away with too much. I’m very disappointed in you. Extremely disappointed.’

I stare at my plate.

‘It’s Gabriel.’ Dad pushes his chair irritably. ‘He’s a bad influence. I said it last year.’

Mum puts her arm around my shoulders. She whispers, ‘You’ll do better in the real thing.’

‘You coddle her.’

‘You’re too harsh.’

‘She obviously didn’t revise.’

They carry on arguing about me as if I’m not even there and I slip out to go to my room, where I shut the door. My bedroom is at the front of the house, above the lounge. It’s the only bedroom I’ve ever known. When I was little, the walls were Barbie pink. Later we repainted them purple, then yellow. Over time, I’ve covered almost every sliver of paint with posters pulled carefully from magazines. The trick is, using scissors, to open the staples before sliding the pages from the centre of the magazine and then closing the staples again. N\*Sync and Christina Aguilera stare at me from the walls.

As I grew, the nursery furniture that I don’t remember was replaced with a tall cabin bed I could lie on and reach up and touch the ceiling. Underneath, I put an inflatable chair and a lunchbox I kept filled with chocolate bars and sweets for midnight snacking. Finally, this was deemed too childish and replaced with a matching set of pine furniture from a neighbour who was throwing it out: bed, shelves, drawers and desk. We spent a whole morning cleaning up and re-assembling the furniture, and I devoted the rest of the day to moving my clothes into the new drawers and lining up *Sweet Valley High* books on the shelves. Months later, I still

have one box left to sort out; a jumble of china elephants, plastic necklaces and seashells that I promised my mother I'd throw away.

At least there are coursework assignments to raise my grade. I've got 'A's on most of my coursework so far, and there are just two more assignments left to complete: one for English and one for Tech. Most people treat Tech as a doss subject because the teacher, Mr Bell, gives the highest grades out of all the teachers and never fails anyone. For my coursework I'm making a Chess and Draughts set, but I've barely started it.

In double English the next day, we spend the first hour talking about exam technique and the second talking about coursework. Gabriel and I are planning to work together, even though Mrs Hellier tells us to choose people we don't usually work with.

'In the real world, you will have to work with people who aren't your friends all the time.'

The whole class groans, and people start moving seats, but Gabriel and I stay sitting together. He takes my hand underneath the desk and rubs his thumb against the ridge of my knuckles.

Amidst the hubbub, Clare raises her hand. She waits to be called on. 'Will we still be marked individually?'

'I was about to get to that. Yes. Group coursework, but individual marks. No one,' here she looks meaningfully at Gabriel, 'will be able to get away with letting the others in their group do all the work and then taking credit for it.'

Okay, so he has a reputation, but I know he wants to do well.

Once the scramble is over, Mrs Hellier sees me and Gabriel and sighs, 'Do you ever listen? Clare, go with Briony and Gabriel.'



Clare looks up from something she's writing, then picks up her bag as if it's heavier than a neutron star and moves over to sit next to me. The noise rises in the room everywhere except our table, as Mrs Hellier struggles to explain over the chatter.

'Choose an author from one of this year's modules and research their inspiration. I expect to see lively, engaging reports that demonstrate a clear understanding of your chosen text.'

We've studied E. M. Forster, Brian Friel, Shakespeare and Coleridge this year. Clare takes notes. Her handwriting is small and spidery, densely packed, almost illegible. I find myself watching her hand move across the page instead of paying attention to the topic. When Mrs Hellier is finished, Clare says, 'I think we should do Coleridge.'

'Okay,' I say.

At the same time Gabriel says, 'Why?'

'He lived near here. We can do some stuff about how the local landscape inspired him.'

After taking a moment to think about it, Gabriel agrees, adding, 'He was high all the time, you know. Coleridge.' He leans back on his chair, hands behind his head.

'Not literally all the time,' Clare replies.

'How do you think he wrote all that trippy stuff? Fucking opium. Hey, maybe our coursework should be about recreating the way it was written.'

I laugh, even though I don't really find it funny. Gabriel puts his hand on my knee under the table. He pushes his shoulder-length hair back from his face and smiles at me.

Mrs Hellier comes over and crouches by our table. She holds the edge of the table for balance. 'I've paired you girls together to mix things up a bit. I think you can help

each other,' she says.

Nonetheless, for the rest of the week, when I get on the bus, Clare puts her bag on the seat so I can't sit down. In return, I don't greet her in the hallways between lessons; instead I make a big deal out of being with Gabriel, hanging on his arm and kissing at the end of each period as if we'll be separated for days and not hours. When we have to sit together again for English on Friday it's like we're total strangers. I find myself chatting awkwardly about the weather.

'It's cold today, isn't it? I hope it snows.'

Clare's about to reply but then Gabriel butts in and says, 'Yes, it's called winter,' and he laughs for far too long. Clare rolls her eyes. She grabs her old rucksack, on which 'Becky loves Tom' remains just about readable, although the ink has run and smudged into blue rivulets between the pockets.

Clare hands us all a photocopy of a map of the Quantock Hills. 'I've marked all the places where Coleridge used to spend time. There's his cottage, in Nether Stowey. You can see Shurton Bars at the beach. And finally I've used a dotted line to mark his favourite route across the hills. I think we should choose one walk each and lead each other around it.'

I tease her, 'Since when are you such a square?'

'Since I decided I have to get good grades to get into a good university,' she replies, staring at me meaningfully.

'I'm sorry,' I say. 'I didn't mean to insult you when I said that.'

She laughs, 'You obviously did.'

I click my mechanical pencil until the lead falls out.

'Not to worry,' she says. 'You probably have a little plastic box, full of spare leads, in your bag.'

I've been looking for them in my pencil case, but I stop. 'No I don't.'

‘In fact, I bet you have everything in there. Plasters, a sewing kit. Wet wipes.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with being organised.’

‘You sound like my dad. And trust me that is not a compliment.’

She stops laughing then, and turns to the map. We agree on what to include and how to divide up the work. We plan to meet, at the weekend, at the Coleridge Cottage. At the end of the lesson, Clare leaves quickly, before I’ve even packed up my things.

Gabriel turns to me, smiling. ‘What’s up with her?’

‘Something I said about the mock exams, it doesn’t matter.’

He puts his arm around my shoulders. ‘You have to stop worrying about them, seriously. You need to chill out.’

I laugh weakly. ‘I’ll chill out when the exams are done and I know where I’m going.’

People jostle around us as they fight to leave the classroom as quickly as possible, on the way to the buses.

‘Seriously. I’ll start an enforced relaxation programme if you’re not careful.’

‘Come on,’ I say, shrugging my rucksack onto my back. ‘I’ll miss the bus.’

He walks me to the stand where my bus stops, and kisses me hard on the mouth until the driver shouts at me to hurry up. I walk past rows of seats, scanning faces for Clare. But she’s not there.

Next Saturday, Mum gets me out of bed early so we have time to do some Christmas shopping before I meet Gabriel and Clare. Usually, Mum finishes all the shopping before December even starts, but it’s already the 9th and now she’s panicking. We spend a couple of hours trawling B&Q looking for a present for Dad, before settling on a socket kit.

She uses the journey to Nether Stowey as another driving lesson opportunity for

me. Erica is a great teacher, but you can't have too much practice. Before we leave the B&Q car park, Mum explains about the high biting point of the clutch on her car, which my Grandad fixed for free. I stall a couple of times, but when I finally do get going it's okay. Changing gears is starting to feel like second nature. We follow the narrow lanes cutting across the countryside. I drive cautiously past my old primary school and rows of terraced cottages before the street narrows into lanes again. The car bumps up and down over potholes.

I park by the newsagent. The windows are decorated with tinsel, lights and spray-on snow, and Christmas fir trees are lined up outside against the window, branches straining against the white netting encasing them. This place sells everything, from baby food to walking boots, eggs to chicken feed. There's an orange bucket outside, labelled 'Bargain Bin' and in it I glimpse such treasures as gardening gloves, batteries, cat treats, rubber balls, 'Grow Your Own Venus Fly Trap' kits, and toy cars.

After Mum has gone on home, I meet Gabriel by the bus stop in the village high street. The stream has frozen solid. I've no idea why Coleridge called it 'Stowey's beloved gutter'. Gabriel and I walk hand-in-hand to the cottage, Gabriel talking non-stop about what a masterpiece of prog rock *2112* is. Clare is waiting outside. I have a camera, Clare has a large hardback notebook, and Gabriel offers around gum.

Inside, the cottage is lit by candlelight and an open fire. The small front room is filled with original manuscripts in glass cases. I take photos and Clare takes notes. She asks the museum volunteers questions about how they would have prepared food and what Coleridge's standing was like in the village.

'With the exception of Tom Poole, the local people were suspicious of him,' the volunteer says. 'They actually thought he was a French spy!'

Up a narrow staircase, the roped-off bedrooms are laid out with mannequins in everyday poses and a typed sign tells us which is Hartley's original crib and what is

taking place in each scene. While I take more photos, Gabriel wanders around and touches everything, even going so far as to lean over the rope and grab a mannequin's hand.

'Bri, look at this.' He puts on a posh voice. 'Nice to meet you, got any opium?' The hand comes off. 'Shit!' he yelps, then turns around, holding the hand. There are footsteps on the stairs. He tries to screw the hand back on, but rushes, fumbles and drops it again. It rolls across the floor. He picks it up and pockets it just as the volunteer emerges on the landing, Clare in tow with her head deep in her notebook. She stares at Gabriel, the hand bulging in his coat pocket, but doesn't rat him out.

We carry on to the next room, a nursery decorated in wood panelling. Gabriel bumps his head on the low ceiling. Afterwards, we go to the garden and I swear I can hear the volunteers discussing the missing hand, so I hurry Gabriel along.

The garden is long and narrow and contains a vegetable patch as it would have when Coleridge lived here. There is a little hut at the bottom, containing poetry books and paper for people to write their thoughts and comments. A family from Canada have written about how much they love the old building; another person has written a long paragraph about Romantic poetry; and several people have written their own verses. I work on adding my own lines about the garden, the bare trees and bitter wind, but it's a bit trite. When I turn around Gabriel is writing his name on the wall with a permanent marker.

'What are you doing?' 'Leaving my mark.'

'This is a really old, important building.'

'You know, graffiti has been a form of self-expression for centuries. They even found graffiti in Pompeii.'

'Yeah but like, this is a museum. Someone has to clean that up. You can be kind of a dick sometimes.' I say.

Now he's picking at the cement between the bricks on the front wall. He pulls out decaying, loose cement and plays with a brick like a wobbly tooth.

'Chill out, no one will notice.'

'That's not what I meant.'

The door opens and Clare emerges, her face flushed with heat from the fire.

'They're all talking about a missing hand. Was that something to do with you?'

Gabriel waves at her with the mannequin's hand. I shake my head, expecting her to tell him off, but she laughs. 'Why the fuck would you steal a hand?'

'I didn't mean to. It fell off. I couldn't get it back on... and now we're here.' He lifts it up for a handshake, and she shakes it.

'Pleasure to meet you,' she says.

Gabriel laughs now, exposing his pointy Adam's apple. 'You're not as bad as I thought you were,' he tells her. 'Hey, you should come to my New Year's Eve party. Starts 7 pm in Little Stowe. Briony's coming for the first time, her parents are actually letting her out of the house after dark.'

'They're not really that strict,' I protest.

Gabriel rolls his eyes. 'Anyway,' he says to Clare, 'It will be cool if you come.'

A shot of jealousy surges through me.

Later, I go back to Gabriel's. When Dad's on nights, Mum lets me stay over – so long as I don't tell him.

Gabriel lives with his parents and his eight-year-old sister, Abigail, in a large old farmhouse. There is a long driveway leading to the road. It must have been a very nice house, once upon a time. There is Minton tiling in the hall, although it is cracked and broken, and the bathroom has double sinks. There's a wood-burning stove in the kitchen, sparkling granite worktops, and a built-in wine rack. Every bedroom has its

own walk-in wardrobe, even the kids' rooms, and Gabriel has a double bed.

Usually, I eat tea with Gabriel's family, then we watch a film and I sleep in the spare bedroom. Tonight, we watch *Home Alone* with Abigail sitting on the sofa in between us. Gabriel tells her off for hogging the popcorn. I can hear their parents laughing in the kitchen. The room is warm, the boiler gurgling upstairs, laughter floating in from the kitchen, and I can smell coffee brewing. I think this is what I want: a full house, Saturday night films with Gabriel, our own children curled up between us. I look at Gabriel. He's been trying to grow a beard, and scraggly hair clings to his chin. He winds it around his little finger until it throbs with blood.

Despite my day dreams, I am relieved when Gabriel's mum comes in, as she always does, and tells me she's made up the spare bed for me. That's my cue to go upstairs. The stairs lead to the second floor, where there is a study and the master bedroom. Then I climb another, narrower set of stairs up to the attic level, which is divided into three rooms. I have to walk through Gabriel's bedroom to get to the spare. Then, happy that I'm under no obligation to do anything else, I lie down with the photocopied map of Somerset and plan to make notes until I fall asleep.

Sometimes Gabriel comes in to say goodnight. Tonight he knocks gently, then opens the door before I answer. He's wearing boxer shorts and the faded Rush t-shirt he likes to sleep in. He gets into bed next to me.

'I wish we didn't have to sneak around like this,' he says.

Putting the poem back on the bedside table, I murmur in agreement.

He pulls me into him. His body is warm and smells of Lynx Africa deodorant.

'When we're at uni together we'll be able to share a bed. We'll share everything.'

I say.

'We should get a king size bed.'

'We can walk home together and cook together in the evenings.' I'm imagining

walking hand-in-hand along tree-lined streets, carrying heavy bags full of books, discussing the day's lectures. In my daydream, Gabriel realises I'm struggling with my bag and takes it from me, then stops to kiss me underneath the falling leaves.

'I love it when you get that little smile on your face.' He kisses me. 'What are you thinking about?'

'I'm thinking about how nice it will be to see you every day. Not just at school.'  
'I'm thinking about seeing you every night.'

He's holding me close now, nuzzling my neck. I know what he wants, so I stretch and yawn. 'I'm tired.'

'Oh.' He's disappointed, but immediately stops. 'It's okay. I'll go.'

'No, stay. We can plan our house and fall asleep together.'

But he's already pulling back the duvet, letting in a flood of cold air. He stops at the door and says, 'Goodnight.'

There's no way I can sleep now. I sit up in the lamplight and look around the room, which is full of the bits and bobs that go in spare rooms, like the exercise bike no one has used in years, a bookcase full of *National Geographics* from the past decade, and a collection of small china dolls, their bright, glass eyes staring at me from beneath perfect curls. Yes, this is what I want – a nice house with a spare room, husband and kids, holiday once a year. So why do I feel as if my heart is shrivelling up like old fruit?

In the morning, my mother picks me up early so we have time to get home before Dad finishes work. We have to get home fast so she doesn't let me drive – he would flip his lid if he knew I spent the night at Gabriel's, even in the spare room. The roads are slick and bright with frost and the car slips a couple of times, Mum swears under her breath and her knuckles are white against the steering wheel. On a Saturday morning



like this, the world is so quiet. In the village centre, the Christmas lights are up but haven't been turned on, and they hang on dull frames.

I need a shower. I run it hot, and stand underneath until my skin turns red and the hot water runs out. Then I sit drying on my bed, not wanting to pull the towel off since it's so cold. Frost laces my window pane, both inside and out, because the glass is still cracked from last summer when Dad accidentally knocked the ladder against it. I pull the towel tighter around my body.

I sit like this until Mum knocks on my door. She's nervous, I can tell. I have the terrible thought that there must have been an accident. Maybe Dad's car has skidded on ice and he's in hospital or he's dead. But all she says is, 'I wanted to ask you something.'

She pauses and casts her eyes around my room, the old cuddly toys sitting atop my wardrobe and the collection of shells on my dresser. 'I need to know if you're practising safe sex.'

I have to stifle a laugh. I'm not practising any kind of sex.

'You and Gabriel have been together for nearly a year now and so it's only natural if you've been thinking about it.'

'Eleven months and 10 days, to be exact.'

'That long?'

'He asked me out in my Christmas card, remember? He says, since he wrote the card and gave it to me on the last day of school, that our anniversary is actually 21<sup>st</sup> December. But since I opened it on Christmas day, I think that should be the official date. Anyway, we haven't done anything.'

She frowns. 'Really?'

'His mum always makes me sleep in the spare room.'

Now she smiles. 'His parents are strict, are they?'

‘Not really. I mean, they’re nice... but I don’t want to do it yet anyway. Not yet. I mean –’ I wish I hadn’t carried on talking, and let her think his parents were super strict instead, but I’ve started now so I cast around for a lie, trying to think of something to say to make her go away. I say the first thing that comes into my head, ‘Not until marriage.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Is that a religious thing?’ Unlike my father, Mum hates going to church and never forces me into going because, she says, I should be able to choose for myself and only go if I really want to. ‘Well, anyway, I wanted to give you this. And remember, I’m always here if you have any questions.’ She reaches, I think, to hug me, but then seems to change her mind and settles for patting my shoulder instead. Her hands are freezing cold. ‘My own parents never talked to me about this sort of thing, but I wish they had.’

‘Okay.’

‘Okay?’

‘I need to get dressed now.’

‘Sure. I’ll leave you to it.’

When she’s gone I look at the booklet. It’s called *When You’re Ready* and features enlightening diagrams of reproductive systems. It’s pretty much a manual on how not to get pregnant. At the back there are photos of couples with speech bubbles displaying comments like, ‘We made sure to use a condom’, and, ‘I wanted my first time to mean something.’ The stupid book makes me feel like going out and having sex with the first person I see, just to stick it to the authors. Except that person would probably be my dad, or Derek from next door who flies a giant St George’s flag on a pole in his front garden.

Hopefully Mum will never mention this ever again.

A week after our visit to the cottage, and after my driving lesson, we go up onto Exmoor to argue about whether it could be the inspiration for the pleasure dome in ‘Kubla Khan’. I think not; it’s cloudy and threatening rain. That’s all it ever does here: rain constantly throughout winter, so you can’t go outside – as if there was anywhere to go anyway. It can be nice, because there’s no better feeling than sitting inside by the fire while the rain batters the roof, knowing you’re safe and warm, but I wouldn’t want to be out in it unless I had to. The sky is a dull grey that reminds me of long days stuck inside watching daytime television. Everything is damp and the grass is dark and patchy. Water soaks into my boots and the cuffs of my jeans.

We follow the Old Mineral Line, a straight track where the mine trains used to run iron-ore from hills to coast. The roughly gravelled path takes us past old mine shafts, and rusty workings, where we stop and stare at the deep holes in the ground. They stare back at us like blank eyes.

Eventually we come across The Incline, a steep slope where a cabling system used to haul trucks up and down.

‘It’d be cool to skateboard down that,’ Gabriel says.

Clare wants to find Walford’s Gibbet which, she says, is famous. She tells us the story as we tramp across the sodden countryside. ‘So this creep called John Walford was married and his wife was pregnant, but he was seeing another woman – a teenager really, she was nineteen – on the side. He decided he’d rather be with her, so he killed his wife. As you do.’ She stops to unfold the map.

‘So then what happened?’ I ask. ‘Surely he was punished?’

‘Oh, yeah, he was sentenced to death. On his way to the gallows he was given a final pint of ale at a pub somewhere near here, and then his mistress climbed into the

cart with him when they took him off to be hanged.’

‘Nice, maybe it’ll be haunted.’ Gabriel says.

‘It’s weird that people used to go out and watch hangings, like entertainment.’ I add.

Gabriel reckons it will be easy to find. ‘I know where this is! Used to go there all the time with my dad,’ he says. ‘Follow me.’

Before long the cloud descends around us. We keep walking, following Gabriel, who has gone on ahead, until he turns around and says, ‘I don’t actually know where I’m going, you know.’

‘What?’ Clare and I say in unison.

‘I’m just walking. I assumed it would be obvious. You know, a giant gallows.’

‘Are you joking? Tell me you’re joking.’ I say.

‘The gallows aren’t there any more, you twat,’ Clare says.

I can’t see anything in front of us in any direction, nothing but grey low-lying cloud for miles. We could be anywhere. Clare pulls out a map and unfolds it, shaking her head, but she seems irritated rather than panicked. I, on the other hand, can already see newspaper headlines about our bodies being found.

We walk a bit further, following Clare this time, until we can hear a river rushing. She looks at the map and decides it must be the River Mole. ‘If we follow it east, we’ll get back to the village.’

‘But which way is east?’ I peer over her shoulder.

‘Wherever the sun isn’t, obviously.’ Gabriel cuts in

‘Can you see the sun?’ Clare says. ‘No. Because we’re stuck in the fog, thanks to you.’

‘Okay whatever, calm down.’

‘You don’t have to act like Briony’s stupid when you’re the reason we’re in this

mess.'

It's cold up here and the moisture from the cloud soaks into my boots and through my coat. We're all shivering, teeth chattering, and have run out of bottled water. I can see things are falling apart, so I change the subject.

'Didn't anyone bring a compass?' I say, squinting into the sky.

'I don't even have a watch,' Gabriel replies.

'How do you cope with him?' Clare looks at me. 'I think we'll be alright if we go this way.'

And so we follow Clare, walking in near silence for what seems like hours. Only the rushing river is our company as we tramp across fields and over stiles, until finally we're going back downhill through an area of cleared field that looks the same as any other, but Clare stops, smiling.

'This is it!' She says. 'Walford's Gibbet. This is where he was hanged. 1789. And before this he stopped at the Globe Inn.'

'How is this related to our coursework?' Gabriel asks, sulking.

Clare shrugs. 'It's not really, but I thought it was cool, and we were already nearby.'

I stare out across the field and try to imagine it packed with people, all waiting for John Walford to meet his death. Maybe there was a party atmosphere, a bit like the Christmas light switch-on is now.

'I guess it shows that walking the countryside isn't all about pubs and writing poetry,' I say, trying to cut through the tension surrounding us. 'There's all this industrial history, crime, murders and stuff.'

'Exactly. It's not completely boring.' Clare replies.

'I wouldn't go that far.' I smile.

The light is growing dim and it is time to leave. We re-locate the Old Mineral

Line and follow it through bare trees, which twist and knot together. The fog is thinner here and, through the trees, the moor and the village stretch out before us. The trees look like enormous, ancient fingers reaching above us towards a grey sky. Gabriel is walking ahead again, carrying a giant stick he picked up a while back.

‘Thank God,’ I say, ‘I know the way now. Here, I’ve found a packet of Haribo in my pocket. Want one?’

Clare takes a fried egg.

‘So how do you know about this place and all these horrible stories?’ I ask her.

‘I used to come up here with my parents when we were picking blackberries.’

‘Oh my God, that’s wholesome.’

‘Yeah,’ says Clare. ‘My mum used to make jam, and tell us all about the history of the place. She really didn’t shy away from any of it, I think she was hoping we would grow up to hate the countryside like her.’

‘I remember that actually. She always gave some of the jam to us. It was pretty good on toast. I envied you.’

‘Really? I’m surprised. Literally my whole childhood was spent washing out empty jam jars and hearing talk about murders.’ She smiles briefly and looks away.

‘Honestly, that’s the life I want even when I move out.’

‘Really?’ Clare says. ‘Because I can tell you now, it sucked.’

‘Yeah. A couple kids, a dog. Country walks at the weekend.’

‘And jam.’

‘And jam.’

Up ahead, Gabriel turns and shouts, ‘How did you get so far behind?’ then he turns and carries on regardless, swishing the stick from side to side. I doubt he knows where he’s going, since he’s the one who got us lost in the first place.

‘Is he a part of this plan?’

I look at his coat billowing behind him. ‘I guess.’

A moment passes. Leaves crunch under our feet. I look up at the sky, which seems huge through the bare trees.

Clare speaks quietly, but I can hear her, ‘You could do better, you know.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘You and Gabriel. You won’t last forever.’

A little bubble of hot anger rises up inside of me. ‘You don’t know that.’

‘Come on. You want to spend your whole life with him?’

‘Just because you’re eternally single doesn’t mean everyone needs to be. We’re moving in together when we go to university. And – ‘ I can’t stop myself. ‘He’s a great boyfriend. He buys me presents all the time.’ My hand goes to the ring he gave me. I twist it around, accidentally exposing the green part of my skin.

We walk a little further in silence, Clare pulling slightly ahead. I wish I hadn’t been so mean.

We all reach the end of the trail separately. When I arrive, Clare is standing by the car park gate and Gabriel is sitting on top of it. The mist has cleared at this lower elevation, and when I look back up I see the peak is completely shrouded in mist. It’s amazing we found the way down. There’s another mile to walk back into the village. Gabriel talks the whole way about how we could have survived for days by drinking droplets of condensation from leaves if we had to but boasts he could have navigated with a compass if we had one, and eventually Clare snaps at him and says, ‘Could you be quiet?’ Like she’s a teacher or someone’s mother. Gabriel rolls his eyes at me when she’s not looking but I don’t smile or roll my eyes back at him and his laughter dissipates.

We’re re-entering the village by the new estate behind the primary school we once attended together. Several houses are being built, wooden frames rising like

skeletons out of the dirt. Others have been completed and sold, lit up by Christmas lights.

Gabriel draws ahead in sullen silence. At the bus stop no one speaks, then we get on the bus and sit in different places. This is the slow service that stops everywhere. In the village High Street we wait for the driver to have a smoke and chat with an old lady waiting there. I watch people going in and out of Little's Newsagent. The sun sets quickly and it grows dark as we leave the village, descending the hill and joining the main road by the church and the cheese factory. The view from the window is replaced with my own reflection as we go down the main road towards the coast. My stop is first, and no one says goodbye, but when I look back Clare waves out of the window at me, and that makes me feel a bit better.

I let myself in and have a hot shower, then put my muddy clothes in the wash. In the kitchen, there's a note from Mum saying they've gone to the supermarket. I sit at the table and write notes about the walk for our English coursework. I remove the film from the camera, put it in the little plastic container and seal it in the Truprint envelope ready to be posted for developing.

When my parents get home, they have bought loads of stuff for Christmas, including a Christmas tree strapped to the roof of the car. We carry it in, Mum with the trunk on her shoulder and me holding the top. Loads of needles fall off onto the living room carpet when we snip the netting off. Dad fixes the tree in the pot and even though it leans slightly to the right, it looks pretty in the bay window. We put the lights on first, then the tinsel and all the baubles, including some really crap ones I made as a kid that Mum refuses to get rid of. Then we open a bottle of port, wrap presents and arrange them under the tree. The events of the day feel far away and since they don't ask me any awkward questions about it, we all get along fine.



## Chapter Four

Erica picks me up outside school for my next driving lesson on Friday afternoon, on the final day of school before breaking up for the Christmas holidays. I'm wearing US Brass heels which she makes me take off because, she says, the soles are too thick to drive in properly. I dutifully remove them, placing them on the floor behind the passenger seat, and flex my toes over the metal pedals. When I pull away I judder slightly but don't stall, and while we wait for the lights at the pedestrian crossing, Erica and I chat about the subjects I'm taking and my plans for university.

‘Did you go to university?’ I ask.

She laughs. ‘It never suited me. My first job after school was installing gas pipes in new houses.’

As we're pulling up to the roundabout leading into town, she comments on my lane discipline and reminds me of the procedure for ‘mirror, signal, manoeuvre’. Once I've corrected she immediately starts talking about gas pipes again. The road we're on goes into the city centre; today I will be practising roundabouts over and over again until, Erica says, they're easy. I like working with her and it's not hard to relax and concentrate only on driving. The Ka is easy to manoeuvre.

‘Before I started doing this, I was in New Zealand for eighteen months, picking

blueberries. Didn't pay well of course, but it was a good excuse to travel. And that's where I met Alex.'

I slow down, pressing the brake a bit too hard, as the car approaches a cyclist; I give him a wide berth and someone on the other side of the road has to stop.

'That was good. I think you're almost ready for your test.'

The rest of the lesson is spent driving home. We get stuck behind a tractor, so it takes longer than usual. The line of traffic following the tractor snakes over the hill, and there's no chance of overtaking.

When we get back and pull up outside my house, I pay Erica with the cash I've been carrying around school all day. She counts it and there's an awkward pause before she says, 'This isn't quite enough.'

'It's £25.'

'£25 an hour yes, but our lessons are ninety minutes.'

'Oh. Shit. I'm sorry.'

'It's okay.'

'I'll go now and get the rest.'

'Don't worry about it, we can settle up next time.'

I smile, 'Okay.'

'Next week, same time same place?'

'It's a date,' I reply, regretting it before I've even stepped out of the car. She's older than my mother.

I enter the house shouting, 'We owe Erica £12.50!' as the door slams behind me. My parents' voices stop and a wall of silence builds up. Something is wrong, I can feel it. There's a ripped envelope on the floor in the hall. I step over it and look into the living room. Dad is standing by the bay window, staring out past the Christmas tree, and Mum is writing something in the notebook she uses for keeping track of

household bills.

‘Did you see my parallel park?’ I ask them.

‘We’ll be okay,’ Mum says as if she hasn’t heard me. ‘This is doable. If I can pick up another shift and we cut some unnecessary expenditures, it’ll be fine.’ She looks up and smiles brightly at me. ‘How was your lesson?’

‘It was fine. But we owe her for half an hour.’

From the window, Dad speaks. ‘We’ll have to cancel those lessons. Too expensive.’

‘But it was my birthday present,’ I whine, looking between them. Mum is on the sofa, frowning at her notes. Dad, running his fingers over a hairline crack in the window pane. The cat comes in and rubs around my legs so I reach down to stroke her. At least someone is pleased to see me.

‘I’ll teach you,’ Dad says at last. ‘My father taught me and it was fine.’

I cringe. Dad is a terrible driver. He merges onto the motorway at 50mph and waits at roundabouts even when there are no cars coming. I doubt he’d pass his test if he took it now.

Mum must see something on my face because she jumps in. ‘It’s only temporary. Just until your dad gets his overtime back.’

‘Why would they cut your overtime?’ I ask, while I scratch the cat behind her ears.

‘Cost-cutting. They reckon if they can’t save money they’ll have to lay people off. It’s ridiculous. There won’t be enough staff. Can’t have one man on a shift alone, it’s not safe.’

## Chapter Five

We're doing the third and final walk today, just two days before Christmas, to the beach at Shurton Bars. It was my choice, this time, and, in addition, I decide to bring rubbish sacks down to the beach and pick up litter because I saw a documentary about the garbage island in the Atlantic Ocean, a huge swirling pool of plastic which is bigger than our whole town.

My mother has packed me off with a sandwich, fleece, anorak, rubber gloves and half a dozen bin bags. I take a notebook and camera and arrive early to wait for the other two. Clare shows up shortly after me, and we spend twenty minutes waiting for Gabriel.

'How long should we wait for him?'

'If he wants to fail the coursework, that's his problem. It's not as if it's fifty per cent of our grade,' she says sarcastically.

It's my favourite weather; cool, calm and clear. If you were looking at a picture of the beach, you would be forgiven for thinking it was summer – the bright sun shines on the sea, the sky is a deep rolling blue. But cold pinches my cheeks, and we're both bundled up in coats and scarves. We start walking together and, even though we haven't agreed where we're going, we fall into step.

I think the sea connects us to other people, to the rest of the planet. Swimming in the same vast ocean as countless others; maybe an early morning swimmer off the coast of Spain, a surfer in California, or a fisherman drawing his catch from Pacific waters. Millions of fish, dolphins, sea snails. Creatures dwelling on the dark ocean floor, unseen and unseeing. All of this is sharing the same space, the same sea-salt smell and the same wet pull of the tide, as my feet in the water at Shurton Bars.

The tide was out earlier on in the day, and has crept back in since Clare and I came down to the beach. The waves now slosh up my calves and soak the hems of my jeans. The white foam shrinks from the sand and, above us, an aeroplane cuts across the clear blue sky. Its rumble follows after it.

‘Did you know,’ I say to Clare, ‘that in the real Little Mermaid story, not the Disney one, she dies at the end and becomes the foam on the sea?’

‘So we’re wading in the remains of dead mermaids?’

‘According to the Grimm brothers.’

Clare bends and picks a limpet shell from the water. It’s empty, washed clean of the life it once contained, bleached white by the sun. She contemplates it, turning it in her hands, then draws her arm back and throws it as hard and as far as she can. I don’t hear or see it splash where it lands.

She rolls a cigarette and, lighting up, says, ‘It’s kind of a happy ending. After all the shit that happens, she gets to return to the sea where she always belonged.’

‘You think?’

‘Sure. Romance isn’t the only happy ending. Anyway, the man she was in love with wanted her to change and stop being who she really was, just so he could have her. That’s messed up.’

‘I’ve never thought about it like that.’

Shurton Bars are steep ridges of limestone, like the spines of giant stone animals

sleeping on the beach. We walk up and down them, meandering. Every so often Clare stops to pick up sea glass. She gives me a piece, a smooth green ring that I slip onto my index finger.

‘What do you think it used to be?’

‘Probably a bottle top. But it’s cool to think it used to be litter and now it’s something nice.’

I imagine Coleridge walking along this beach, maybe picking up similar things and taking them back to the cottage for Sara to look at. Based on what I’ve read, their marriage wasn’t always a happy one. She was often alone, in that cheerless room, waiting for him to come back from his wandering.

We walk along the beach towards Steart, chatting, until we have more sea glass than we can carry. We have also filled four bags, two each, with litter: leftover beer cans, bottles, bits of wire and metal, soot-blackened disposable barbecues, even a dog lead. I also find a Lego octopus and some sea beans – smooth brown stone-like objects which start life as plants and seed pods on tropical islands before being carried across the oceans to different coasts. My father used to tell me about them when we took walks on the beach when I was a kid.

Clare and I are the only people on the beach. The tide, in some places, has left behind hard, compacted sand that doesn’t retain our footprints. We have come largely unprepared; Clare is wearing a new pair of walking boots, which rub her feet raw, and my feet have gone numb with cold in my thin Converse knock-offs. Before long we’re both feeling tired and miserable. With the prospect of another mile to walk back, we leave the rubbish bags and sit by the sea. Despite the cold, the sun is strong and I’m parched. Clare smokes a cigarette and flicks the butt into one of the rubbish bags, which rustle in the breeze. Really, it’s too cold to swim, but I long for the cold shock of the sea, salt in my hair, slippery rocks and seaweed under my feet.

‘I wish I’d worn a swimming costume under my clothes,’ I say.

‘Well, there’s no one here. Go for it.’

Clare eases off her boots. There is blood on her heels from being rubbed all day. I look out to the glittering sunbursts on the water, the smooth round islands of Steep Holm and Flat Holm. If I squint, I can just about make out the lighthouse on Flat Holm.

‘Do you think someone lives there?’ I wonder aloud.

‘Whoever it is, I feel sorry for them. Must be boring as fuck.’

‘I don’t know, it might be nice. Watching birds, swimming in the sea, reading books.’

‘What happens if they get sick? Or run out of milk?’

A gull swoops down and picks a shiny fish from the ocean. ‘I think it would be great, not having to go anywhere or do anything. Just hanging out with nature.’

‘You are such a romantic. Coleridge would love you.’

‘I wish it wasn’t too cold to swim.’

‘Ah, it’s not that cold. Close your eyes, then,’ she says. ‘I’m going in.’

I shut my eyes, then hold my hands over them for good measure. Standing at the edge of the water, where the sea sucks the sand out from underfoot, I hear her running in, kicking up water, splashing in the tide and shrieking at the cold. When she shouts, ‘Okay, your turn!’ I uncover my eyes and the sun dazzles me. She’s kneeling in the surf, her back to the horizon, with only her head and shoulders visible.

‘Now you close your eyes,’ I instruct her.

She closes her eyes, takes a deep breath and submerges her head underwater. I take my trainers off and place them away from the water’s reach, remove my bracelet, my jeans and jumper and my ring, because I don’t want to lose it. Keeping my t-shirt on, I run into the water until it reaches my waist, and the freezing water is painful but

also kind of nice – instead of fighting the cold, I give in to it. I wade forward until I'm next to Clare. Seagulls circle overhead, and the shore seems a long way away.

Clare comes up for air, gasping and rubbing water from her eyes. She never does anything by halves; once she's in, she's all in. Her school books have 'No regrets' written over them in bubble writing. She probably hasn't kept a t-shirt on, I think, and a weird little thrill goes through me.

'Come on, you'll get cold if you don't get your shoulders under.'

'I'm okay here.'

'I'll splash you,' she threatens, and doesn't give me any time to respond before kicking her leg up and showering me.

I squeal and shout. 'There's salt in my eyes!' I worry I sound angry but I don't feel it. The water is too shallow to really swim in, so I kneel down and pull myself forward with my hands, like I'm crawling except I'm almost weightless. My t-shirt gapes and bubbles, then is totally submerged and sticks to me like a second skin. The seagulls wheel and wail in the sky above me. Small waves ripple in to shore and out again. In and out, in and out. I match my own breathing to the rhythm. After I've grown used to the cold, I float on my back and wonder where the sea will take me. I relax and float like this until Clare shouts and when I open my eyes I'm surprised at how far I've been carried along the beach by the current. I swim back, grateful that she was there, not wanting to think about how far I could have gone out.

After a while it's too cold to stay in so we swim back to the shore, towards the rock piles and shallow dunes. There, ever present, is the power station. The sand turns into coarse pebbles. I can see the signs telling us to keep dogs on leads and put our litter in bins. Clare's clothes and mine are laid out in the sun with our jewellery on top of them.

We get out and get dressed, I find myself thinking Clare is pretty even with



eyeliner all over her face; when she pulls her hair loose and flips it over her shoulder, I don't know where to look. She's wearing a black bra that's riding up slightly at the back. The sound of waves fills my ears and I stare out to sea, feeling almost faint. A large cruise ship is on the distant horizon, appearing stationary. I wonder where it might be going. We get dressed without looking at each other and make our way back up the beach. Every so often she bends to pick something up.

'Hold your hands out,' she says, and pours a pile of sand-coated sea glass into my cupped hands. I stuff it into my pockets.

'You're not wearing your ring,' Clare says.

I look at my ring finger, marked by a green circle where the ring should be. 'Oh. Shit.'

'Did you stop wearing it?'

'I must have forgotten to put it back on after we were swimming. I should have left it in my shoe or something.'

We go back and dig through the sand where our clothes had been piled up, finding little but driftwood and stones and then there's something shiny. I grab it but it turns out to be the ring pull from the lid of a tin.

'It doesn't matter. If we don't find it, Gabriel will have to buy you a new one,' Clare says. 'One that doesn't turn your finger green.'

'He's going to be so annoyed.'

'Well, fuck him if he is. Anyway it's probably at your house.'

It's beginning to get dark. 'I guess,' I say. 'We should go back before the tide comes in any further.'

We walk home, dropping the bin bags off by a public bin along the way. It's cold and Clare lends me her jumper. When I arrive at my house, Mum asks me where I got it from, insisting that she wash and iron it before giving it back.

‘And why is your hair wet?’ Mum scolds me as she find a hair dryer. ‘You were messing around, doing something stupid I bet.’

I think of Clare in the sea. ‘No, I wasn’t.’

Mum doesn’t manage to pick up another shift and the lack of money makes things hard at Christmas. On Christmas Day the family usually gathers at our house but this year, since the kitchen still smells damp and weird, only Mum’s parents come. Our traditions include arguing about who will cook, drinking enormous amounts of Bailey’s Irish Cream and falling asleep on the sofa before 5 pm. Christmas in our house is all about drinking. As a child, I left out Scotch for Father Christmas instead of milk. Grandad is pissed before lunch, and the rounds of opening presents are punctuated by Amaretto and wine. Even my glass is repeatedly topped up. My parents swap gifts. Dad pretends to be happy with his socket set, and his presents for Mum were obviously chosen from the 3-for-2 section of the supermarket; a set of bath bombs, and a nail care kit in a small plastic box.

I help Mum with the cooking, peeling vegetables while the rest of the family talk and laugh together in the living room. She is muttering about no one ever helping, but the kitchen is too small even for the two of us and we keep knocking into each other. When I jostle her and cause some hot juice to spill out of the roasting tin holding the turkey, she sends me away and I gratefully go. I’m waiting for a text back from Gabriel. He said he would call me to say happy anniversary, but he hasn’t, and soon it will be the afternoon. I’m worrying about him even as I take plates from the kitchen to the dining room and lay out the £1 scratch cards by everyone’s placemat. We sit, we pray – Grandad insists on it – and we all make jokes about what we’ll do with the jackpot before we scratch them off.

‘I’d buy a house in the Caribbean,’ Mum says. ‘Lovely and warm.’

‘I’d share with my family, of course,’ Gran says. ‘Briony, I could pay your university tuition fees.’

Dad’s joke goes down like a lead balloon:

‘I’d pay for a divorce,’ he says and then laughs for what feels like ages until there’s a knock on the door. We pause.

‘I’ll get that,’ Mum says.

‘No, I’ll go.’ I rise, feeling the wine going to my head, and totter to the door. I can see Gabriel through the frosted glass, so he doesn’t startle me even when he jumps out and says, ‘Surprise!’

‘What are you doing here?’

‘Well happy anniversary, it’s lovely to see you, too.’

I guess he’s trying to be spontaneous and romantic, so I move out of the way and let him pass through into the hall. He throws his coat onto the shoe rack. I pick it up and hang it. Gabriel reaches his arms around me, pulls me to him and sticks his tongue down my throat. I push him away.

‘Don’t. My grandparents are here.’

‘Who is it?’ Mum shouts.

Dad mutters, ‘I hope it’s not bloody carollers.’

‘Do you hear singing, Richard? It’s obviously not carollers.’

‘No,’ I go through to the dining room, Gabriel following behind me. When he appears in the doorway, Dad’s face darkens. ‘What’s he doing here?’

‘You know how to make a man feel welcome,’ Gabriel says.

‘Well get the boy a plate!’ Gran gets up and goes into the kitchen. ‘It stinks in here.’

‘I know, Mother. That’s because of the damp. Let me go find a chair.’

Then it’s just me, Dad, Gabriel and Grandad awkward around the table. Gabriel

taps his fingers against a dining chair. Grandad concentrates on scraping the foil off his scratch card with the edge of his knife. When we get Gabriel set up with chair and plate, we sit around to eat in renewed silence.

‘So don’t you have your own family to eat with?’ Dad asks. ‘Dad!’ I say. ‘It’s our first anniversary.’

‘Is it? Well, I doubt you’ll be around next year. Briony will have to concentrate on her A-Levels, she doesn’t need any distractions.’

‘I understand,’ Gabriel replies. ‘But I intend to support her through that.’

‘What kind of grades do you get?’

‘I’ve won a tenner!’ Grandad holds up his scratch card, changing the subject before Gabriel can answer. Dad continues to glare at him.

Small talk stalls and dinner feels like it lasts forever, but eventually we’ve cleared our plates and it’s time to eat the Christmas pudding. Dad sets it alight while I help Mum stack up the plates next to the sink, although it’s a struggle to fit them around all the food, which is still on the counter instead of in the now mouldy cupboards.

Everyone ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ when we bring it through, but we are so full that most of it goes uneaten, cream cooling and pooling in the bowls.

In the afternoon, we watch the Queen’s Speech and open another bottle of Baileys. Grandad naps. Gabriel talks to my Gran about different types of banjos for ages. Then the phone rings and Dad steps out.

‘Don’t pick it up,’ Mum urges him. But he does anyway. Turns out he’s been called into work. They argue in loud whispers in the hallway.

‘You can’t go now,’ she says.

‘What else can I do?’

‘You could refuse! It’s Christmas Day!’

‘They’re sacking people left, right and centre. I can’t risk it.’

‘Tell them you can’t drive, you’ve been drinking.’

My grandparents try to defuse the tension and start talking to me loudly about how much they love their presents.

‘Briony will have to drive you, since everyone else has been drinking,’ Mum says.

She, Dad and I get into the car. Dad sits in the front, Mum goes in the back, in stony silence. The roads are empty and shiny with rain, which sprays up as I drive. I keep the wipers on their fastest setting and they squeak against the glass. Without the radio on, it’s tense and awkward. I follow the curve of the main road along the coast, down to Hinkley Point. It’s five miles and only at the last one do the buildings start to look bigger and closer. I know we drive close by Clare’s house at this point and I find myself looking for her. Even though it’s unlikely she’ll be out, I peer down each driveway we pass. I see lights on in living rooms, colourful decorations and spray-on snow in bay windows, and televisions flickering, a man taking his boots off outside the front door; quick snatches of other lives, but none of them hers.

When we get home, Mum slams the door upon entry. Suddenly the day is over. My grandparents leave. I help Mum to wash up. Gabriel pulls me aside and whispers that he wanted to give me my anniversary present today but it’ll have to wait. We watch *The Snowman* in silence, with Mum on the sofa between us – our sofa has wooden arms, it’s not the kind you can lounge on, so we sit up straight and uncomfortable.

Dad gets home late, having begged a lift from a colleague. He’s annoyed and full of it. He rips his coat off and tosses it onto the sofa, sits in front of the TV without saying a word. We all go to bed before eleven. Gabriel sleeps on the sofa.

On Boxing Day, Gabriel invites me over to his house for what he calls my Christmas and anniversary present. I don’t know what to expect. Before we leave, I

look in my parents' drink cabinet for something to take with us. The cabinet contains one bottle of Famous Grouse and several dusty bottles of wine, then some whiskey miniatures. I slip one of the bottles of wine into my handbag that evening and the dust, when I rub it from my hands, sticks together in rolls. Later, Mum gives us a lift back to Gabriel's house. At the top of the hill, the houses grow further and further apart and a smaller road turns off, leading to his place.

Gabriel can't find his key so we press the bell, which rings deep inside the house. His mother answers the door and lets us in. She is wearing a dressing gown and pulls it tightly around herself.

'You had a nice time?' I nod.

'Come on through. Sorry about the mess.'

She stands back from the door so I can pass her, and I enter the large kitchen.

The Christmas dinner plates have been washed and left to dry in the rack by the sink. At the centre of the room, a scrubbed wooden table is laden with dirty plates from breakfast. I wait awkwardly next to the table, then remove my coat and hang it over a chair, look at my reflection in the window and tug at the hem of my dress. Maybe it is too short. I can hear talking and laughing from upstairs, footsteps crossing the floor above my head.

'Let me get something ready. Wait here.'

While Gabriel's gone, his mum asks what I got for Christmas.

'Money, a diary, and some new clothes.'

'Well, that sounds lovely,' she says.

Gabriel finally comes back down. He enters the kitchen, waits for his mother to leave, then turns to me.

'You look nice, by the way.'

'Thanks,' I reply. 'So do you.'

‘Happy Anniversary.’

He kisses me with my back against the counter, the ridge of the worktop digging into my back. Gabriel is not a great kisser: he’s all about the tongue. But he makes up for it with enthusiasm. I try to guide him, coax his lips towards my neck or ears like I read to do in *Cosmo*, but he never follows. We do this for a few minutes, though it feels like longer. When we stop there are grooves in my back.

‘Come to my room.’

‘Won’t your mum mind us being alone in there?’

He laughs, though I’m not trying to be funny. Without responding, he heads into the hallway and up the stairs, stopping midway to ask me if I’m coming. I hurry after him to his bedroom, where he dips his head underneath the sloping ceiling. The window is open and the air is freezing but, wow, he’s really gone to town.

There are candles on every surface, flames flickering and casting long shadows across the bed. A bunch of rose petals are scattered over the duvet. It’s like every romantic film cliché I have ever seen.

‘What do you think?’

I move carefully around the candles. ‘Where did you get all of these?’

He stands behind and put his arms around me. They feel heavy on my shoulders and I shrug him off.

‘Do you like it?’

‘It’s very atmospheric.’

He falls back laughing, ‘Only you would say something like that. It’s very atmospheric.’ He sits hard on the bed, sending petals into the air. He pulls my hand, and I sit next to him. The bed dips, but I stiffen my arm so I won’t slide down towards him.

‘I wanted to do something nice for you,’ he says softly. His warm breath makes

the hair on my neck stand up. Why can't he do something normal and nice, like buy me a book or take me out for dinner?

'I brought wine,' I say, in an attempt to change the subject.

'Really? I thought your parents were ridiculously strict.'

That's what I told him when we started seeing each other, so he wouldn't ask to stay over my house. I pull the bottle from my bag. 'They don't know I took it.' I unscrew the cap and sniff inside. It smells really bad, like old vinegar. God knows how many years it spent in the cupboard, or what it's supposed to smell like. I take a tiny sip and pass it to Gabriel, who chugs as if it's actually good. It leaves a pink halo around his mouth. I kill some time by looking through his CD collection, skipping over Rush, Joy Division, Nirvana, Grateful Dead, and pull out *Let's Talk about Love* by Celine Dion.

He snatches it away from me, saying, 'That's not mine.'

We listen to *Nevermind* until the hidden track comes on and makes me jump.

We've drunk half the wine. Gabriel puts the bottle on the floor and pulls me to him. We huddle under the blanket in our clothes.

'We're alone up here.'

'Yes,' I say. 'We are.'

Then he kisses me again, with his hand on my bare back, underneath my dress. His tongue moves around inside my mouth and I look up, out of the skylight, at the clouds drifting across the moon.

I push him away and struggle out from under him. There's a packet of condoms on the floor next to the wine bottle. He still has the mannequin's hand from Coleridge Cottage, resting on his bedside table. The candles gutter.

'I think we had different things in mind.'

His face falls, 'I went over the top.'



‘No, no. It was a nice idea. Really.’

‘I knew I shouldn’t have used the petals.’

‘I guess I’m not ready for this. Not mature enough, or whatever.’

‘I spent loads of money and it took me ages to pull the petals off all the flowers. Look.’ He shows me all the places on his hands where rose thorns made him bleed.

There is a hotness building behind my eyes and pressure in my throat. ‘I should go.’

‘You only just got here. We can go back downstairs. I’m sorry.’

I pick up my bag. ‘I’ll call my parents.’

He doesn’t follow me down to the kitchen. There is no one else around and the room is dark. It’s my dad who picks up the phone.

‘Dinner finished a lot sooner than I thought, and now they have to put Abigail to bed,’ I lie. ‘Can you come and get me a little early?’

I wait for him in the driveway, shivering. I forgot to pick up my coat from the kitchen but I don’t want to go back. The light is blazing from Gabriel’s bedroom window. I wonder if he is angry with me.

When my dad pulls up, he leans over and asks me if I want to drive. He’s been taking me out when he feels like it, no matter how much I try to put him off, and never passes up an excuse to give me a lesson and make me drive somewhere, whether it’s to the supermarket or Gran’s house. Sometimes he even sleeps while I’m driving. But today I really don’t feel like it and I’ve had half a bottle of wine, so I shouldn’t, but I can’t tell him that and despite my protests of tiredness, he insists. I lower myself into the driver’s seat. Dad points out the accelerator, brake and clutch like he always does, telling me I can remember them as ‘ABC’. I miss Erica. Dad makes me adjust and re-check my mirrors. Then I stall as soon as I pull away.

‘It’s okay,’ he says.

I shake my head, attempting to clear it, then try again and stall again.

‘Just pick the clutch up a bit slower.’

After a few more attempts he’s getting impatient, which makes things worse.

‘How about I start it off and get you to a downhill section?’

So we swap seats, and I watch what he does as we pull off. When we reach the top of Three Mile Hill we swap back.

‘What if someone comes?’ I pull the seat back into my position.

‘You’ll have to get on with it.’

I start the car and roll slowly downhill in first gear. It gets noisier as we pick up speed; the engine straining.

‘Change gear now, change to second!’ Dad is getting panicked.

‘It’s not going in!’

‘Put your foot on the clutch –’

So I do and the car speeds up, getting away from me. At the same time, Dad reaches for the gear stick and I take my foot off the clutch, causing the gears to grind.

‘Aren’t you listening to me?’

At the bottom of the hill the car rolls to a stop and I get out, leaving the engine running, fighting back tears. ‘You do it, you drive home.’

‘Come on Briony, I didn’t mean to be impatient – you can’t give up that easily.’

I stomp to the passenger side of the car and get in. We drive home in silence, resentment unfurling between us, the headlights bumping along the road. It’s dark and there are no other vehicles in the lanes, but Dad sounds the horn whenever we round a corner, startling me and the sleeping cattle in the fields.

## Chapter Six

To top it off I have to go to Gabriel's New Year's Eve party. It's difficult to sneak to parties from my house but this one is important. Gabriel's New Year's Eve party is tradition, and the stuff of legend. His parents and sister usually go to a family party, so everyone here is free to drink and smoke as much as they want. Some say that, last year, Gabriel smoked a joint as big as a foot. Others say the police went up but, instead of breaking up the party, they joined in. I wasn't allowed to go, so I don't know. This year I lie, telling my parents I'm going to stay the night at Clare's and we'll work on our English coursework. I spend the morning preparing for the party with waxing strips stuck to my shins and a mud-mask hardening on my face. I pluck, exfoliate and moisturise. I stand sideways in the mirror and think about how I should start doing sit-ups, not to mention that my face is too round and I look like a ten-year-old. I look a bit better without my glasses, but it's not worth being unable to see.

Once I've thought of one insecurity, others follow suit. The Cosmopolitans stacked underneath my bed tell me how much I must improve myself. God knows what I've spent on hair curlers and straighteners, manicure sets, foundations, moisturisers.

Mum says it's a con but she buys all this stuff anyway, because the biggest sin is

not just being unattractive but being lazy. She's tried all sorts of weight-loss tips from magazines, and for a while she was even convinced you could lose weight from drinking hot, boiled water. She drank a mug, the heat flushing her face, and told me it sped up digestion.

'How?'

'Because your body uses more energy trying to equalise the temperature after you drink it. Science.'

'Rubbish,' Clare said, when I mentioned it to her. 'That's not how the body works.'

I rip the waxed strips, curl my eyelashes and straighten my hair. I'm not great at make-up but I use some kohl, purple eye shadow, generous applications of lip gloss.

I've also sewn floral patches over my perfectly intact jeans.

This year, Gabriel has brewed a keg of beer he calls 'Devil Dog' and has even made labels with information such as; 'brewed in my bathtub,' '7+%' and 'please drink irresponsibly'. I've come early to help him shift furniture and breakables into the garage before the party starts.

By the time everyone starts arriving, the sun is set and darkness surrounds Gabriel's house. A strange and quiet breeze carries chatter from the lawn, where some people are sitting on garden chairs. Others talk by the windows and dance in the corridors.

The light in the winter evenings only lasts up until four or maybe four thirty. On the few occasions my family go up north, anywhere above Bristol, Mum swears it gets dark earlier. 'That's why they're more depressed up here,' she says. 'More hours of darkness. They have an even worse problem in Finland.' But sometimes I treasure the dark winter evenings in front of the fire, with rain pattering against the windows.

The house is three storeys and sprawling. The wooden porch runs around the

outside, packed with people. I watch Gabriel use the porch railing to pull himself up onto the roof. It was on this roof, apparently, that Terry Cocker proposed to Kate Baker last year. He gave her a Lord of the Rings souvenir ring, paid for in seven instalments. She turned him down.

Gabriel keeps calling for drinks to be brought up to him.

‘I can’t get up there,’ Terry shouts from the patio doors.

‘Throw up a can, mate, just throw it.’

‘It’ll burst.’

‘Give it a go.’

Apart from me, no one calls him by his real name. Some use his surname, others call him Gabrielle, but he doesn’t mind. He’s popular because he can laugh at himself – and because in Year 9 he was well-known for his extremely detailed pen-drawings of naked women in school textbooks. If someone found one in class, which was not a rare occurrence, they passed it around so everyone could see. Some boys photocopied them and took them home. Some even offered to pay him. The Art teacher sighed and said ‘Gabriel, if you were capable of focusing your talent you could be a great artist.’

Everyone in school has nicknames but I don’t know what to call myself. Even when I try to think up nicknames, the best I got for me was Blondie, because of my hair. It never caught on, and I remain boring Briony. Gabriel once told me that if I was an animal I would be a yellow labrador, ‘Not looks-wise or anything, I mean, like a spirit animal. Like, dogs are you know, friendly and loyal and nice, and so are you.’

Terry’s arm loops around in an attempt to throw a can of beer up to Gabriel on the roof. He misses, and the can falls back to the ground, where a stone punctures it causing it to expel its content with a low hissing noise. On the second attempt, the can makes it to the roof but rolls down again, landing in the gutter. Terry is gearing up for a third throw just as Gabriel starts coming down the roof, and this time the can hits

him on the shoulder. He attempts to catch it, and watches it also roll back down to the ground.

‘Never mind, I’m coming down now.’

I watch him climb down with my breath held in my throat. He slips and a broken tile skids down the roof before him. When he reaches the edge of the roof, he hangs off the edge with both hands, his feet wheeling in the air searching for the railing. I grab his ankle and guide it to the railing so he can get down safely. When he’s back down, people disperse.

‘You saved my life!’ He laughs.

‘Are you going to make it up to me?’

An extension is going up around the back of Gabriel’s house, its skeletal walls covered by a tarpaulin flapping in the wind. We duck underneath. When we’re alone under the tarpaulin, he hugs me, pulling me into the damp crook of his armpit, and kisses me until he has to stop for breath. ‘That is a very short skirt.’

‘Is this too short?’ I bend down and touch my feet, ‘can you see my underwear?’

‘Sadly not.’

‘It looks okay?’

‘It doesn’t matter, everyone will be drunk soon.’

The thick make-up makes me highly conscious of my face and I try to keep my lips pursed in a kind of pout so I don’t smudge the lip-liner.

Inside, it’s hot and heaving, condensation beading and rolling down the windows. We chat to people and get drinks; Gabriel fetches a glass of Devil Dog from the keg and passes it to me. People are talking in small groups. Several couples are making out in the garden.

The Devil Dog is strong and bitter. It leaves an earthy taste in the back of my mouth. I nurse mine while Gabriel downs his and refills it. I pour some of mine down

the sink so it will look like I've finished it. Outside, there are couples necking in the garden but Laura Ewing is standing alone, spinning poi. 'Come look, I'm going to soak them in vodka and set them alight!' she shouts to anyone walking by. The daughter of a solicitor-mother and self-help author-father, Laura considers herself the expert on all things spiritual or self-improving. The fire zips up the string of the poi to the handles. She drops them on the grass and a group of people stamp on them. Gabriel chucks his cider on the flames and they sizzle out. Laura inspects her hands. 'I'm burnt!'

Clare ushers her inside to run her hands under the cold water tap. The poi lie smoking on the lawn.

'Hi,' I say to Clare as we stand by the sink. I'm holding my drink tightly, the cold making my fingers numb.

'I didn't think she would really come,' Gabriel mutters in my ear. He thinks he's being subtle, but even his whispering is loud.

Clare says she's going to get a drink. I follow.

We look for drinks in the fridge. I shout, 'Do you think there's any vodka?' a couple of times to ensure someone will hear. 'I drink it neat,' I say to no one in particular, picking up a bottle of vodka, even though I've never tried it in my life.

Gabriel takes it from me and adds Cola. 'Can you believe she actually turned up? I was trying to be nice, but Jesus – take a fucking hint.'

'You're drunk already.'

I direct him into the lounge where there are shots of something bright green laid out on the coffee table. Clare follows us. Terry Cocker is going on about shooting them through his eyes. He keeps holding the glass up to his face and tipping it back as if he's going for it and then pretending to get distracted by someone so he doesn't have to.

‘Clare,’ he says when we come in. ‘How cool will it be to shot this into your eye? You could get real drunk from it, right?’

‘Or you could drink it.’ She picks one shot up and tips it into her mouth, winces and grabs another. I have one too even though it’s nasty.

I remember in Year 8 there was an educational assembly about alcohol. It was conducted by puppets. We sat, cross-legged, on the floor of the sports hall. I was next to Clare, who shook her head and chewed the ends of her hair.

‘Do they think we’re children or something?’ she says. ‘Hello, I haven’t played with Barbies in like, three years.’

‘Me neither. They’re so lame.’ I thought of the box of them I had under my bed.

At the front of the hall was a trestle table covered in a black table cloth. An empty glass bottle labelled ‘Alcohol’ had been placed on the end of it. A young woman smiled nervously at the assembling classes and brought another puppet out of a suitcase.

‘Okay, quiet down everyone. The assembly is about to start.’ The headmistress nodded at the woman, who ducked down underneath the table. There was a silence, punctuated by a giggle from somewhere near the back, and then the puppet came to life.

‘Hi kids! My name is Al, Al Cohol. Can you say it after me? Al Cohol.’

‘Al Cohol,’ I said.

‘Oh, god,’ Clare groaned.

‘I can’t hear you.’ The puppet put its hand to its ear. ‘Try again, louder!’

‘Al Cohol,’ said everyone, monotonous, in unison.

‘I’m here to talk to you about – can you guess?’ The puppet raised its hands in encouragement.



‘Alcohol,’ everyone said.

‘That’s right. First of all I want you to answer me a question about numbers. You have all learnt about percentages, am I right?’

‘Yes,’ everyone said.

‘Kill me,’ Clare said.

‘What do you think if I say seven per cent – do you think that is a small or a large number? Let’s have a show of hands.’

I put up my hand and suggested it was small.

‘How can she see us?’ Clare narrowed her eyes, ‘from under the table?’

The puppet pointed to someone else, who also suggested that seven per cent was a small amount.

‘Are there eye-holes cut in it? Is she watching us right now?’

‘What about if I told you seven per cent is the amount of alcohol,’ the puppet picked up the glass bottle, ‘in this? Did you know, that’s actually a very high amount of alcohol and it can get you drunk very quickly. In fact, if you drank even a teaspoon of something that was one hundred per cent alcohol, it could kill you instantly, so seven per cent really is very strong indeed.’

A series of ‘oohs’.

The puppet held the bottle to its mouth, knocked its head back. ‘Ah, that’s the stuff.’ It was slurring its words. It put the bottle back on the table and then, twirling in a circle, lay down as if it had fainted.

A puppet dressed as a doctor entered the play. ‘Oh dear.’ Its felt stethoscope flopped around. ‘Looks like Al has had too much to drink. Did you know, alcohol dehydrates you? That means it takes all the water out of your body. We’re going to have to take Al to the hospital.’

I have forgotten all about this until now, when Gabriel takes another drink and says, 'So how did you convince your dad to let you come?'

'He doesn't know.'

He laughs, 'Well, he'll know tomorrow if you carry on like this. More Devil Dog?'

Outside, Laura is gathering up the burnt poi and someone falls against the kitchen window, the shadow of their body covering the glass with a hard thunk.

Some people are playing Never Have I Ever. I watch for a bit and then join in. We go through the usual ones; nudity in public, sex in public, sex in front of parents, skiving, smoking, drugs, petty crimes. The rules are that you have to drink if you have actually done something. Then Gabriel says, 'I have never had sex,' and looks straight at me.

'Oh fuck you, Gabriel.'

To spite him, I decide to drink anyway. There's a trick my dad taught me, when we sometimes chased glasses of squash and timed ourselves in competition. He used to say get into a rhythm – sing a song or something – and swallow quickly. So that's what I do and they are not actually pints, just small tumblers with pictures of smiling sheep printed on them. But it looks impressive, and soon I'm on my sixth or maybe seventh, Gabriel refilling from the keg and running a commentary for the gathering spectators.

'Surely she can't put this one away – we're on number eight, guys, number eight!'

'How many till she falls down?'

'She's done it! Now onto nine – chug it, Bri.'

After number nine I stagger back, lightheaded. My lips and limbs no longer feel like my own, and I can't stand still.

The lounge is wooden-floored and decorated with large, loud art prints of multi-coloured zoo animals. The walls are papered in orange patterns and the curtains are bright green. At the centre of the room a huge, glass chandelier hangs above the coffee table. Crystals hang down amongst the light bulbs and refract the light around the room.

The chandelier hangs low, if I stand up I would be able to reach up and brush it with my fingertips. I take Gabriel by the hands, his small and soft hands, and underneath the chandelier we spin in circles, faster and faster, until all the people fanning out around us are colourful blurs. I feel dizzy when we stop and I stumble, laughing, and then there is the dull shock of sick on the floor, splashing my feet and the furniture. I'm left shaking and empty, in the centre of the room with the others at the edges. My throat burns.

'That's disgusting,' Terry Cocker shrieks.

There is sick on my glasses.

'It's everywhere,' Gabriel's voice rises with panic, 'it's everywhere.'

Someone opens the windows. Goosebumps rise on my skin. For a moment no one else speaks.

'You absolute twat, you shouldn't have carried on giving her drinks,' Clare says to Gabriel, breaking the silence.

'She kept asking for them!'

'Get a damp towel, clean it up. Briony, I'll show you to the loo.'

Clare waits outside the bathroom while I undress. I put my clothes in the shower and sit in the bath with the water running, resting my forehead on the cool porcelain.

Clare knocks on the door and tells me she's leaving clean clothes outside. I get out of the shower, wrapped in a towel, hoping to see her. She has folded a Jefferson Airplane t-shirt and some jeans belonging to Gabriel in a pile on the floor and, next to

that, she's placed a large glass of water.

The clothes are clean and warm from the airing cupboard but they smell of him, of Lynx Africa and Fresh Linen scented dryer sheets. I sit on the toilet and listen to the laughter coming from downstairs. I sit like this until the music gets going again and becomes loud. I look in the bathroom cupboards at Germolene, plasters and paracetamol. There's a mouse trap laid in the cupboard under the sink and a stack of water-stained books yellowing between the toilet and the bath.

I scrub off my make-up in the mirror.

I definitely don't want to go back to the party, where everyone will laugh at me. I think of my parents watching the news at home, maybe with the cat curled up on the sofa between them, or maybe occupying separate rooms, the lights like islands on either side of the house.

Tentatively, I exit the bathroom. At the bottom of the stairs Terry Cocker is asleep on the floor. When I step over him, he stirs and mumbles, 'I can't open the gate.'

Clare is smoking on the porch steps. It is a heavy and foggy night, the stars obscured by clouds promising snow. I don't know how to announce my arrival without looking weird, so I kind of hum a tune. She ignores me until I stop and then, without looking at me, says

'Feeling better?'

'Apart from being incredibly embarrassed.'

'Don't be. No one will remember.'

She stubs out her cigarette on the rail, leaving a black circle scarred into the wood. 'What were you trying to do in there? Showing off?'

I don't know what to say. 'May I sit?'

'Sure.'

I look out into the dark garden and realise all the living souls under the age of eighteen for a square mile are in one building, in Gabriel's house.

'Are you sitting or not?'

I sit down next to her on the steps. 'I was showing off, I guess.'

'You'll feel it in the morning.'

Loud music from the house causes the boards of the porch to vibrate. I don't know what to say, so I let it fill the silence.

Clare lights another cigarette. 'These things always have a way of turning bad but no one will remember. Don't worry about it.'

She's wearing black trousers and a thick coat. I'm already freezing even inside Gabriel's jumper. We sit on the porch steps in the clear cold air, watching the clouds gather in the sky and waiting for them to break. Clare leans in to me a bit, or maybe I'm imagining it. I wish I was brave.

'So this doesn't mean anything by the way.' She takes a long drag on her cigarette and holds the smoke in her mouth for ages and eventually she blows it away.

'Like I said, I would have done the same for anyone.' She stubs out the cigarette.

'Gabriel didn't exactly rush to your side, did he?'

There is a plum tree growing at the edge of the garden, against the woven wire fence running the boundary. Its trunk strains so hard against the wire that the fence has grown into it, the bark regrowing around the wire. I imagine its roots reaching underground for miles and miles. Its limbs stretch out and graze the grass.

'Do you want to ditch this and come back to mine?' Clare says.

I'm surprised, but hear myself answering with no hesitation, 'That would be so good.'

She calls her dad and she doesn't even have to lie to him about where she is – she asks if he will pick us up from this party. He pulls up by the front door, exhaust fumes

spewing from his car. He greets us with a smile and a wave, he even beeps the horn at Terry Cocker as we drive away. He asks us about the party and what music they played, did we enjoy it, did any boys ask us to dance? Clare gives one-word answers and I look out of the window at the dark shapes of hedgerows and trees passing us in the lanes. Twigs scrape the side of the car, but Clare's dad doesn't seem to care. My dad would freak out, go straight home and polish and wax the car until he could see his own reflection in the paintwork.

Clare's dad keeps up a steady stream of chatter. When he has exhausted the topic of the party, he talks about the cows coming into calf and spring time to look forward to, with the cats enjoying the sunny spots in the porch as the days grow longer.

We pass into the farm and he gets out to open the gates. Clare and I stay sitting in silence. I try to keep my hands close to my body. The car's headlights light up the bumpy path ahead, and I focus on that, consciously noting the details to distract myself: chickens scratching in the dirt, stones strewn about, snowdrops poking through the soil on the sides of the path. I recite these tangible things to myself because it's something to concentrate on, to dispel any weird thoughts of Clare. It's quiet and she doesn't say anything either.

When her dad gets back in the car, he brings with him a gust of cold wind. He drives through the gates, then leaves the door open while he goes back to shut them. Goosebumps come up on my arms; Gabriel's t-shirt is not much protection from the cold. I pull a thin, black thread from the hem and let it fall to the floor.

The car is dirty anyway, with old newspapers and dog toys and muddy boots in the foot wells. The messiness is something I like about it; I feel I could eat and drink without being told off. I like the dog smell, rather than the new-car smell and the air-freshener smell that makes me feel sick. My parents keep their cars clean, and Dad spends his weekends hoovering it out, washing and waxing it, painting over tiny,

practically invisible chips with special paint he buys from the garage. It seems like a waste of time to me, seeing as the car gets driven through the muddy lanes every day. I would rather spend my weekends doing meaningful things like Clare's dad, looking after animals and making things grow.

We drive up the track and park outside the house. Clare's dad gets out and opens the doors for us, like a chauffeur. I giggle and Clare says, 'Cheers.'

It's been nearly six years since I was last here, but it hasn't changed much, except for the lack of books lining the shelves in the hall, which have been replaced with a large collection of video tapes. A staircase leads into darkness, and at the end of the hall is the kitchen. Clare turns on the light and my eyes take a second to adjust. I was always jealous of their house: the kitchen is large, with warm wooden floors, marked with scratches and scuffs. There is a log burner overflowing with ashes, but both it and the Aga are cold. I remember it being much better kept than this; Clare's mother was extremely house proud.

'Would you like a proper shower?' Clare says. 'There should be some make-up removal wipes up there too.'

I head upstairs and, not wanting to use up the hot water, take a cold shower and put Gabriel's clothes back on. When I'm done I sit on the edge of the bath and scrub the glitter off my face with wet wipes. I put the shiny wet wipes in the bin. Now my skin is so dry, I search for moisturiser in the cabinet and find some ancient-looking E45. I remove my glasses and wipe it over my eyelids. This is a good way to kill fifteen or twenty minutes. There is no sound from anyone in the house, except the TV downstairs, so I stay in the bathroom a little longer, trying to sober up. As a child visiting with my mother, I had once trapped my finger in a door and was brought here to be treated with cream and a plaster, before being sent back outside to play. I remember Clare's mother being much more brusque than my own; whereas mine

reassured me and told me there was no blood, hers deftly applied a plaster and sent me on my way as if I was part of a queue. I read the labels on the shampoo bottles. As well as shampoo and make-up there's a jar of Swarfega. I open the lid and smell. It's orangey and surprisingly pleasant. I rub the thick, granulated gel on my hands. Then someone knocks on the door.

'Are you done in there or what?'

It's Clare's sister. I haven't seen her for years, not since I was a kid and she was my reluctant babysitter. She used to come over, complain about the lack of snacks in the fridge, send me to bed and watch horror films so loudly that I slept with my head under the pillow.

'Just a minute,' I reply through the door.

'Is that Briony? I didn't realise it was you.'

There is the sound of steps walking away from the door. She must be giving me a moment to get out. She's probably waiting for a shower, wrapped in a towel, so tall and cool and faintly smelling of cucumber. She is already at university in Kent, but home for the Christmas holidays. The house is still covered in the posters she made for her A-Level exam revision: diagrams of cell division, reproductive organs, photosynthesis equations. There is a diagram of the uterus on the back of the toilet door, neatly labelled with annotations pointing out the 'ova,' 'Fallopian tubes,' 'ovaries'.

I wash the Swarfega off my hands and leave the bathroom.

In the kitchen, Clare has put the kettle on. The room is clean but for the unswept floor and coffee stains on the worktop. But the dishes are all put away. There is a potted poinsettia in the middle of the table, and several pairs of socks drying above the stove.

I enter, awkward and unsure where to put my hands. I settle for leaning against



the worktop by the fridge with my hands in my pockets. Water drips from the ends of my hair, down the back of my shirt and onto the worktop and the tiles.

‘Let me get you a hair towel,’ Clare says.

She goes upstairs and I hear her footsteps crossing the landing. The kettle starts to boil furiously, and it boils over, sending droplets of water dancing on the ring of the stove. Clare returns with a white bath towel, warm from the airing cupboard. I wrap the towel around my hair. Clare kneels and builds a fire in the grate. A layer of rolled up newspaper, kindling and finally what looks like part of an old chest of drawers. She strikes a match, holds it underneath the paper, and soon the fire is roaring with life.

Rain hammers on the windows. The fire crackles and spits out glowing embers that die on the tiled floor.

Once that is done, she doesn’t seem to know what to do with herself. She’s always doing something, is rarely still. Whereas I can procrastinate and let hours slip by, barely noticed, she fills her time with chores and revision. I feel like I could blink and an hour will have passed, whereas she would have spent the same hour making, tidying, working or studying. She mirrors my posture, leaning against the countertop with her hands in her pockets. Then she picks up the poinsettia, holds it under the tap and tops it up with water. Everything she does is filled with purpose; she doesn’t fiddle or fidget. Her nails are short, rounded and even in length, whereas mine are variously bitten down or growing long.

We start speaking at the same time. I say, ‘Thanks for doing this,’ and she says, ‘Want something to eat?’

We look at each other. One of the dogs comes in and drinks, sloppily, from the bowl of water by the door. The only sound in the room is the sound of him slurping from the bowl and, when he looks up, he drips water on the floor from his jowls.

‘You dirty thing,’ Clare teases him.

I laugh, and the moment of tension is broken.

‘I’m glad you’re here, or else I would still be at that crappy party,’ she says. ‘You were a good excuse to escape.’

It pleases me to know that she’s glad I’m there, even if only for that reason. ‘So I’m just an excuse?’

‘You know I don’t mean it like that,’ she smiles at me. A small, shy smile that I don’t think I’ve ever seen on her before. But then of course, I mess it up by filling in the silence with an irrelevant question. ‘Do you like it? Drinking and stuff?’

She shrugs, ‘It’s not as if there’s a lot else to do.’

She looks as if she is going to say more, but then she turns and pours the water from the kettle into the teapot and unhooks two mugs from the mug tree. ‘I’ve never really been in with that crowd. Sugar?’

‘Two please.’

She stirs it in, the teaspoon clinking against the sides of the mug. She doesn’t add any to her own drink. She hands me mine, but doesn’t pick up her own. Instead she rinses off the teaspoon and leaves it to dry, then opens the door to the fridge.

‘Do you want something to eat?’

‘No thank you.’

‘Well I’m going to eat because I’ve got to do something. Just standing around, it’s awkward.’

She takes two eggs and, with one hand, cracks them into the frying pan as she pushes some toast into the toaster with the other. She quickly chops up some kind of herb and chucks it in, then stirs it and leaves it to sizzle while she dumps the stuff she has already used into the sink. All this is done before I have even started to drink my mug of tea, as I’ve been waiting for it to cool down. I blow on it, even though my dad

always says that is pointless and unhygienic, with my hands wrapped around the mug letting the warmth come back into them. As I take my first sip, Clare has finished cooking the eggs and tips them out onto the toast. There are two plates, and she hands one to me. 'I'm pretty sure you're being polite, so here.'

She's right, I'm starving. 'Thanks.'

'I wouldn't have offered if I didn't mean it.'

We eat at the table while the dogs wait patiently for the leftovers. The big wooden table is scarred with years' worth of marks. As I eat, I look towards the door and see a height chart marked on the door frame, but the records stop far below the door frame, at ages ten and thirteen, September 1996.

'It was really shitty for Gabriel to humiliate you like that.'

'Yeah, well. I was being stupid.'

'He shouldn't have done it.'

'It's fine.'

'Never Have I Ever is a stupid game anyway.'

When we've finished eating I help her to set up the camp bed on the floor of her bedroom, which was always off-limits when we were kids. Her bed takes up most of the length of the room, and the bedside table is covered with a shell of dried candle wax.

On top of the bookcase is a collection of pebbles and driftwood in a pile. There is little decoration, apart from the pink lightshade hanging from the ceiling lamp that comes to a point, finishing with a tassel that brushes her head every time she stands up. She keeps the curtains closed. Clare lights a bunch of incense sticks and candles with a cigarette lighter. The smoke is kind of choking me, but it smells nice and I like that she's making an effort.

'I hope this will be okay,' she says. 'Or would you prefer to take the bed?'

‘I’m okay.’

I don’t have any pyjamas with me so I climb into bed, still wearing Gabriel’s shirt and stare at the ceiling until I fall asleep.

When I wake in the morning Clare is not there. Her bed is empty, but I can hear voices downstairs and the sound of the kettle boiling. I pull my fingers through my hair and browse the bookshelf. She has *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* and a lot of *Point Crime* books. The shelves are filled with other bits and pieces; shells and interesting stones, pieces of driftwood and sea glass. I pick up a heart-shaped silver charm that looks to have come from a bracelet, turn it in my hands, then put it down again. I go to the window and pull back the curtains. Clare’s window looks out across the roofs of the outhouses where a collection of mildewed tennis balls and footballs languish. A bird flies away, calling to an unseen mate. The fields and the sea spread out in the distance.

Clare has a collection of photographs on the windowsill. Some in frames, most in piles, with the top ones getting faded. I can’t help looking through them, trying to move them only a tiny bit so she won’t notice. There are her parents on their wedding day, standing outside the church, smiling. Clare looks just like her mother, tall and graceful, with dark hair. I start looking through the pile more carefully. Other photos show Clare and her sister as babies, taking their first steps, later, riding horses, feeding a lamb in the kitchen, perched on top of the tractor. There’s one of them in the living room, Becky wearing her uniform for her first day of secondary school. Standing by the green-painted front door, she wears her hair in two neat, shining plaits falling across her shoulders. Like me, in the photo my own parents took, she holds a rucksack at her feet and it looks almost too big for her. The weather that day must have been clear and sunny, because her shadow stands behind her.

There's no later photo of Clare, though I flick through the stack twice in an attempt to find one.

At the bottom of the pile of photos, there are postcards – touristy places like York Minster, Whitby Bay, Fountains Abbey. Only one of them – with a picture of the Angel of the North with the sun setting behind it, lighting up its wings – has any writing on it. It's an address, in a messy scrawl which looks just like Clare's: '25 Knighton Avenue'. Whoever wrote it has also drawn a small picture of a cottage, with smoke curling from a brick chimney and flowerboxes underneath the front windows. An arrow pointing to it says simply, 'Home'.

I hear Clare on the stairs and make as if opening the curtains when she comes in to the room. From behind me I hear her say, 'What are you doing?'

'Just want to let some light in here.'

'I like it being dark.' She is carrying two mugs of tea. 'What are you looking at?'

'Nothing. The view.'

'I don't keep anything important there.' She hands me a mug. 'Here, drink quick, there's somewhere I want to show you before your parents come to pick you up.'

She lends me some welly boots and a warm jacket. We take the dogs, who run in front of us. She leads me out across the fields and we wade through ankle-deep mud, eventually reaching a footpath. Clare talks non-stop all the way, about the weather, the beach and the dogs. Small stuff. I've never known her to be so chatty, it's as if she's someone else at school and someone else here.

'Barney likes you, look. Throw him this stick.'

I do, but when he brings it back to me I find I'm afraid of his teeth and strong jaws and don't want to take it from his mouth. Eventually Clare takes it and throws it again, further than I did, but Barney brings it back to me again.

'They won't hurt you. They're soft and stupid.'

Clare instructs them to sit and holds onto their collars so I can pat them. The dogs run ahead, stopping every so often and looking back to make sure we're following them. We take turns throwing the stick.

After about a mile the footpath turns to marram grass and pebbles. We walk side-by-side, eventually falling into step.

'Sorry I was short with you earlier,' she says. 'There's a lot of contraband on that sill. Things I don't want my dad to see. He doesn't know my mum's been sending me and Becky letters and things. Becky keeps hers at university though. He'd be so pissed off if he found out.'

I wonder how I can keep her talking. It can't be nice, having to keep secrets like that from her own family. Is she opening up to me specifically, or am I simply a listening ear? Either way, I try to ask questions to keep her talking.

'Surely it's good she keeps in touch?'

'You would think.' Clare throws another stick, and the dogs dutifully bring it back, carrying it between them.

There is a low mist covering the beach. The tide is coming in. By the time we reach the sea it's already covered the mudflats and reached the rock pools, leaving only a narrow strip of pebbled beach to walk along.

'We won't be able to stay very long.' Clare removes her boots and socks.

The dogs are running in the sea. She whistles to them and they come racing back up the beach, shaking themselves dry. 'Let's climb the rocks. You can see the coast of Wales if you get high enough.'

Clare goes first and I watch her and put my feet where she put hers, pulling myself up in the places she has already been. The wet sand moulds to her bare feet. But then she slips and tries to catch herself on a rock. The rock is sharp and splits the skin of her palm and grazes her wrist. Her blood is left, a brown smudge, on the rock

face but she doesn't cry out in pain or grimace. She carries on, and once we get to the top of the rocks she sits down and stares at her open palm, fingers splayed, and pulls her brows together in concentration as if she's just trying to read a book. When the blood starts congealing, she pinches the skin and releases fresh droplets of blood, which bead in the creases of her hand and then trickle down her wrist like a thin ribbon of paint.

'Are you okay?' I ask.

The dog licks her.

'It's fine.'

'It might be dirty. You should clean it in the sea.'

She looks up at me. Her pupils are dilated in the grey mid-morning light.

The wind and the crash of the waves steal her voice. Her blood is browning on the rock as if it has always been there. Later the tide will come all the way in and submerge everything, taking our traces with it and, for some reason, this thought makes me sad.

'Doesn't it hurt?' I ask.

Clare shakes her head, 'My hands are totally numb from the cold. It's only a little cut.'

I look at the puckering edges of the cut as it begins to heal, and I wonder if it will scar.

The following morning, the sunrise turns the sky pink. I'm glad to be back at home. I open my bedroom window to breathe in the cold air. Frost crusts the windowsill and clings to a spider's web. A thin haze sits over the fields. I watch a robin make its way across the front lawn. I am the first to wake, and I spend a couple of hours reading in bed. My parents get up about nine thirty and we have pancakes for breakfast. After

that, we go for a walk along the beach and skip stones into the water. I remove my shoes and wade into the freezing ocean, as far as I dare. Sand shifts beneath my numb feet. It is a clear, cold day and in weather like this I can see all the way across the bay.

This makes me think of Clare. It's ten miles coast to coast. If I went all the way in and carried on swimming, past the twin cubes of Hinkley Point, through its warm waters, and out into the bay, I could be in Cardiff before lunch.

'Come on,' Mum shouts to me. 'We're leaving.'

Dad is already halfway back up the beach, his back to us. He never waits.

Back at home, we drink hot chocolates by the fire while we burn all the important bits of paper from the previous year, like bank statements and cheque stubs. Amongst these is the results that got me in trouble, and the birthday card Gabriel gave me, and I slip it into the fire while no one is looking.



## Chapter Seven

I guess I should be looking forward to having driving lessons again after the Christmas break, and to going back to school and seeing everyone, but I'm not. The holidays seem to have come to an end too quickly, and now it's January 8th and I want nothing more than to stay in bed for another two weeks. Instead, I walk to the bus stop in a flurry of snow, a scarf bundled up around my throat. Anthony is flicking his lighter on and off, running his hand over its flame.

'It doesn't hurt,' he says. 'Want to try it?'

'No, thanks.'

The bus is warm and its windows steamed up, busy with chatter. I sit next to Clare again. She's got a new Walkman, a CD one, held flat on her lap. The music skips each time we go over a bump in the road. Even with my eyes closed I can feel her next to me.

The shock of the cold hits me when I get off. No one dawdles outside the building, but it's as cold inside as out. We sit, hunched and huddled, in our coats. Patterns of frost cover the windows.

Mrs Hellier writes the wrong date on the board and then wipes it off with her sleeve, replacing '2000' with '2001'. She explains that the heating is broken. 'We

shouldn't even be here. How can anyone be expected to work in these conditions?

But,' she straightens some papers on her desk, 'that's just my opinion.'

This year, the school is introducing PSHE into the curriculum. It has fallen to the science teacher, Mr. Williams, to teach the new sex education module to the Year 8s, in the science lab. He's uncomfortable with this, Mrs Hellier tells us, so we in Year 12 are enlisted to help out. There was a letter sent home about it, telling our parents to sign the form if they gave us permission to participate. My mother signed the slip without reading it.

For once, everyone is early. We line up outside during lunch. The Year 8s peer through the windows and try to spot the rumoured cucumbers, the packets of condoms. But it looks the same as ever. The same, big, high wooden desks, the stools arranged in rows, an equation on the board. The science classrooms are old, and Mr. Williams once told us that they haven't changed a bit since he was a boy at the school. And they always smell the same, of cleaning products and gas, slightly musty.

Clare sits next to me. She's had her hair cut since Gabriel's party – now it only just reaches her shoulders, wavy and catching the sunlight. She removes her pencil case and a textbook from her bag, arranges them on the desk and starts doodling. I want to lean over and talk to her, maybe talk to her about the night we shared, but I can't think of anything funny or interesting to say.

Gabriel draws a dick on the blackboard. He adds three tear-shaped globs of ejaculate, the chalk squealing, and then stands back to admire his work. He strokes his chin and adopts a bad imitation of a French accent.

'What do you think of zees work, Briony? You like it?'

He sits down next to me with his legs spread so his knee is touching mine. He stretches his arm out across the desk and rests his head on his hand, taking up all my space.

I try to move away, shrinking into the wall.

The windows in here are painted shut and constantly wet with condensation.

Gabriel's body radiates warmth. He smells ripe, somehow, in a way that reminds me of frying mushrooms.

'Heard your dad is getting the sack.'

'That's not true.'

'No need to get all defensive. I was going to offer to help. Hey, I've got a crate of cider at home. I'll bring you some over if you want.'

'No thanks.'

'It's a new batch. Gets you drunk like that.' He clicks his thin fingers. 'Got a gallon of it for a tenner.'

'I don't want any.'

'You sure? You were loving it the other night.'

His shirt is damp in the back and under the arms. He pokes me in the ribs, 'Can I borrow a pen?'

I give him my least favourite one, knowing I'll never get it back.

He uses it to draw another picture on the desk: a dick, between insults about the teachers and names scratched in hearts. Last year, I wrote Gabriel's name in hearts and now I can't stand to be near him.

Mr. Williams comes in and erases Gabriel's drawing with one, swift movement of his arm. He calls the register. He writes 'Sex Education' on the board and underlines it twice, two evenly spaced straight lines drawn against a metre stick.

Gabriel touches my knee under the table. His hand is clammy and feels like it leaves an imprint on my tights. I might have to throw them away.

After brief introductions and some vague promises about us being there to 'share our expertise', Mr. Williams rolls in the television on squeaky wheels and says we are

going to watch a video. The Year 8s hurry to open their exercise books. The video opens with the BBC 2 logo, which is cut in half by a line of static. The narrator's voice booms, too loud.

'Growing up is an adventure and we all must go on it. Girls' bodies fill out in the breasts and hips. Boys grow taller and broader shouldered. Emotionally you're on a see-saw – sometimes up and sometimes down.'

'Gabriel,' I whisper. 'Can you move?'

Clare is drawing. She leans over her book. Her hair hangs forward and touches the desk, exposing the nape of her neck.

The video continues.

'Sometimes you might have sexual feelings that build up inside you. All girls and boys have the same problem.'

Gabriel edges his seat even closer to mine, so our arms are touching. I can't go any further the other way because of the wall.

'What?' he says. 'You wanted me to move.'

'Move the other way, I meant.'

Mr. Williams pauses the video,

'Settle down, Briony. Gabriel.' He looks at me, waiting until I sit still. The Year 8s giggle.

'Thank you. No more interruptions, please.'

The narrator continues, 'You might be having sexual thoughts about the opposite sex. When boys and girls have sex, the most important thing is that you use contraception.' There is a shot of a man and a woman going into a bedroom.

'You know what they're going to do,' Gabriel says. He tries putting his hand on my leg under the desk again.

'Stop it.'

Clare turns around in her seat. She sees me against the wall, and Gabriel's arm under the desk.

'What the fuck are you doing, Gabriel?'

'Helping Briony with her sex education lesson.'

'If you touch her again, I'll hurt you.'

His smile falters, but he says, 'Try me.'

She digs her nails into the back of Gabriel's hand until four neat, red crescents spring from his skin.

He's practically crying by the time she's done.

Mr. Williams stands with his palms flat on the desk and tells Clare to get out.

She leaves her coat, bag and books on the table. The class is quiet as we watch her leave, but the video continues playing. Instead of waiting by the door, she must have walked on down the corridor because, a minute later, I see her, through the window, crossing the sports field and leaving the school by the back gate.

Gabriel is sent to the nurse.

I saw the edge of the table with my ruler. My hands are shaking. My school tie presses against my throat.

At the end of the lesson I pack up my bag and Clare's, too. I walk across the field, in the same direction she went. I leave the school gate and carry on up the lane, shielding my eyes against sun. The power station is just visible on the coast. I must have walked only half a mile, maybe less, but it feels like a long time has passed.

Although I worry about skipping class, it's too late to turn back. The sounds of the school fade behind me and I imagine students at their desks, staring out of windows. I continue up the lane until I've warmed up from the cold and my teeth have stopped chattering. In the field, two horses watch me over the gate.

Eventually I round a corner and approach a wide lay-by where there are three old

school buses parked up in a row. They are all rusted and one sits lopsided on a jack. The wheel arches reach my thighs.

I remove both of the bags from my back and set them down next to the number plate. The lay-by is at the top of the hill, looking down toward the coast, the power station, the grey sea. Chulmleigh spreads out across the valley, the river running alongside, new housing estates growing up around the edges. It is much colder up here than it was in the school grounds, and the wind whips up groups of leaves into small cyclones. The sun hangs low in the sky, burnishing the tip of Belstone Tor, and stretches my shadow across the road.

The door of the bus is closed, but I can see Clare in the driver's seat, smoking out of the window.

I knock on the door and she presses the button to open it. 'All aboard.'

'I brought your stuff.'

'How did you find me? No one knows about this place.'

I shrug, 'I followed you.'

'I've been coming here all year and no one's ever found it.'

'Don't you get letters home for skipping lessons?'

'Did you look in my bag?'

'I'm just trying to be nice.'

I pass her bag up and stand there. An awkward moment passes. She flicks her cigarette out of the window.

'Don't worry about skiving, they won't send you a letter. It goes verbal warning, written referral, and then a letter home. Look how weird the steering wheel is.'

The bus is damp. Someone must have left the sunroof open, and moss grows on the seats, pockmarked by mice, the stuffing exposed. Cobwebs stretch across the luggage racks. The curtains are closed and the low sun struggles through, lighting up

everything with a dim red glow.

We play with the hazard lights and beep the horn. We take the handbrake off and both swear to feel the bus move backwards. We walk up and down the aisle. The view out of the back window encompasses the hill, the riverbank, smoke coming from chimneys in the town. We watch an aeroplane cross the sky and then its sharp contrail fade away. We frisbee the 'CAREFUL, CHILDREN' sign out across the heather and burn holes into the seat covers with Clare's lighter and when we are bored with that, we lie down on the backseat. There is a plant growing through a hole in the window there, and the wind rustles its leaves. I find a picture of someone's dog in one of the ashtrays. It's a black lab, sitting on a sofa with a ball in its mouth. Clare blows smoke at the ceiling. A spider hanging from its thread descends slowly, coming to land in her hair.

Without thinking, I catch the web on my fingers and pull the spider away. It crawls into a hole in the seat. I sit up, watching it go. She helps it along by putting a hand out for it to crawl on. And then, in one quick breath, we kiss. It is brief, more like bumping lips than anything else. Before I really have time to register it, it's over. 'Oh no,' says Clare. 'That shouldn't have happened.'

She stands, strides along the aisle, grabs her bag from the front seat. 'Wait. Please don't go.'

I hurry after her but she's already down the lane, walking fast and in the opposite direction to the school.

She's back after lunch, in time for English, where Mrs Hellier is going over the main themes in *King Lear*. Gabriel has been talking for the whole lesson, throwing little notes around, leaning on the back of his chair. When Hellier calls on him, thinking he's not paying attention, he comes out with things like, 'Poison symbolises the

poison in the human heart.’ We eventually settle down for some exam practice, but Gabriel leans forward, taps Clare on the shoulder, says, ‘No hard feelings about this morning,’ and asks for answers. Clare agrees to write them out, then passes him a piece of paper that simply says, ‘Fuck off.’

Time seems to go so quickly when I’m near her. But I’m afraid at how good it feels. Sure, I’ve heard the word ‘lesbian’ tossed around as an insult, shouted over the heads of people in the corridors, directed at girls in Tech who know how to make a perfect dovetail joint, or those who have never had a boyfriend. I didn’t think it could apply to me. In previous years, I was one of those worried about lesbians in PE, in the changing rooms as I undressed. Is that why we all wore our PE kits underneath our uniforms and, afterward, dressed behind towels?

Have I ever looked at the other girls in PE? I try to remember. Is there something wrong with me that others can sense? Do I give off some kind of signal? No one can ever know about the way I feel, the kiss on the bus. Clare hasn’t even really spoken to me since. She crossed to the other side of the corridor when I passed her during lunch, and she moved seats at the start of English. Was it so she wouldn’t have to sit near me, or am I being paranoid?

Either way, this makes me want her even more. I see her name everywhere, find myself searching it out in registers and books during class all day. I wait in line in the canteen and whisper it to myself, two syllables that travel from the back of my mouth and end on my lips: Clare Hall.

I make a note of the bands whose names she doodles on the desks. When I watch her writing, I feel a sudden, warm urge to take her hand in mine.



## Chapter Eight

At home that night, in the dark, with the glow-in-the-dark hands on my clock pointing in the direction of midnight, I watch the date flick over from the 8th to the 9th. I can't stop thinking about that kiss, about Clare. I turn on my bedside lamp and it casts a soft orange circle on my notebook. I spill out my heart in my neatest handwriting. When I'm finished, I fold the page over into quarters and write her name on the front: Clare Hall.

I intend to pass her the note during morning Registration, but she arrives late and has to sit at the opposite end of the room. Then, during English, I see my opportunity when Hellier sits at her desk to mark exam papers.

When I think it's safe, I lean forward and toss the note towards Clare's desk. It flutters to the floor.

Clare looks around and grabs the note. She unfolds it and stares at the page, but she isn't quick enough. Mrs Hellier stands up from her desk and comes around to

Clare's desk with her hand outstretched.

'You know what happens when people pass notes, girls. Clare, give me that. So what does this say?' She takes the note and flicks her eyes across the page.

She reads aloud in the same voice she uses when she dictates from the textbook.

‘I have been trying to talk to you, but you seem to be ignoring me. I wanted to say I really like you and I do not mind about the kiss.’

I can feel myself blushing, my face is hot. Clare stiffens in her seat and other people are giggling around the room. There is a lot more to the note and I silently pray she won’t read the rest out. I hold my breath while her eyes skim the page.

‘Well, I will safely assume that I am not the intended recipient of this note, Miss Quinn.’

‘No, Miss.’

Laughter runs around the room. I should have lied and claimed not to have written it at all. I wish, more than anything, for a natural disaster to occur this very second. A fire, a freak storm, a flash flood, anything. I can feel everyone’s eyes on me.

Mrs Hellier refolds the note and slips it into her pocket.

‘Your minds should be focused on your work, not your love life. If you have any unfinished business with one another, please conduct it outside of class. Now, back to the book. ‘Kubla Khan’ will almost certainly be in the exams in June.’

I keep my head down and copy quotations into my exercise book. There’s still an hour of the class left – each minute seems like an eternity. I begin to think I won’t even survive it.

Finally, it’s over. I pack up my stuff and leave, trying to catch up with Gabriel. I reach him, breathless, just before he gets on his bus.

‘You’re a fast walker.’

Gabriel looks at me. He’s trying to grow a moustache and it sits, like a caterpillar, on his top lip.

‘Who was the note for?’ he says. ‘Because it didn’t come anywhere near me.’

‘It was no one. I mean, I was passing it on for someone else.’

‘Who, then?’

‘Uh,’ I stall for time, trying to decide the best way to lie. ‘It was for Terry Cocker. From Kate Baker.’

‘I don’t believe that for a second,’ he says.

I don’t know what to say. While I let my mouth open and close, he turns and walks away.

The final lesson today is Tech which, after English, is my favourite subject. I love the smell of the labs, wood chip and resin, and the chance to create something from nothing. Everyone is freer to talk, but there’s so much to be getting on with that no one really notices if you’re by yourself. My parents have a habit of keeping everything I make in these lessons, no matter how terrible they are. The cupboard in the hallway is filled with years’ old coat hooks, drawer alarms, embroidered tea towels and photo frames. Sometimes, my mother likes to joke about what I will have to do with all the junk in the house when they’re gone, but I never laugh.

I walk with Clare on the way to the Tech block. To fill the awkward silence, I talk non-stop about exams and university plans.

‘I want to get good grades,’ I say. ‘To keep my options open. I don’t want to move too far away from home, so I’ve been thinking about Plymouth and Bristol.’

‘I need to get all ‘A’s to get into my top uni,’ she replies, hurrying down the corridor. ‘If I can’t get into Cambridge, I’m putting Warwick as my second choice.’

I’m surprised: she never seemed the type. ‘You’re applying to the top universities?’

‘Why wouldn’t I?’

‘But, why?’

‘Two reasons. But mostly I just want to get as far away as possible, and increase

the likelihood of never having to move back.’

When we enter the room, Mr Bell looks up and says, ‘You’re late.’ The room falls into silence. I hurry to my seat, head down.

I’ve made the chess pieces for my Tech coursework on the lathe and cast draughts from pewter. Mr Bell is impressed and tells me I could get an A\*. All I have left to do is finish the board, sand it smooth and add parquet squares. I begin the lesson by sanding the corners on the belt sander. I’m watching the belt eat away at the pine, concentrating on getting the sides even, when I notice someone standing next to me. Gabriel.

‘Hi,’ he says. He’s still wearing that red elastic band on his wrist. I turn off the sander and remove my safety goggles. ‘Hi.’

‘Congrats on getting an A\*.’

‘Well, I haven’t got it yet, I could mess it up.’

‘Why do you always do that?’

‘Do what?’

‘You can’t just take a compliment. There’s always a “but…” or you have to tell a stupid joke. It’s annoying.’

My voice goes small. ‘I thought you liked my jokes.’

He sighs and there’s pity in his eyes. I turn my back to him and switch the sander back on, determined to ignore him. I continue sanding the corners, hoping he’ll go away, until I’ve overdone it and the board is a lot smaller than it should be.

Sighing, I turn it off again and blow the dust away.

Gabriel is watching me. He pulls a piece of paper out of his pocket. It’s folded in quarters and the paper is weak and tearing along the fold lines, as if it might have been read a million times. And there is Clare’s name written on the front, in my handwriting.

‘Where did you get that?’

I lunge forward and try to grab it from him, but he stands up and holds it out of my reach. He is barely taller than me, but every time I reach up to grab it, he holds it out of my way. After I’ve given up jumping, pleading, he holds it out to me but snatches it away again when I try to take it from him. Outside, there is an unfortunate PE class supposedly playing hockey, small groups huddled together, their collective breath clouding in the air.

‘Don’t be so immature,’ I try. ‘Give that back.’

My mind is reeling. Mrs Hellier must have put the letter in the bin. I would never have suspected Gabriel of fishing it out.

‘Sure they will. You signed your name at the bottom.’ He pauses. ‘I’m not trying to be horrible.’

‘Well you’re making a good job of it.’ I weigh up the options in my mind. Yes, he has the note, but does that really matter?

‘I think we should break up,’ he says.

My first reaction is surprise, then embarrassment. I can’t resist trying to make a joke. ‘I’m that annoying, huh?’

‘I’m being serious. It’s kind of obvious that you aren’t into me any more.’

‘What are you on about?’

‘You never text me. You hated my surprise at Christmas. And I always see you looking at her.’

‘At who?’

‘At her! Clare Hall. It’s been obvious ever since we started that stupid Coleridge coursework project.’

I press the corner of the chessboard into my palm. All of my future plans involve him. And this is how it ends?

‘Why are you doing this?’

He shrugs, ‘I don’t know. Maybe it’s time.’

I frown, unable to shake off the feeling that everyone is watching. Before I can think of something to say, he walks away and picks up his work as if nothing has happened. I duck my head and turn the belt sander back on.

I miss the bus, and I could cry just watching it drive away, but there’s a group of Year 7 kids hanging about so I hold it together. I watch them kicking a football between them and a part of me wishes I could be that age again, to start school all over from the beginning. But then one of them sees me watching and shouts, ‘What are you looking at?’

I hurry away, but I don’t have another way of getting home until my parents finish work, so I turn and go back to the school, thinking I could go to the library, but it’s already locked up for the day. There’s nothing for it but to wander around the halls until my mother finishes work at five. I can’t even call her until the end of her shift, because she has to keep her phone in her locker.

I sit on the stairs and try to revise some Coleridge, but images of Clare swimming at Shurton Bars keep popping in to my head. I decide to walk again. I do so glumly. Then I round a corner and nearly bump into Mrs Hellier.

‘What are you doing still here?’

‘I missed my bus.’

She unlocks the tutor room and brings me a cup of tea. I sip it self-consciously and she sits opposite me, saying, ‘I wanted to talk to you anyway.’

I should have known this was a trap.

The window from the room looks directly out across the sports field, where the football team is assembling for practice. In the corridors, the noise of chatter and

laughter grows quieter as people leave the school and go home. I hold the candle holder and scrunch the newspaper in my hands.

Mrs. Hellier sits opposite me and stacks the textbooks into a neat pile. She wears her wedding ring sandwiched between two others: diamond engagement and eternity rings.

‘You haven’t been yourself lately, Briony. I noticed a change in you before Christmas, and I thought the holidays would help, but I was wrong. You were always such a good student. What’s got into you?’

‘Sorry, Miss, I don’t know. I’m stressed about the exams I guess.’

She smiles. ‘You can call me Jean, since we’re out of school hours. Don’t think of me as your teacher here, think of me as a friend to confide in. You can trust me.’

I open my mouth, close it again, then decide to go for it. She seems genuine.

‘What would you do if...’ I don’t know what to say. ‘If you liked someone but couldn’t do anything about it?’

Mrs. Jean Hellier leans back on her stool. She looks me up and down. ‘It’s natural to want to experiment. You’re young, bless you. At your age, your hormones are going crazy.’

‘I guess...’

‘So maybe it’s best to wait and see how you feel in a little while. Lots of people admire their close friends. You wouldn’t want to ruin a good friendship.’

She stands, picks up the textbooks and holds them against her chest. ‘You go to the front desk and ring your mum, now.’

I call my mum’s work to leave a message asking her to pick me up. I get through to her manager, who hangs up without saying goodbye. I guess she will be about an hour, after she finishes, so there’s still ages to kill. I stand awkwardly at the Reception desk for a moment, with the phone pressed to my ear, then decide to go back to the

Tech rooms. I'll be able to sit in there and read my book without interruptions, maybe look at everyone else's projects. It is a peaceful place to be.

When I get there, the room is not empty. Clare is at the back of the classroom, smoothing down the sides of her project. She is concentrating on her work and doesn't notice me come in. She has her hair tied back but bits of it are falling out and she pauses to tuck them behind her ears.

I watch her as she works with the sandpaper, crouches down to see how things are coming along, runs her index finger along the surface of the material to check its smoothness. The sun streams in through the high windows, and specks of dust are held in the sunbeams. Fine, frizzy hairs stick up on top of her head and catch the light, a little bit like a halo. She hums while she works, to the tune of a song I don't recognise.

I want nothing more than to go over and kiss her, like people do in films. We'd lock eyes and smile, speaking only to say how long we have waited for this, this everything. The sun would light us up like a spotlight, as I feel her heart beating in her throat, against my fingers. But Mrs. Hellier's words echo in my head, about it being a phase, just hormones, nothing worth pursuing.

I stand out in the hall with my back to the wall, chewing on a fingernail and imagining how Clare would react if I walked in. I can hear the ventilation fan come on, drowning out the sound of her humming. She must be spraying the candle holder.

I turn and walk away.

My fortunes change, almost overnight. Without my relationship with Gabriel to protect me from the rumour mill, I am suddenly wildly unpopular. Girls refuse to change next to me before PE and make a show out of moving their stuff away from me when we're sitting at the desks in lessons. I spend break time alone in the library,



playing *Runescape* and stealing bites of my tuna sandwich when the librarian isn't looking.

On the 11th, Gabriel starts going out with Laura Ewing. She lives at the posh end of town and her solicitor-mother spends weekdays in London for work. She was the talk of the school a couple of years ago when she was part of a big murder trial and was on TV every night. Laura is one of those people who chews gum in class and sticks it underneath the table when she's finished with it.

Gabriel and Laura are constantly all over each other. Whereas I didn't like PDAs, they make out before each period as if they'll be separated for years, not hours. I try not to look, but can't help it. As I see his tongue darting around her mouth I wonder how I could ever have thought I liked it too.

In Tech, on the final day we have to work on our coursework designs, he stands behind her under the pretense of helping her to use the pillar drill, and when they're told off for behaving in an unsafe manner, they go to the supplies' cupboard, saying they're looking for scraps of wood to work with.

Gabriel grabs a long piece of dowel from the rack and flourishes it like the people who perform on the village green on May Day.

'Fair maiden, I have come to take your honour.'

Laura grabs a sheet of ply and hits him with it.

'Settle down,' Mr Bell says. 'Your young love won't be so beautiful if you're in an industrial accident.'

I'm measuring out a new board on a sheet of MDF. I don't have the correct saw, but Gabriel's bench is near the supply cupboard, and since I don't want to go near him and Laura I take my time measuring it. Mr Bell must have noticed because he brings over a saw and leaves it wordlessly on the bench next to me.

To Clare he says, 'That's too simple even for a passing grade. I expected better.'

Looks like you have a lot of work to do.'

She seems to have started her candle holder again from scratch. She's got a sheet of aluminium clamped into a vise and is cutting shapes out, standing back and crouching to look at her progress. I hover by her bench and pretend to be sweeping up. While I am brushing the filings from the desk into the pan, she studiously ignores me.

'Do you need a hand?' I say, quietly. She's always swooping in to help me out, so I need to return the favour.

'You need to concentrate on your own. It's painful to look at. Such a good idea, so badly carried out.'

I know she's just being combative. 'How did you get so behind anyway?' I ask.

'Are you kidding? I've been doing our English coursework. Since Gabriel's checked out I'm basically doing it all myself.'

'Well I could help, we're supposed to be doing it together.' I'm slightly hurt that she's continued without me, but I carry on with my original plan. I came over here to discuss something specific. I look around before I speak again; to make sure Gabriel and Laura are occupied elsewhere. Gabriel is sawing into the edge of the desk while Laura laughs.

'Did you get a chance to read my note before Hellier took it away?'

'No, I didn't.'

I keep sweeping the surface of the desk even though there is nothing else to be swept.

Mr. Bell tells Gabriel off and makes him sit at the front desk to do his work. He is watching me instead, and he smiles when my eyes meet his.

'I'll write a new one. I'll post it to you instead.'

Clare unscrews the sheet of metal from the vise. I can see she's cut out the

silhouettes of two birds, wings outstretched. 'Listen, Briony. Forget it. We'd be the talk of the whole school if we did get together.'

'So?'

'So we've got to spend six hours a day here for another whole year. You don't want to spend it being laughed at and teased all the time. The best thing to do is keep your head down, make it through, get out alive.'

'Why would you kiss me if you didn't want to go out?' I whisper furiously.

'It's not that simple.'

She confuses me.

My parents always insist on eating dinner at the dining table – it's my dad's thing. Even when we get fish and chips from the van, he insists on using cutlery and plates. Usually, I fill any silence but tonight, with everything going on with Clare, and Gabriel's words weighing on my mind, I am quiet. The worst thing isn't being dumped, or even that he moved on so fast, it's that I don't really care. In fact, I feel sort of relieved and I'm more worried about what Clare thinks of me. What does that mean?

The kitchen is coming back together and the food is back in the cupboards, although the paint is still peeling on the doors and skirting boards. The gap under the door has been plugged with towels, waiting for a replacement.

Usually Mum cooks separate meals; a breakfast for my dad and dinner for us, but tonight we're all having pasta carbonara, which is Mum's go-to meal for when she doesn't feel like cooking because all you have to do is dump the jar of sauce onto the pasta. Forks clink against plates and I hear Dad chewing until he remarks:

'You know, this sauce from the jar is very unhealthy. It's full of sugar.'

'Would you like to cook dinner instead?' Mum replies after a moment's tense

pause.

‘I’m just saying.’

Mum sighs and looks at the ceiling as if she’s appealing for help, so I decide to speak up. I tell them that my English coursework is nearly finished but that Clare and I need a studying night to get it done. Casually, I ask if Clare can come round.

‘What happened to Gabriel, wasn’t he in your group for it?’

‘He’s stopped working with us because, well, we broke up.’

The mood around the table changes instantly: they hated Gabriel and my dad is especially jubilant. They agree to me having Clare round without any problems.

‘Actually, we should invite her father, too. God knows he needs a break, someone to cook for him for a change. We can make an evening of it.’ Mum says.

It is as if they’re preparing for a visit from the Queen. Even though they already know her and she’s eaten here a thousand times before, they spend Saturday, January 13th preparing. My mother tidies the house. She wants to know if Clare is still a vegetarian or if she can do roast chicken.

‘I have no idea.’

‘No idea? You have no idea what your best friend eats?’

‘We’re not friends.’

Mum looks confused.

‘But you two get along well. You talk about her all the time.’

‘No I don’t. We were forced to work on the Coleridge project together. I’d never have chosen to be in her group.’

She pauses, and smiles a little as if I have made a joke. Then she says, ‘You should be nicer. God knows they’ve been struggling these past few years.’

I roll my eyes. Clare’s mother left nearly six years ago. It took ages for her dad to get over it, but he seems fine now. In fact, he seems happier about it than my own

mother, who misses her closest friend, although she will never admit it.

Anyway, I imagine Clare in my bedroom. I hide my old soft toys, the ones I can't bear to part with, and the Sweet Valley High books, drag my violin out from under my bed and set it up with the music stand to make it look like I play all the time.

I watch Clare and her dad pull up from my bedroom window. Her dad is carrying a bottle of wine. We wait for them to ring the bell, then Mum answers the door and kisses him on each cheek, which seems to surprise them both. We stand in the hallway during an awkward moment of silence. Clare examines the embarrassing photos on the walls. School photos through years of dodgy haircuts, me swimming in the sea, putting a tent up, blowing out four candles on a Barbie cake.

'What happened?' Mum jokes. 'It's a shame you can't be that sweet forever.'

'Mum, shut up.' She frowns at me.

'The food's nearly ready. Shall we crack open the wine?'

At first I hang back, but Clare follows Mum into the kitchen where I hear her saying,

'Your house looks lovely, did you repaint in here?'

The windows are steamed up and everywhere smells of roasting chicken. There's a measuring jug filled with gravy granules next to the kettle and potato peelings in the sink. We eat at the dining room table, laid with the best tablecloth – heavy white linen usually reserved for Christmas. There's a red wine stain on one edge. We use the silver cutlery, instead of the set with plastic handles. My parents can't get enough of Clare, going on about school, and she impresses them with talk of university, a law degree.

'Of course,' Clare's dad says, 'you could always stay here and work on the farm.'

'I don't know,' my mum adds. 'There's not much for young people round here.'

My dad pours more wine – even for Clare and me – then gets up for another

bottle. He shouts, 'Red okay?' from the kitchen and brings it out. He sits back down at the table. 'I'm sorry, but there's no point in working for anyone. Work for yourself, or you'll get fucked over.'

'Richard, don't say that.' Mum covers her glass so he won't refill it.

'They only care about profit margins. Like us, we've had our overtime cut and we've been replaced with cameras. They've told us to expect lay-offs, so I won't even have a job in six months.'

An uncomfortable silence falls over the table. I concentrate on a roast potato, using it to soak up the gravy on my plate. Clare nudges her dad who clears his throat and says, 'Lovely chicken, this.'

Trees tap against the dark window. Mum lays down her cutlery. 'Why won't you have a job?'

'We're not discussing this now.'

'When were you going to tell me?'

Then they're talking over each other, voices raised, and Dad pushes his chair back, Mum follows him to the kitchen. They seem to have forgotten that anyone else is here, that they have guests, and we're left at the table with the food going cold.

Embarrassment and anger rise up inside me. I can't stand it. I go to the kitchen, still holding my fork, not really sure of what I'm doing, and shout, 'Why can't you be nice to each other?' Hot anger fizzles through me. They both pause, look at each other and then me – and they laugh. They're laughing at me.

I disappear, stomping towards the front door, and slam it shut behind me. The wind chime tinkles. The night air is clean and cold, the stars are like bright pins on a dark blanket. I walk until I feel warm, down the lane to the point where grass grows up the middle and the road withers away into a narrow, stony track. There's a shortcut onto the beach, if you push through the bushes. Partially lit by the full moon, I make

my way down there and stand on the narrow strip of beach not covered by the tide, the shining sea spread out before me. It seems bigger at night, like it could swallow me whole. I think of the people who died here, on the exposed mudflats and inside tiny caves that fill with water in minutes. Ancient merchants who walked across to the Welsh coast, tourists who don't know about tide times. Dad says if you respect the sea, it'll respect you – but no; I will not think of him now. I breathe in the sea-salt smell, cold air searing my lungs.

There's a noise behind me, someone else scrabbling down through the shortcut.

I turn around. It's Clare. She's wearing my coat and her shoes are not laced up.

'Your parents are intense. They're laughing now like nothing happened.'

'They're probably drunk already.'

'God, do you remember all those PTA meetings at your house?' 'They made us eat on the plastic table in the lounge.'

'And we used to prank call directory inquiries.'

'Remember when they phoned back?'

We laugh.

'What happened?' she says. 'We used to hang out together all the time.'

Underneath the hard curve of the Milky Way, my worries seem small. There are millions of stars out there, and planets – other versions of us, orbiting different suns.

'I don't know what happened. I thought you didn't like me.' I sound so petulant.

'You were the only reason those meetings were bearable.'

Her words hang in the air, and I let them. I guess we both understand what's being left unsaid, but I don't want to bring it up in case I'm wrong. Then Clare reaches down, chooses a pebble, and throws it into the water. A distant splash. I'm inwardly kicking myself for allowing the moment to slip away from me. Before I can get a hold of it she says, 'So are you coming back in? It's fucking freezing.'

The twin towers of Hinkley Point are lit a ghostly grey. So many of those parents' meetings concerned its existence: Clare's mum worried about the effects of radiation on our developing brains. She was always bringing petitions round, arguing against further development, and my parents signed them but then Dad moaned about her when she was gone. She wasn't from round here, her family had money, and she didn't understand that people need to make a living.

From this distance, I can hear the generators humming and power buzzing through the electricity lines. Hinkley Point is as much part of the landscape as the smooth islands in the bay, the noise it makes as comforting as the sea.

'No,' I say. 'Let's walk up there. See how close we can get.'

The bay curves around, like a hand cupping the ocean. It's intersected by tall, concrete spits and the pebbles are at different levels like giant stairs. As we move along the beach we're also climbing upwards, and soon Hinkley Point is directly above us.

What will future historians make of it? Is it a palace, a shopping centre or a temple? Maybe a fort on the clifftop, a look-out post, a weapon.

There is a wire fence around the site, and a sign mounted on it saying: 'YOU ARE NOW ENTERING A NUCLEAR SITE. NO TRESPASSING'. Another sign,

faded, details the kinds of birds that nest on the beach. I've never seen any of them. I thread my fingers through the cold wire squares. The concrete posts are crumbling, the wire pulling away from the holes where it should be fixed. Clare bends the fence back. It's much stronger than it looks, and she scrapes her hand on the frayed wire edge. It reopens the cut from the rock at the beach. Her blood is left smeared on the concrete after she pulls herself through the gap.

I stop, my breath clouding. 'We shouldn't be doing this.'

'Come on, if they really cared, they would have repaired it.' She widens the gap



in the fence and I squeeze through it. My jeans get caught on the exposed wire and now I'm stuck, half inside the site and half out. Clare takes my hand and pulls me through and I fall against her. We stay like this for a beat longer than necessary.

'Is this breaking and entering? Is your hand okay?' 'Probably.'

I don't know which question she's answering.

My jeans are ripped, exposing my thigh. Apart from that, being inside a nuclear site doesn't feel much different to being outside of it. There's the same low hum of power, the swishing sea and pebbles crunching underneath our feet. Our shadows are long, overlapping with each other, below the floodlights. We keep walking, side by side, all the way to the edge of the building where I put my hand to the cold concrete, rough and cracking in places. It towers above me, I feel dizzy when I look up at it.

'Do your parents argue a lot, then?' Clare asks.

In this situation, a new closeness feels possible. But I'm still looking up at the tower when I answer. 'Constantly.'

'Mine did, too. They thought we didn't notice, but I remember them arguing about the stupidest stuff. Once, they got in a huge row about whether to paint the kitchen white or yellow and it ended up with my dad throwing loads of paint in the bin. Really expensive paint that my mum had custom mixed.'

'I didn't realise he was like that.'

'Let's just say I don't blame her for leaving, anyway.'

I wish she would say more but I don't want to press the issue. I think about all the gossip around Clare's family at the time her mother left, the rumours and then the silence.

I hear a car driving past, somewhere unseen. A few minutes pass, and then it comes again. I remember my dad complaining about how the night shifts are boring because all he does is drive in circles all night and it's difficult to stay awake.

‘Did you hear that?’

Clare shrugs, ‘They would have stopped us by now if they were going to.’

‘If they’re anything like my dad they probably won’t even notice.’

In the bright moonlight, Clare’s hair shines like silver as she looks thoughtfully over the ocean.

‘What happened with your lot anyway? I never heard much about it, except my parents being all coy.’ I’m not just being nosy, I feel like she doesn’t have many people to confide in and would welcome the opportunity. I want to be there for her.

‘Not a lot.’ She picks up a jagged rock. ‘Just your classic “going out for milk” scenario.’ She uses the rock to draw a skull and crossbones on the wall. It’s a large drawing, the skull bigger than her own head, and before she’s finished, headlights wash over us, a car door opens and a security guard gets out. Clare freezes, poised, about to draw the second crossbones.

‘You are trespassing,’ a voice says. It belongs to the man who steps out of the car.

He calls into his radio that he’s ‘found the breach’. He flashes the torch in my face. ‘Aren’t you Richard’s daughter?’

I squint and look away.

‘Wouldn’t expect you to be out here doing this.’ He sighs. ‘Not a nice girl like you.’ Then he beckons us into the car. We go to the reception in the main building. It is a large, glass-walled room, with a sculpture of an atom at its centre. We sit on hard, orange sofas and wait for our parents to come.

‘What were you thinking?’ Mr Andrews says. He paces his office, like an animal caged into the small space behind his desk. His degree certificate is hung, askew, on the wall. A 2:2 in Geography. I want to straighten it.

He’s asked a question.

‘We were gathering material for our English coursework,’ Clare says. ‘I’m inspired by the politics of the landscape around Hinkley Point.’

Who knew she was so good at bullshitting? I’m impressed.

‘I want to hear Briony’s side of the story.’ He stops pacing and sits down in front of us. Looks at me. ‘You’ve never been in trouble before.’

As always, I resort to a joke: ‘There’s a first time for everything.’

No one laughs.

He takes a mint crème from the glass bowl on the desk. ‘Let me give you some time to think it over.’

After he’s left the room – leaving the door ajar; he’s probably right outside, listening – Clare leans over to me and whispers, ‘He’s trying to get you to blame me.’

I haven’t been able to get Gabriel’s words out of my head. He knew I liked Clare even before I did. A lot of things make more sense now, like the way I feel about her whispering into my ear.

Mr Andrews returns. ‘Briony, you’re not in trouble. I simply want to know what happened. So. Tell me.’

‘It was my idea.’

He sighs, then smiles. He folds his arms and looks each of us in the eye. ‘I worked hard to secure the funding for the Classroom of the Future, girls. Without the support of Hinkley Point, it will not be built. I can’t have you jeopardizing it. Really, I have no option but to reprimand you. I’m putting you both in Isolation for today.’

Isolation is a room in one of the huts, supervised by whichever member of staff is available. I have never been there, but I’ve heard from others that all you do is sit in silence. No books or study and no breaks. Just watching the clock for six hours straight.

Mr. Andrews brings us to the hut and signs us in. Mrs. Hellier is leading the first

session. There is one other girl there, a Year 11 with bright pink hair. Clare and I are made to sit at separate tables so we can't pass notes. Not that either of us particularly wants to.

A couple of hours crawl by. At lunch break, we're allowed out to get food. I don't go, because I have my packed lunch, but Clare goes out and returns with nothing.

'You didn't buy anything?'

'I ate it already.'

Even from two seats away, I hear her stomach rumble. I turn round and look at her questioningly.

'Your mum's food must have been dodgy.'

'Shut up. You loved it.'

'Not cooked properly, obviously.'

I try to persuade myself I can't stand her. Why am I here when I never do anything wrong? But then she tucks her hair behind her ear, and she bites her lip in concentration when she draws on the desk, and I want her to notice me.

She looks up.

'What are you staring at?'

'Do you want one of my sandwiches?'

'Fuck off.'

'I'm not going to eat it.'

She doesn't reply, so I throw it over to her desk. Like a bird, she eats only when I'm not looking.

## Chapter Nine

Less than a week later, Hinkley Point does cut the funding for the building. They claim it is due to their budget, and nothing to do with us, but Mr. Andrews apparently does not believe that. I am used to being a teacher's pet, but lately he's been making a habit of stopping me in corridors to adjust my tie or tuck my shirt in properly.

In order to raise enough money to finish building the Classroom of the Future, the school holds a jumble sale. My mother volunteers to make the posters, which she prints off at work and gives to me to put up around the school. 'Jumble Sale! School Hall Jan 24th' it says in bold letters, bordered by Clip-Art balloons. She's also signed up to run the bric-a-brac stall. She rushes around the house collecting things deemed to be junk. She makes me clear out my wardrobe and go through my books. She tries to get Dad's CDs, too, but he hides them from her. Finally, she enters the attic and throws things from the hatch onto the landing below: pink clothes and soft toys, books and bedding. All my baby things. Black bin bags crowd the landing. I pick through them and hold the tiny clothes up to my body.

'I can't believe I used to fit in this.'

'Well, you were a baby. Help me fill the car.'

Even though they're old and I never look at them anymore, I can't stand the

thought of Minnie Mouse and Rosie Bear going to bad homes, unloved and uncared for, their little glass eyes cracked and their soft fur stained. I let Mum go on ahead and hide the toys in my room. Since they have spent years in the attic, I arrange them so they can look out of the window. They remind me of the way Mum kissed me when I was little, when she tucked me into bed at night. They have the smell of the attic on them; dust and damp. Mice have nibbled Rosie Bear's ears. I can't remember the last time Mum kissed me. Now, she says goodnight from the landing on her way past my bedroom. A small, secret part of me wants her to tuck me in, to kiss my grazed knees and tell me stories. But I'm too old for such things. Now, I tower over her – I'm nearly as tall as Dad. When I take a bath I can't lie down in it like I used to, not without having to bend my knees so they stick out of the water. I buy my own pink Bic razors to shave my legs, though mine are never as smooth or tanned as those in the adverts, and I'm not very good at it. Drops of blood spring from my shins if I'm not careful. Once, my hand slipped and the razor slid up my leg, bringing away a curl of skin between the blades.

My blood swirled and sank in the water.

It is forecast to snow on the day of the fete and my mother worries, checks the Ceefax every hour, salts the road outside our house and puts a spade in the car. But it turns out to be torrential rain. We run through the downpour with our bin bags full of junk and arrive, dripping, in the school hall.

We hurry to set the stalls up in rows across the room. I help Mum to arrange the bric-a-brac and keep hold of the change float in a Tupperware container. Since there wasn't enough from our house to furnish the whole stall, we'd put a notice in the newsletter and posters in the church asking for donations. I hang up clothes on a rail, mostly knitted jumpers from the 80s, and sort through various keyrings, books, a

ceramic figurine of a girl feeding a carrot to a rabbit, and miscellaneous Lego pieces. I put all my baby things in places where they can't easily be seen, in the hope that no one will buy them.

Mum competes with hagglers and I stare resentfully at the other stalls: the raffle, the tombola, 'Guess the Weight' and 'Hook a Duck.' A lot of people are here. The hall is packed, and it's hard to move around. I'm glad to have the table, a barrier between me and the crowds.

We sell almost everything. People come by to say hello, including Clare. We pretend not to notice each other at first. She picks up the figurine of the girl with the rabbit, then puts it back down again. She flicks through the clothes on the rack and riffles the pages in the 1992 AA Road Atlas. Then she asks me how much it is.

'Why do you want it?'

'Does it matter?'

I smile and turn to my mother.

'How much should I charge for this?'

'Hello, Clare,' my mum says. Her voice is cold: she blames Clare for the trespassing incident. 'Fifty pence. It's all for a good cause.'

Clare rolls her eyes and gives me five 10 pence coins and I put them in the Tupperware. Then we stand there. Me behind the table and her jostled by crowds on the other side. Our eyes meet over a pile of ancient *National Geographics*. The top one reads, 'Inside the wreck of the *Titanic*'.

'Mum, I'm taking a break.'

'You're supposed to be helping me.'

'I won't be long.'

I disappear before she has another chance to object. I buy two butterfly cakes and give one to Clare. We both eat the wings first, then lick the butter cream from the

middle. Then we go to the hook-a-duck stall, where I win a cuddly toy dog. Clare does the tombola and wins a set of shower gels. When the stalls are being packed up, we sit on the tables by the Classroom for the Future site. The tarpaulin flaps over the door, revealing exposed wiring and bags of concrete mixture inside the room.

‘Do you think they’ll ever finish it?’ I say.

‘Nope.’

She’s reading the plaque on the bench, which is dedicated to an old headteacher, Mr. Potts, who served the school for thirty-five years. He was there when my parents were at this school, and my mother greeted him on my first parents’ evening like an old friend. The plaque is rusted over, the bench weak and bending underneath us. Years of rain have left it rotting.

‘It’s sad to see it like this,’ I say. ‘My mum remembers Mr Potts. She says he was the only reason she stayed in school.’

‘This is why, when I die, I want to be cremated and forgotten about. Nothing sadder than seeing a bench like this being uncared for.’

The crowds are thinning but not every stall is packing up yet. ‘It doesn’t seem like that long since we started here.’

‘I don’t know. Feels like we’ve been here forever. I can’t wait to leave.’

‘Do you remember our first day? When you helped me find the way?’

She squints into the direction of the moor, thinking.

‘You know, when you told me I looked like a nerd and my shoes were too polished.’

‘I did not.’

‘You did!’

‘That was you?’

I nod, laughing.



‘It seems so long ago, doesn’t it?’ she says.

The sun comes out from behind a cloud, providing a moment of respite from the rain.

‘Are you going to come back for the holidays?’ I ask Clare.

‘Probably not.’

‘I’m going to. I think I’ll miss it. Even the power station.’

‘My mum has said I can stay with her during the holidays.’

‘Really?’ I try to sound nonchalant. ‘That sounds cool.’

‘Yep. I never, ever have to come back here. It’s a good feeling.’

There are still some cakes left, so we are allowed to take our pick from them.

Clare puts three in a Tupperware box my mum gives her. It has been a surprisingly nice day. I’ve enjoyed hanging around with Clare. When we’re supposed to go home, no one comes for Clare. After waiting around, I offer her a lift. Mum isn’t too pleased but she can’t really say no, so maybe as revenge, she makes me drive. Mum gets in the front passenger seat and Clare sits behind her, where, I’m conscious, she can see everything I’m doing. I swallow as I adjust the seat so it’s in my position, and she catches my eye in the rear view mirror. During my driving lessons, I’ve daydreamed about this – being able to show off how good I am at it.

The drive is slow, because the roads are icy. The lane twists over the hills, then curves around and follows the beach for a few miles. On one side, we pass empty fields of mud. On the other, a narrow stretch of sand gives way to the sea. The grey squares of the power station stand against the sky. We cross a shallow ford and begin the steep ascent to Clare’s house.

When I pull up to the gate of Clare’s farm, she gets out, thanks us and says she doesn’t need a lift all the way up to the house. We wait in the car and watch her walk up the muddy path. The yard is littered with what looks like rubbish: piles of rubble,

an old mattress with a hole in it, a wheel from a tractor. She reaches the house, looks back and waves, then lets herself in.

My driving test is scheduled for the 27th of January. It's too soon, and I don't feel ready, but my parents insist.

'It's not difficult,' Dad tells me. 'You know the roads. Just don't crash.'

I have a refresher lesson with Erica before the test. It's a bit awkward seeing her again, especially because I still owe her money from the last lesson we had together all those weeks ago, but she's nice about it. I mess everything up in the lesson and she reassures me, saying, 'Bad dress rehearsal, good performance.' Nonetheless, I'm so nervous that I spend the time before the test in the toilets spraying Rescue Remedy on to my tongue. Failure is not an option.

The route of the test is designed to encompass rural roads and city roads so we start out from the driving test centre. The first thing the instructor wants me to do is bay park, and I get it within the lines but I'm wonky. He writes something on his clipboard and then we go out to the city. I haven't practised the big roundabout since Dad started teaching me, and it's much busier than I remember. With no traffic lights, I feel like I'll never be able to pull out, but finally a gap appears and I step on the accelerator – only to find the car coming to an abrupt halt anyway and a motorbike coming around. The examiner has stepped on the emergency brake. He writes something else on the clipboard and then we head out towards Exeter.

We drive around some suburbs and then, as I feared, he wants me to do a parallel park, which I completely mess up until he says we'll move along and find a different spot. I'm pretty sure I've failed and then I become strangely calm and do everything else perfectly, but of course back at the centre I'm right – he tells me I've failed the test.

Erica takes me back to my house and comforts me on the way. 'It's okay,' she says cheerfully. 'I failed my first test too. I drove into a house.'

She checks the rear-view mirror and pulls out onto the big roundabout. She doesn't break her chatter the entire time. 'This would have been... God, sixteen years ago. I was doing a three point turn in a narrow road and I reversed it into a house positioned directly on the road. I'm surprised the instructor didn't stop me. My excuse is that I was used to living in New Zealand and driving on the other side of the road.'

'What happened then?'

'Well the worst part was that I was taking the test in my girlfriend's car and she was pretty angry that I destroyed her bumper.'

'You had a girlfriend?'

'Have – she stayed with me, surprisingly. Of course I paid to fix the car, so that probably helped.'

I guess I should have known, but I'm surprised. 'So do you live together?' I ask tentatively.

'Of course. You know the new estate in the village? We recently bought a house on there. Just have to wait for it to finish being built.'

I look out of the window, possibilities unfolding in my mind. For some reason I've never thought of it as being a legitimate option, but here is Erica talking about her girlfriend as if it's no big deal.

'So what's her job?' I say.

'Travel agent. It works out well because we get cheap holidays.'

'Do you have any children?'

'Not unless you count the dog,' Erica laughs. 'But, personally, I do.'

I can imagine it now. Clare and I, a cute little house by the beach, holidays in Europe and a couple of dogs. Everything I wanted but didn't know was possible.

## Chapter Ten

The jumble sale must have raised a decent amount of money because, in the second week of February, work begins anew on the Classroom of the Future. A door is put into the frame and glass is installed in the windows. At lunchtime, I sit on the picnic table by the site and watch the builders laying the flooring. It's taking longer than expected to work around some water pipes that weren't on the plans. Clare and I are finishing off our English coursework project and we spend lunch periods sitting on the tables outside the classroom, discussing ideas for presentation. I look forward to these sessions, and find myself taking more time on my appearance in the mornings, a bit of eyeliner, a clean shirt.

The letter for Dad comes in an official brown envelope. It's dated February 5th, even though it only just arrived today, on the 15th. I pick it up when I get home and leave it on the sideboard underneath some bills. What I really want is the clothing catalogue that has also arrived. I carry this through to the kitchen, grab a couple of chocolate biscuits from the tin, and sit down at the table to circle the things I want to buy with my Christmas money. I enjoy having this time to myself. The weather is beginning to warm up, the days are getting longer and golden sun streams in through the windows.

Crocuses have started budding in the garden, and every day the cherry tree has more new leaves on it.

After I've eaten the biscuits, made a sandwich, and filled in the order details for a couple of tops and a new dress, I hear the key turning in the front door. I hastily clean up the kitchen, binning all the empty wrappers, and am sitting innocently at the table when Dad pops his head around the door. He fills the kettle and Mum comes in behind him, carrying the stack of letters. She goes through them and Dad puts three mugs of tea on the table.

'Junk, junk, bill – oh, here's one for you.'

'I'll look at it later.'

Together we chat a bit, make dinner and clean up. Dad forgets about the letter until the evening, then opens it in the hall. I'm doing my homework in the kitchen and Mum is watching the news.

We hear him swearing from the hall.

Mum launches into action stations. She goes out and buys all the newspapers with job supplements, sits at the dining table with a mug of coffee and circles any vacancy that might be suitable for Dad. She applies for a second job and makes a budget, then removes the lightbulbs from the lamps in the hallway and bedrooms, saying that if we can't remember to turn them off, we'll have to go without.

'What difference will that make?' Dad says.

'Have you looked at the vacancies yet?'

For the whole of Saturday, Dad moves around the house in his dressing gown until Mum makes him get dressed. We eat toast and soup and he goes on about how automation is stealing jobs.

'There won't be any left by the time you're my age, Bri.'

‘What about lawyers?’

‘Not many. Computers will take those jobs.’

‘Doctors?’

‘There are robots that can do operations now.’

‘For God’s sake, Richard, will you shut up? You’ll find another job, Briony will be fine. Just do something. Anything!’

He has two weeks’ notice, but threatens not to work it. They argue all of Sunday evening and Monday morning, a tense back and forth going around in circles. I sneak out early and wait, for nearly an hour, in the dark at the bus stop. The rising sun fringes the sky with red. The lamp flickers on and off, finally dimming to nothing. I see the burnished tip of Anthony’s cigarette before I see his face.

‘Your lot get the letter too?’

This is the most he’s ever said to me. ‘Yeah. My dad did.’

‘It’s fucked.’

‘He’s saying he won’t work the notice.’

‘Don’t blame him. It’s an insult. Twenty years my dad’s been there.’ Anthony takes a long drag. ‘Fuck, I needed this. Can’t hide it from my parents much longer.’

When the bus arrives, we get on with a new, more equal relationship – we’re in it together, and he lets me on in front of him. Clare isn’t on the bus so I sit alone, and I must have fallen asleep a bit because it’s a surprise when we reach school. During registration, Clare rushes in, apologising for being late and saying she missed the bus.

The gap underneath the back door seems to get bigger and bigger, and every morning when I descend the stairs I can feel the air changing from warm to cold. At night the wind whistles through the kitchen. The weather turns cold again during the third week of February and, on the morning of Tuesday 20th, I go down to find a thin layer of

frost covering the tiles and I skid, catching myself on the worktop before I fall.

Outside, snow is thick on the ground and glittering. When I walk to the bus stop I'm the first one to make footprints.

Since Dad's been out of work, he's started several projects around the house. I encourage him with this in order to stop him from asking me about my life. When I get home from school later that day, he's in the kitchen measuring the doorframe.

'Hold this end,' he says when I walk in and pull out the biscuit tin. I stand dutifully by the door, holding the tape measure to the floor.

'I'm going to B&Q, do you fancy a drive?'

'Sure,' I reply, figuring I can put off some homework. I regret my decision when, on the drive, he starts asking me about Gabriel. I try to concentrate on the road while he peppers me with questions.

'Who broke up with who?'

'He did. But I was going to. He got there first, that's all.'

He doesn't even try to hide his smile. 'I never liked him.'

I don't reply and we drive in blissful silence for a few more miles. We arrive into town and join a queue for the big roundabout. Chains of red tail lights line up before us in the dark over the crest of the hill.

'Your mother tells me she spoke to you about... you know,' he says.

I wish I'd put a CD on when we got into the car. Anything but this. 'She did.'

'And have you..?'

'No.'

'Okay. Good.'

The queue moves forwards and, unused to driving in traffic, I accidentally jolt the car forwards before slamming on the brakes.

'Dad, what would you do if, in theory, I wasn't with a boy.'

‘Ideally you won’t date anyone now until you’re older. Concentrate on getting into a good university and finding yourself a good job. Maybe, later, get a cat.’

‘No, I mean...’ I trail off and look out of the window, accidentally catching the eye of a woman in the car next to me. She frowns and goes back to fiddling with the radio. There’s a suit hanging up in her backseat.

‘Go on.’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘For what it’s worth, you can do better than him. He’s not very driven, and he needs a haircut.’

‘That’s what Clare said too. Well, not about the hair.’

‘She’s got a good head on her shoulders. Weird family, shame about her mother, but I think she’ll do well.’

I’m glad it’s dark so he can’t see me blushing like I do whenever anyone mentions her name.

‘What do you know about that? Her mother leaving?’

‘Oh, it was a big scandal at the time. Not a lot happens here, as you know, and the PTA was gossiping about it for weeks. It was all your mother talked about, drove me up the wall. Apparently she just upped and left one night, told them she was going to meet your mum for a couple of drinks and never went back. Let me tell you, she used your mum. I never liked her, she didn’t take any interest in us. She was posh, thought her own shit didn’t stink. City type, you know.’

I think this is the most he’s ever said to me in one go. I let it sink in, and then the queue moves forward. We finally arrive at B&Q, with just enough time to buy a door before it closes. We put the back seats down and fit it into the car, and Dad insists on driving back because it’s impossible to see out of the rear window. At home, after a couple hours of banging and swearing, the door is in – but it doesn’t shut. Dad rams it



with his shoulder until it's wedged closed in the frame. The wood in the centre panel splits from the force.

'Don't tell your mother about that,' he says.

'She's going to want to use the door at some point.'

He glares at the door, looks it up and down as if it's offended him. 'We'll cross that bridge when we come to it.'

Meanwhile, the frost icing the kitchen floor has melted, pooling across the tiles. I splash through it and get the mop, then spend the next half an hour soaking up the water and filling the mop bucket with it before transporting it to the toilet in the hall. When mum gets home she's pleased and doesn't even seem to notice the split in the door or the fact it's the wrong colour for the frame. Plus, the floor is sparkling. She goes out to buy fish and chips from the fish-and-chip van, and, for once, we eat in front of the TV and watch *EastEnders*. I should be happy.

The week goes by and fortunately Mum doesn't try the new door and find out it won't open. At the weekend, she begs me to take Dad out again so she can get some time on her own. I persuade Dad to let me take him for a drive and we go the scenic route, inland, over the hills, to Clare's house. Mum mouths, 'Thank you' to me when she shuts the door behind us.

We head up the long lane with grass growing up the middle, leave the car at the farm gate and trudge up to the house. It has been raining and the mud sucks on my trainers. Chickens strut up and down, pecking at the ground. The cows watch us with curiosity. Their warm breath snorts in steam from their noses. Despite this, everything seems weirdly quiet. There's no one in the yard and some of the barns are locked.

Clare's dad is surprised to see us but he opens the gate and asks us if we would like a cup of tea. He tells me Clare's up in the barn doing something with the horses,

and I leave my father behind, while they talk about whatever it is they like to talk about; probably tools or how terrible London is.

It's cold in the yard and the wind cuts into my cheeks. I've always been scared of horses so I hang back – they're so big, and they can kick you in the face. I watch Clare confidently brush each of them, pick dirt from their hooves, until she notices me. She stops what she's doing and comes over.

'You scared the shit out of me, creeping up like that. Have you considered a career as a burglar?'

'Sorry.'

'Seriously, how do you move so quietly?'

We stand outside the stables, watching the wind whip up dead leaves. It's stopped snowing but is bitterly cold, the puddles in the yard frozen over into solid lumps of ice. The sky is clear except for a few thin clouds scudding across it. I turn to her and say, 'So shall we make it official? Going together.' I think of Erica, at home with her girlfriend and dog, enjoying the quiet domestic life I didn't think possible.

A couple of seconds pass and feel like an eternity and then Clare says, smiling, 'Sure.'

She invites me to stay the night and, later, we head up to her bedroom. We watch *Scream* – my parents wouldn't let me see it in the cinema – and turn the volume up as loud as we want. No one appears and tells us to be quiet or go to bed. When we get hungry, we make popcorn and pizzas and eat ice cream straight from the tub. I think of my parents at home, eating at the table and then going to bed at 10.30 on the dot. Clare's dad doesn't come home until gone midnight. He puts up the camp bed for me in her bedroom and tells us not to talk too loudly, but that's it. No third degree, no chaperoning to separate bedrooms. We brush our teeth together in front of the mirror.

We stay up late and share her bed. I like keeping my things next to hers, my

toothbrush on the mug and my pyjamas on her bed. It is so much better than being at Gabriel's, where the time dragged and I could go for hours without speaking aloud.

In the morning, she has to work on the farm and I join her, helping her with her chores. We walk down to the fields together, holding hands, the dogs running in front of us and the wind blowing sea salt into our hair. We help her dad bring in the cows into the sheds for milking and then hang around on the farm for a while, walking in the fields and throwing sticks for the dogs. We wander around the hay meadow where long grass shivers and tickles our thighs.

When my mum comes to pick me up, I smile the whole ride home, and even my dad notices. They keep asking me, all evening, what I'm looking so happy about but I don't tell them. I like having this shared between Clare and me, whole and untouched.

It's fun going together in secret. Much more fun than being with Gabriel, who constantly wanted to make out in front of as many people as possible. In school, Clare and I hold hands underneath our desks. She slips notes into my blazer pockets for me to find later in the day, when I change out of my uniform. Just silly little notes, drawings or jokes to make me smile. I collect her notes together in a pile, tied up with a hair bands, at the bottom of my underwear drawer. At night, I read every single one over again. I practically have them memorised. I drift around the house, daydreaming of our future, allowing time to pass me by. I spend hours texting her from my mother's emergency mobile phone, perched on the bathroom windowsill, which is the only place in the house where I can get a signal.

Whenever I can, I cycle up to her house and we hang out there. We study together, and then I help her finish her chores, or we might simply lie on her bed and talk. Even though we see each other every day, she writes letters to my house, sometimes long ones about being happy, sometimes short mysterious notes saying

nothing but a time and a place. The first time she does this, the letter says nothing more than ‘March 3rd at the triangle, 11 am.’ I head up to Graham Roberts’ bench overlooking Stoke Coursey, including the school and, on the outskirts, the riding stables. I’m early so I sit there and watch the comings and goings. It’s a quiet Sunday morning so there isn’t much happening. The odd car swishes up the lane. There is hardly any noise. It is warm and still. After a while, Clare cycles up. She has a carrier bag dangling off her handlebars. In it she is carrying cheese sandwiches and a coffee cake she’s made. She passes the cake to me and I unwrap it from its bundle of cling film and tea towels. Since she forgot to bring a knife, we dig into it with our fingers and eat it in a sticky mess. It is moist and delicious.

‘You could be a baker,’ I say.

She laughs. ‘I’m not doing anything that stands any chance of having to stay here. My only goal is to get as far away as possible.’

My hair is being blown by the wind so I tie it back. Likewise, Clare keeps playing with her hair, tying it up into a plait and untying it again. The landscape unrolls in front of us and I think maybe I could have a good life here, with her, and I don’t have to go away at the first chance I get.

‘It must be kind of nice, knowing you can come back here and work with your dad if you do decide you want to,’ I say. I don’t tell her that I’m imagining us both living there, running it together, maybe opening a little farm shop on the side.

‘There’s no way I’m staying on the farm. I’m leaving this dump as soon as I can.’

‘For good?’

‘I want to travel the world.’

‘That’s cool. I haven’t been anywhere. Except when I went to France with my parents a few years ago,’ I say. Disneyland Paris, which my dad said was not really France at all, more like a tiny version of the United States. Nonetheless to me, that

seemed pretty adventurous in itself.

‘Yeah. It’s shit. I hardly ever see my Dad,’ she says. ‘He normally works until late, after I’ve gone to bed. We make hardly any money. It’s really not worth it.’

Maybe she’s right. The sink is piled high with unwashed dishes smelling of mould and old food. Every surface is covered in paperwork: bills and final notices with red headers. A stack of *The Daily Telegraph* is nearly as tall as me and goes way back into 1998. There are sometimes clothes drying on the chairs and their evaporating moisture mists the windows, obscuring the view.

Later that day, back at her house, we are in the fields, pulling crowfoot from the grass and digging out the roots so the horses won’t eat any. It is difficult work in the cold, the ground hard with frost, but it’s fun with her. We laugh and talk about people from school, plans for the future, memories from childhood. The only time she clams up is when I try to ask for too much information about her mother, and after that I change the subject as quickly as possible by pretending to have forgotten what crowfoot looks like and asking her to identify it for me. The sky is the colour of a bruise, threatening rain. When the storm starts, it comes down hard and freezing. Neither of us have a coat or anything.

For a while we carry on, but soon we are soaked to the skin. Water squelches in my shoes and runs down my neck. We drop the spades and return, running, to the yard, lightning flashing overhead. Instead of going all the way back to the house, Clare holds open the door of a lesser-used barn and ushers me through. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, I can see we are surrounded by machinery; large metal skeletons rise above us and reach for the ceiling, where the shadows of wooden beams run across. The rain is loud on the roof.

‘Is this safe?’ I shout over the noise, ‘A wooden barn full of metal?’

‘The storm will blow over soon.’

‘But in the meantime?’

She laughs, thinking I’m joking. ‘Let me get the light.’ She reaches behind me for the switch, but when it clicks, nothing happens. We are still in darkness.

‘The power must be out. There’s a torch in here somewhere.’

She moves to go and find it, but I surprise myself by saying, ‘No. Leave it like this, I kind of like it.’

‘Okay,’ she says, moving back. I am suddenly aware of how close we’re standing. The storm crashes around us but I am barely aware of it any more. She fills my head, her closeness, rain dripping from her hair onto my collar bone. And we kiss and by the time we are finished, the rain has stopped and we open the doors onto a wide, blue sky.

## Chapter Eleven

The next day, we work on the report for our English coursework until it's finished and ready to be bound. Gabriel doesn't show up. I'm glowing, even when I get home. Her dad drops me off and I practically float inside. Thoughts of Clare are enough to drown out my parents' talking. They are in the lounge, TV on, talking about the Foot and Mouth outbreak that has started up north and looks to have spread to Devon. It seems a million miles away to me.

'It is down here,' I can hear Dad saying. 'Started in Okehampton and now in Highampton.'

'Where did you hear that?'

'When I stopped in the petrol station on the way back from work.'

I freeze, feeling my heart sinking in my throat. I'm not exactly sure what this will mean for us but I know it can't be good. My parents are talking in the hushed voices they use for arguing. I text Clare asking if she's heard about it.

'Yeah,' she replies. 'Dad is worried.'

It rains all night and the sky is grey when I wake up on Monday morning. Who knows what school will be like today? The rain doesn't know what's happened and it is

unremarkable; a fine drizzle soaking through my coat and into my hair. Luckily the heating in school has been fixed and the heating in our tutor room is turned up high during morning registration. I sit in the second row, between Gabriel and the window. I wish I hadn't chosen to sit next to him at the beginning of the year because now we're not allowed to move seats and I'm stuck next to him.

We are supposed to be keeping the windows closed. Condensation runs down the glass and gathers on the wooden sill. I pick at flakes of white paint with my thumbnail. Gabriel sits with his legs apart so his knee touches mine. I move closer to the radiator. The heat feels like it is burning through my trousers. Outside, a group of seagulls peck at some chips. Bright flashes of ketchup spoil their yellow beaks.

It has been a grey, endless day. Two in the afternoon but the light is already dimming and it feels much later in the day. Mrs Hellier is writing about exam technique on the board. When her back is turned some people laugh at the sweat patches in the underarms of her white blouse. Laura is in front of me writing with the exercise book at a ninety degree angle to the edge of the table. Before the lesson started, I overheard her telling Gabriel she believes a person can always sense being watched, feel their eyes and their energy. I stare hard at the top of her head, at the roots where her blonde highlights suddenly change colour. She doesn't turn around. Next to her, Clare sits with her chin resting on the palm of her hand and stares out across the sports field. I crack the window open and hold my hand outside, the breeze soft on my skin. Across the valley, smoke is rising from the fields.

It is Gabriel who says, 'What's that smell?'

I look at him over my shoulder. Terry Cocker has wrapped his tie around his face like a bandana. Laura sprays white musk body mist into the air. She is worried about poisons. The smell is fuel and flesh and it smothers us.

'Stay calm and sit down, everyone.' Mrs Hellier struggles to raise her voice



above us. 'Foot and Mouth is not harmful to humans. Who opened the window?'

I think I can hear fires burning, roaring in the distance.

Two girls hold supportive arms around Laura. Gabriel passes her a tissue. 'My aunty has a horse,' she sniffs. 'We don't know what will happen to it.'

'Glue factory,' Clare says. She stands and swings her bag across her shoulders. 'Or dog food. What they do is they take them away and put them in a huge masher. There's all bits flying everywhere, you know – eyeballs, guts, tongues. The staff get covered in it, they have to wear goggles.'

'Clare,' Ms Hellier says. 'You should apologise. I really don't think that was appropriate.'

'Then, at the end of the line, all the mashed-up meat gets spat out into different tins, some dog food and some glue.'

Laura dabs at her face with the tissue. 'Miss, make her stop.'

'It's just the circle of life, Jean.'

'I really think you should step outside.'

'I'm leaving anyway.' Clare crosses the room and pulls open the door. By the time it's shut behind her, she's out across the field. She walks with her head down, her bag bouncing against her thigh.

Things progress quickly. Within days, the infection has spread across the country. Disinfectant and 'NO ENTRY' signs appear at the gates I pass. Each day the journey to school takes longer, with diversions around lanes that are blocked off because of isolation zones. Some parents sign petitions, citing disruption and the need for quarantine, saying the school should be closed. But Mr Andrews says he's determined to carry on as usual. On March 9th we hand in our English coursework. In the morning, I look out at the gathering purple clouds but it is not yet raining. When I

arrive at school, I head as fast as I can to the library, where I can get the report bound. Lots of people from my class are waiting in line while the lone librarian struggles to get everything done. I find Clare and together we go over the report to check for typos.

Outside, it looks like it's started to snow. While we're waiting for our report to be bound, Clare and I go outside and look up at the sky, watching the snowflakes stream towards me. The sky is thick with cloud, and it is like looking at the off-channel on the TV. I imagine the sound of static all around me. But something's not right – it's the smell. A weird, cloying kind of smell that makes me want to gag.

'It's not snow,' Clare says. 'Can you smell that?'

'It's ash.'

I look at the flakes settle on her hair, and she's right: it's not melting. It's not snow.

'We should get inside,' she says, and encourages other people to join us. We run inside, others follow. It's dark and the strip lights flicker for ages before finally settling down and bathing the hall in anaemic light. At the window, it's suddenly obvious: a huge plume of smoke in the field over the road. We gather round and jostle against each other, trying to see, until the headmaster comes in. The door clangs shut behind him and his heavy footsteps urge us into silence. He leans towards the librarian and whispers something into her ear. She tells us the main road has been closed and the school buses won't be able to come.

So we go, row by row, to the administration office to phone our parents. Mrs. Hellier leads the way, and there are whispers amongst the group, which stop whenever she looks around. Clare and I walk together, close but trying not to be too close. Our secret is growing hard to keep.

The line outside the office shuffles forward. Mrs. Hellier calls my name. It's

different to be behind the admin desk, instead of in front of it. It doesn't look anything like I expected. From the front, it appears so well organised but from behind, I can see folders strewn across shelves, piles of registers teetering on the desk, and empty coffee mugs all over the place.

I call my mother at work and when she comes to the phone I explain that I will be stuck at school, probably overnight. Suspicious at first, she asks to speak to a teacher, but then she's called away and has no choice but to believe me.

Later, we stack the chairs and desks at the back of the assembly hall. There is no longer ash falling from the sky, but the smell persists, sweet and cloying.

In the evening, we lay out PE mats on the floor in the hall and ancient sleeping bags and blankets are fetched from a storage cupboard. Without pyjamas or toiletries, we remove our school blazers and sleep in our shirts. I lie awake and listen to the pipes clanking inside the walls. Underneath the mat, I can feel the hard floor. It's quiet all around me except for the sound of breathing. I stare at the dark ceiling and will myself to sleep.

Then Clare rolls over and taps me on the shoulder. 'Are you asleep?'

'No.'

I hear the sleeping bag rustling as she pulls herself out of it. 'I can't sleep at all. Let's go to the Classroom of the Future.'

We sneak out of the hall and head down the corridor to the Classroom. It's so cold our breath is lit up underneath the lights, until the room looms large and dark ahead of us. We enter, our voices echoing around the walls.

Although the doors and windows are in, there's no electricity or plumbing to the room. It is filled with tables, chairs and stacks of textbooks. We sit. The plastic chairs

are cold and brittle, sharp in broken places.

When Clare puts her hand on my knee I realise I'm shaking. Whether that's from the cold, or anticipation, I don't know. I put it down to the cold. Her hands are smooth, but not soft, and so cold. The rings she wears are loose on her fingers. The cuff of her jumper has a loose thread which tickles my leg. She moves up, and it's easy to forget about the cold and the pyres. All of it seems so far away. She goes to the inside of my leg and I want to burst. There's nothing, no one on earth but me and her in this space. She passes the point where I thought she would stop, but she doesn't. I can't really see her in the darkness but I can tell she's looking at me, the atmosphere has changed. The wind whistles around the walls of the building, the tarpaulin flaps in the wind, and the moon casts long shadows across the machinery and the ground.

And then Mrs. Hellier comes marching. We hear her footsteps but don't have time to hide before she appears in the doorway.

'Come back to the hall, right now,' she says.

We follow, heads down. She instructs us to be quiet as we enter the hall, and I can see people watching us in the beam of the torch.

## Chapter Twelve

When I finally get home the next morning, after the night in school, I feel like I could sleep for 24 hours. Dad is in the kitchen frowning at the newspaper.

‘What’s up?’

He lifts it so I can see the front page. The army have been called in to help with the culls, as DEFRA cannot cope with the sheer number of animals being culled.

Over the next few days – while the mornings seem to get brighter, daffodils unfurl and birds start building their nests in the eaves of our house – corpses are piling up in the fields, stinking and rotting, their bodies bloated and their eyes stolen by the crows perching on top of the piles, pecking and pecking until they are full. After our neighbour’s animals are culled, the birds stop eating the seeds we hang out in the back garden on the feeder. The little fat balls, which usually disappear on the very day they’re put out, stay hanging, sadly, getting wet in the rain and gradually just crumbling by themselves with nothing to eat them.

Mum says the superstition is to throw a pinch of salt over your shoulder and say, ‘Greetings uncle crow’. It is impossible to do it for every single bird we see.

Nevertheless, I try saying ‘Greetings uncle crow’ whenever I see one, with the idea in mind that if I do this then I will be able to end the cull, and I can protect

Clare's farm. But it is exhausting and time consuming, and Mum keeps asking me what I am muttering about.

Army vehicles, huge trucks double the size of our cars, squeeze through lanes they can barely pass. The roads are being cleared so the vehicles can fit through, the hedges cut back, the pot-holes filled. They churn up the fields and turn everything to mud. The trucks bump over the roads and come in long lines, three or four at a time, and they block the lanes so it's difficult to get into town or school. Or anywhere really.

The worst thing, at first, is hearing the distraught bleating of the lambs that have been locked inside the barns. It's for their own safety, so say the presenters on the news, but they sound desperate and confused. The cows, too, are shut in and unable to be milked properly. Many of them die simply as a result of being stuck, the food in their fields running out, or from heat and exhaustion in the barns.

I hate Mondays, and this one gets off to a bad start, with the Gideons coming in to school to do a special assembly. It's been scheduled for ages, but has gone from being a tedious joke to being a big event. The whole school attends, and it is teamed with a fundraising drive: a bucket at the entrance to the hall, with a handwritten sign taped to it saying, 'For families affected by foot and mouth.'

The Gideons are two American girls, who use puppets to tell the story of the Good Samaritan and then give out free copies of the Bible. The books are pocket-sized and covered in bright, Christmas-green faux leather. There's an index, listing common 'problem areas for teenagers' and corresponding helpful verses. These include things like 'friendship', 'puberty', 'family' and 'school' as well as other hilarious topics: 'sex', 'prostitution', 'drugs' and 'homosexuality'.

The lesson after the Gideons' assembly is General Studies with Mrs Quick. There

is giggling throughout the register. Even Clare is caught up in it. We're just opening our textbooks, when Gabriel stands up, bangs the desk and stands on his chair. He recites lines from the Bible in a deep, booming voice. He holds the book out in front of him as if standing at a lectern.

'If a man lies with an animal, he shall surely be put to death, and you shall kill the animal.'

We all laugh at him, even Mrs. Quick does at first. Pleased with the attention, he riffles through the pages to find another. 'If your hand should cause you to sin, cut it off.'

The other rows explode in laughter. Some of the guys make unnecessary gestures.

Mrs. Quick tries to wrap it up. 'Thank you for that sermon, but I must ask you to be quiet now.'

Gabriel sits. There's more whispering voices and rustling pages. Then he stands again and, in the same deep voice, says: 'There is no authority except from God.'

Other people are looking up their own quotes and telling him to read them. No one is paying attention to the lesson.

'If you can't settle down I will ask you to leave.' Mrs. Quick walks towards his row, 'Give me the book.'

'But, Miss – let there be no foolishness nor crude talk.'

She wrenches the book from Gabriel's hand. 'That's enough of that.'

Gabriel turns around and smiles at me, a thin smile that doesn't really reach his eyes.

When I get home, Dad is watching *Neighbours* and none of the dishes have been washed. Mum will hit the roof if she sees this, so I gather all the cups from around the house, wash up and put everything away. I'm done shortly before Mum arrives home

and when she asks me if I'd cleaned up I tell her it was Dad. She narrows her eyes at me, clearly not believing my story, but I shrug and retreat upstairs where she can't ask me any more questions. I pretend to be too tired to eat dinner with them and spend the whole evening in my bedroom, where I sit at my desk and flick absentmindedly through the Bible. I hide it under a magazine when Dad comes in to ask if I feel better and if I've finished my homework. I have a feeling Mum has sent him and that, if I give the right answers, he won't hang around.

'Yeah, we only had English.'

'You've not even left your room.'

'I'm a bit tired.'

I fake a yawn.

'I'll leave you to it, then.' He pauses in the doorway. 'Thanks for cleaning up earlier. I know I haven't been very good lately.'

I stare at my desk until he pulls the door to again, and only a little thin line of light spills into my bedroom. He has left the door slightly ajar. I get up and push it closed, then go back to the desk and retrieve the Bible. It feels heavy and substantial in my hands. I walk to the window and look out at the moonlit streams of smoke on the moor.

The window opens up onto the sloping porch roof, with gaps in the tiles like missing teeth and moss growing in the cracks. The previous spring, a family of house sparrows made their nest in the eaves and I watched them diving in and out of the roof with twigs, leaves and worms. They did this for several weeks until the chicks flew the nest. One day, I put a ladder against the house and retrieved the empty, densely packed crown of skeleton leaves and twigs, a few feathers clinging to it. This was another thing I am supposed to throw away, but instead I keep it shut safely away in a drawer of my desk, on top of paper and pens.



My parents grew up nearby, too. Mum was born in the same hospital where she would later give birth to me. Dad was born at home in the village and his parents live in the house they've lived in all their lives. Even the carpets in that house are the same as they were thirty years ago, and have thinned. Desire paths.

Both of my grandfathers worked in the power station and my parents met at an employee family day where they ate egg and cress sandwiches and watched children play pass the parcel. Mum tells the story like this: she didn't want to be there and had chosen to wear the worst clothes she had as a form of protest, but Dad couldn't take his eyes off her. Dad jokes that he was actually eyeing up her sister. They got together, finished secondary school and followed their fathers into work. They saved up, married, bought a house. Grew flowers in the garden and painted the walls of the nursery Barbie pink. From my window I'd been watching the sun set and the seasons change for nearly eighteen years.

I open the Bible and, by the light of the moon, look up the advice for 'alcohol' and 'sex'. I've already heard the best bits from Gabriel. And then, with sweaty palms and my heart thudding in my chest, I look up 'homosexuality'. Even though I'm alone, I feel embarrassed to look at that word. It seems so far removed from myself. A scientific kind of word, broken down into separate parts and dictionary defined. I don't have a proper dictionary, only my old 'ABC Children's Illustrated Dictionary', in which homosexuality doesn't exist. Then I shake my head, knowing that, if Clare could hear me now, she would be having a laugh at my expense.

I close the Bible again and leave it on the windowsill, though it is crumbling with damp and flakes of wood get on my clothes. The moon is full and bright, turning power lines into silver threads that stitch together the fields. In the field across the road, a herd of cows sleep huddled together underneath the trees lining the boundary. Further away, the headlights from a tractor move up and down. In the distance, by the

shore, the perimeter of the power station is lit up by floodlights.

## Chapter Thirteen

Because of the Foot and Mouth, kids drop out of school every day throughout March, including Clare. Most people adhere pretty strictly to the government's isolation policy.

During the register on March 19th, her name hangs in the air. A new craze is to shout, 'They're dead!' whenever someone doesn't answer, but as the numbers grow it stops being hilarious and Mrs Hellier threatens detentions. She says there are futures at stake and we're tempting fate.

Each week, a different pupil takes the register to the office before first period. When it's my turn, I dawdle and look up everyone's middle names: Gabriel Adam Harris, Terence Alexander Cocker, Clare Charlotte Hall. Her name is the best; it sounds mature and important. There is a line of black 'A's after her name to indicate each day of authorised absence. Many other names are the same. As I round the corner to the slot where I'm supposed to put the register, I hear lowered voices from inside the office. So I hang back and listen.

It's the administrator, Miss Jennings, saying 'Are we going to have to close the school?'

'It's a possibility,' Mr Andrews replies.

There's a pause, the sound of a chair scraping back. She says, 'I don't want to be insensitive, but if that happens, will we still be paid as usual?'

'Of course, yes. Of course.'

Even though I know it's completely irrational, I feel overwhelmingly guilty. If being with Clare goes against the Bible, is this our punishment? I can't stop myself from looking up information about plagues in the school library and the massive encyclopaedia on the bookshelf at home. I re-read the entries until I feel as if I could recite them. I look up the Black Death on the Encarta in the school library. I sit and wait while pictures of ancient plague doctors in their scary bird-like masks, load incredibly slowly. The Black Death is estimated to have killed up to 60% of humankind.

Since I live near Clare, I'm given the task of picking up all of her work to take home for her. I collect homework and textbooks from her subject teachers. I'm meant to leave them in the post box at the end of her drive. Usually, she is waiting for me and I hand them to her over the fence. One day, when it looks like school isn't going to return to normal any time soon, we're told to collect our tech project. I go to the Tech room to pick up my chessboard and Clare's candle holder. When I get there, the room is unlocked but empty. The candle holder is sitting, finished, on one of the tables. It's perfect. The swans' curved wings look like they could be in flight. Their long necks stretch up to the ceiling. I imagine Clare cutting around the little flicks of their wings, filing them smooth with the large metal file. It is perfectly varnished, no drips. It must have taken her ages. I can see her, alone here after school on long dark nights, silhouetted against the moonlight spilling in through the window, silvering her hair.

## Chapter Fourteen

Two weeks later, the cull is widened even further. We are told that any livestock within a three mile radius of an infected farm will be culled as well in case they have the disease. When the pyres are lit, the smoke and the weird chemical smell drifts across the villages. The shops and pubs are deserted, and neighbours speak across fences but never meet up. It's even quieter than usual, and the deserted roads are beginning to look straggly with overgrown hedges.

Some of the teachers stop coming into school when their family farms are closed down, or because the roads are shut, or because the isolation policy is in place, keeping them in their homes unable to leave or to allow others to enter. With a reduced teaching force, and hardly anyone in the school, we aren't taught lessons, so much as supervised while we do exercises from our textbooks. Only Gabriel and Laura remain from my tutor group. We sit in the near-empty tutor room, them on one side of the room and me on the other.

We're no longer allowed off the school grounds at lunchtimes. It's too much of a risk to the surrounding area, we are told, to wander freely. But apart from this we have good, free reign of the school and we can pretty much do whatever we want.

Lunchtimes are extended by ten minutes and we eat our food wherever we want.

It's easy to skive off, and lots of people do.

Mr. Andrews holds a special assembly where he explains what will happen to the school. We all file into the hall, and barely take up two thirds of it. Whereas, usually, people are crammed in and some even have to stand, now we can all sit on a chair.

Mr. Andrews' voice echoes and seems small in the mostly empty hall.

'We want to stay open, and we will try our best to remain so. But some contingency plans must be put in place. We understand this is a hard time for everyone in the community, so we will do everything we can to make it easier for you.'

Mrs. Hellier tells us to send letters to the pupils who are gone. She writes a list of names on the blackboard, hands out envelopes and pads of Basildon Bond. Some ideas, she says, are to write about how much we miss them, what is going on in school and to give them our best wishes. It's easy to fire off letters to acquaintances like this, a page full of pretty meaningless platitudes, but I leave writing to Clare until last, because I don't know what to write to her. I have barely started when the lesson is over, and Hellier is coming around to gather our letters into one big envelope. Although she says she won't read any of the letters, I don't trust her. And so I fold my letter up small and slip it into the sleeve of my jumper, hoping to go unnoticed. But Mrs. Hellier must have eagle eyes, because she does notice.

'Briony, you haven't submitted a letter for Clare.'

'I sent her a card already. My parents signed it from all of us,' I lie.

'I really think you should write something. It's going to look bad if everyone else submits a letter and you don't.'

'Can't I just deliver it myself?'

'This is about lending support as a school, as a community.'

This is new. The school has never pretended to care about us, or any community,

before. I stand, the letter tucked inside the cuff of my sleeve. The paper tickles my skin.

‘I don’t want to send a letter, ok? If I do, then I’ll do it in my own time.’

I try to get past, but Mrs Hellier is standing in the entrance to the doorway, blocking it off so I can’t get out into the hallway.

‘I’m going to be late for my next lesson,’ I say.

‘After lunch I want something on my desk to send in the last post.’

‘Fine,’ I reply, shouldering past her to get through the door.

This is apparently unacceptable behaviour. Mrs Hellier writes me up for being rude and I have to spend lunchtime scraping chewing gum from underneath the desks in the Isolation room. She stays and watches me the whole time, as if she doesn’t have anything better to do.

The letters that she was supposed to be sending to the absent pupils are still in a large brown paper envelope on her desk. I am annoyed she hasn’t sent them yet – I want to take mine over to Clare’s house at the weekend, and it will probably get there before any of the others. What is the point?

She bundles up the letters while I scrape at the gum with an old metal spatula that has ‘Home Ec’ stamped on the handle. Why do people stick gum to their desks? I concentrate on scraping the gum, trying not to touch any of it, and depositing it into the bin. Some of it has teeth marks, the ghosts of crooked incisors and large molars. I imagine people chewing it, pulling it out of their mouths in long strings.

‘I don’t know what’s got into you lately, Briony. You’ve always been such a good pupil. Have you ever had a detention until recently?’

I don’t grace her question with an answer. All the other teachers are being super-understanding about everything, and allowing us to get away with basically anything. It’s only Mrs. Hellier who wants to delve deeper.

‘I know this is a difficult time for all of you,’ she pauses and sets down her pen, ‘but you have to find healthy ways of expressing yourself. You’re at an important crossroads in your life.’

When the bell rings and I am free to go. I think about what she said all the way home. The bus is sparsely populated now, and no one has to sit next to another person. The back row is entirely empty but nonetheless everyone sticks to their usual places. I am in the middle, where I usually sit with Clare. The bus is quiet and sombre, there’s no one chucking things around or laughing in the back.



## Chapter Fifteen

I date the letter 2nd April. I underline the date neatly, twice, with red pen, as if it's a school exercise. I wish I had special writing paper but Basildon Bond will have to do. I set my alarm for 6 am, knowing that my parents won't be awake until at least 9. On Saturdays they always have a lie-in and listen to Radio 2 in bed. I leave a note for them on the kitchen table. The note tells the truth – that I am going to Clare's house to deliver a letter.

Clare won't be expecting me, I haven't rung ahead or anything, but I set out confidently on my bike, thinking it will be easy to follow the signs on the road. There are lots of places I can't go, smaller lanes around the farms marked with 'Foot and Mouth Precaution: KEEP OUT' signs. I decide to stick to the main roads. There aren't any cars on them so at least in that respect it's straightforward. Due to so many lanes being closed, I have to take a really long route and after twenty minutes I stop and realise I'm lost. I pass a sign saying I'm entering Woolfardisworthy. It's a small village, and probably doesn't deserve to be called a village. It's more like a small grouping of houses, centred on a small square containing a bench, a pub and a clock with a bell that a group of local men ring on Sundays. There is a small corner shop selling essentials like bread, tinned beans and tomatoes, ham and chicken feed.

The pyre from a neighbouring farm has been burning overnight and the thin smoke is rising from the fields. Luckily for me, the wind is blowing it in the other direction, so I can't really smell it, but I know how bad it is: burning flesh and smoky skin, the coarse hair and wool on the animals backs being singed and burnt.

It is a cloudy morning, red along the horizon, and smoke from distant pyres rises into the sky and thickens the clouds even more. It soon becomes apparent that I'm getting further and further away from Clare's house. I get off my bike to check the map I remembered to pack, and a dog comes tearing down a nearby driveway and starts barking at me. It stays behind the gate at first, chomping and barking. I can see lines of spittle stretched between its upper and lower teeth. Of course I freak out, and my heart starts thumping in my chest. A burst of adrenaline tells me to cycle as fast as possible in the opposite direction. The dog jumps up onto the gate with its front paws on top. The gate rattles and seems weak. It is chained together but is also badly fixed in places by what looks like chicken wire. The dog keeps barking at me as I cycle away, calves burning.

By the time I reach the top of the hill, my heart hammers in my head. The smell grows stronger, making me gag. I stop again and stare down onto fields where men in white overalls, lit by the flames, stand out, in the dark morning, like ghosts. I know that Clare's farm lies just over the crest of the hill beyond these fields, but I simply don't know how to get there any more. I decide to go back home.

It feels good to wheel back down the other side of the hill, but as soon as I pass the sign pointing to Nether Stowey I felt utterly pathetic and hopelessness. I had a job, an obligation, I had set out to achieve a task and I have failed just because a stupid dog barked at me from behind a locked gate. It wasn't even a big dog, medium size, probably friendly really. I know Clare wouldn't have been scared, she would have carried on as normal, maybe told it to shut up, coaxed me on past. She would

probably be able to quieten and pet it. And now she'll never know I tried to deliver the letter.

She'll never know I've been thinking of her non-stop.

I could have posted the letter, but as I wheel my bike along the path by the stagnant pond at the edge of our village – with the sun rising and struggling to break through the cloud, and acrid smoke spirals overhead from the pyre in next door's field, and my hands shaking from the adrenalin and exhaustion, from fear and cold. I re-read the letter and realise it is silly, feeble, pathetic. I have tried to sound all comforting and deep in it, but everything sounds shallow and teenage. Stupid.

Standing under the huge plumes of smoke, I suddenly understand that nothing I can write will be enough to eclipse what's happening. I tear up the letter into tiny pieces and chuck them into the pond. They float into the stagnant water and start sinking, the ink from my fountain pen leaking and smearing. There is other litter down there, old soft drink cans, dented and faded, an ancient sock, a tube of lip balm floating on the water. The things people must have thrown out of their cars, and then my letter.

Almost immediately, I regret ripping it up, although it's not as if I can't rewrite it. I wish I could call her, but no one in their family has a mobile and the landline is constantly engaged. I wonder if it has been cut off.

I still have to get back into my house as soon as possible, so I bike quickly home. But there are lights on in the house, and in my gut I know I'm in trouble. They must have heard me sneak out, or maybe they woke up early or something.

Dad is standing at the front door. 'Your mother is worried sick,' he says.

'I didn't think you would be awake.'

Without saying anything, he stands aside to let me through, into the house. 'She wanted to call the police, but I told her you couldn't have got far.'

‘I wasn’t going to go far.’

‘What are you doing running around like this? You know unnecessary travel is out of the question. Anyway,’ he shakes his head, ‘I’m completely baffled. It’s not like you to sneak out like that.’

‘I left a note.’

He doesn’t grace this with an answer.

Mum is pacing the lounge with the cordless phone in her hand. She doesn’t look very happy to see me and she is angry. She says it was stupid to go off in the early morning, into the smoke, without telling anyone –’

‘I left a note,’ I say again. Did neither of them even read the note?

‘Anything could have happened to you.’

‘We live in the middle of nowhere, not Exeter.’

Mum is paranoid about Exeter. Whenever we have been there, she’s made a big deal out of having to hold onto our bags and watching our backs at cash machines. When a crime was reported in *The Express and Echo* she cut out the section and showed it to me before we went on our trip. We weren’t even going overnight, just for a day, on the bus, and it was only about forty miles away. Clare said it was nice that she cared, but I thought it was a bit over the top. And she is proving me right now, as she says she’d had her finger hovering over the ‘9’ button, waiting for bad news.

I am grounded. Usually this wouldn’t make any difference to me, but the conditions of the grounding include me not being able to borrow Mum’s phone or to use the landline, which means I have no way to call Clare, and no way to go out to the post box. They give me a lecture about the dangers of trespassing, especially in ‘these times’ and even imply that I could have carried Foot and Mouth to other parts of the county. This is what makes me feel the worst of all, the idea that the smoke could have got on my clothes and been carried on me to here, to the sheep across the road,

where the little lambs no longer run around in the fields but burn on the pyre with their legs in the air.

## Chapter Sixteen

Time passes slowly. We're all out of our usual routines, and we float around the house in dressing gowns and pyjamas. On Sunday, Dad gets up early, puts some laundry on and sweeps the kitchen, then asks me what the date is.

I check the calendar, which is mostly blank, because all of our plans have been cancelled. 'It's the 8<sup>th</sup> April.'

He nods, as if this means something to him, and then puts on his coat. 'I'll see you in a bit.'

When he returns, two hours later, he presents Mum with a bunch of carnations in brown paper and gives me a small potted cactus.

'Have you been to town?' Mum asks.

'I've found a job.'

There's no contract or offer letter, but he has been told to start tomorrow, April 9th. The job is to assist with culling the livestock: anyone is being recruited because there's so much work. It's temporary, but the pay is decent. Nonetheless, Dad spends all morning justifying it to us. As we eat our Sunday roast, he carries on and on about how the money was too good to refuse, and cash in hand.

'All I'll have to do is stand at the entrance to the farms and stop people from

entering, or make sure they do all the cleaning stuff,' Dad says. 'It's better than nothing.'

Mum is worried, 'What will the neighbours think?'

'You tell me,' he replies sharply.

The row continues until they're arguing about how they might pay for my driving lessons and university and they get further away from reality until Dad mentions paying for my future wedding and grandchildren.

'Can you both just shut up?' I say. 'You're getting way ahead of yourselves, and you're not helping anything.'

They both fall quiet, looking at me in surprise.

'Sorry, Bri.' Dad says.

Mum seems to think she's won, but Dad comes home on Monday with a brown envelope full of bank notes, pleased to be earning again at last and have a routine.

In the coming days, I watch the pyres from my bedroom window and smell the burning and I try to imagine Dad there, standing out front by the gate, smoke swirling around him. But I can't really picture it. He leaves for work before I wake, and arrives home after dark. At night I lie awake and listen for the sound of keys in the door. He removes his overalls outside and heads straight upstairs to shower. I fall asleep to the sound of hissing water. He becomes withdrawn, getting home late and leaving early. He doesn't say much when he gets home and refuses to watch the news. This becomes even worse when he finds out his responsibilities also include helping to round up the animals. The sounds of the quad bikes they use to do this can be heard zipping across the fields and lanes, a high whiny kind of buzz that stays in your head even after the pyre is lit and everyone is gone.

This morning, mist sits low over the moor. The way sunlight filters through it reminds me of the net curtains in my nana's house. It is early; the sun low in the sky.

The shadow of our house stretches out until it covers the path to the front door. In the field across the road, a herd of cows sleep huddled together underneath the trees. A little further away, the red post van makes its way carefully up the lane. And through it all, there are two pyres burning. One freshly lit, another, smaller, one that was lit last night and is now dying out. The smoke from this one doesn't curl up as high into the sky, instead it putters out like it does in our fireplace when the wood is a bit damp. The shadows of corpses are vaguely visible in the field and the smell of smoke and disinfectant seeps through the cracks, no matter how many old towels I stuff between the sill and the frame.

I can't believe it's mid-April already. This time last year, there were church services, and Easter egg hunts for children in the village centre. I picked daffodils from the garden and put them in a vase on the table to surprise my mum. The world felt alive and blossoming. This year, there is none of that. On Easter Sunday, we eat leftover pasta from the night before and share a bar of Cadbury Dairy Milk between the three of us. Mum keeps reaching for and playing with the cross pendant she wears. Dad goes to work, coming home late and sullen.

I find it hard to sleep at night. I have so many questions for Clare, and no idea when we'll see each other again. Besides, every time I close my eyes I see the twisted, blackened corpses and wonder where Dad is. By late April, lack of sleep is catching up with me and I stumble around like a zombie. I've started sleeping with the light on. It's nearly midnight but there is no sign of Dad. The date on my clock ticks over from April 20th to April 21st. I roll over and stare at the ceiling. At one thirty I hear Mum coming upstairs. Her footsteps are heavy on the landing. She stops outside my door and pushes it ajar, letting a thin triangle of light into the room. She peers through the gap. I close my eyes.

'Goodnight,' she says quietly.



She stands in the doorway. Light filters through my eyelids and I don't move until I feel sure she's gone.

I am finally drifting off to sleep when the sound of the phone ringing cuts through the house. It's Dad, saying his car has broken down and asking if Mum can go and get him. Mum brings me a coat and says she doesn't want to go alone. We stumble to the car and she pulls out of the driveway before the windscreen has even finished demisting; she rubs a circle with her hand and peers through it. The moon is full and bright, the sky remarkably clear. I spot the Plough and Orion's belt amongst the arc of the Milky Way.

There is no other way to go but the lane by the burning farm. Even with the windows shut, the smell is overwhelming. I close the vents and button my coat all the way up over my nose and Mum grabs a tissue from the box and holds it over her mouth. Dirty smoke drifts across the road, carrying small peels of charred skin that stick to the windscreen. It follows us for a mile or two, making our eyes water and our throats itch, before the wind changes.

The hill rises steeply and Mum has to change down into second gear as we reach the top. Here the moor is wide and quiet and wind rocks the car. The view encompasses sea, hill and wood. I count two, three, four, fires burning in the distance, brighter than the lights of villages and lone houses sitting, sheltered, in the folds of the hills.

We continue for another mile, at a slow crawl so we can see Dad's car at the side of the road. We nearly miss it, but our lights catch his silhouette standing nearby.

We pull up, gravel kicking underneath the wheels and no doubt scratching the paint, and he lifts his hand to shield his eyes. He's still wearing his overalls, covered in mud and streaked with blood. The laces on his boots are undone. He doesn't move towards us, just stands there.

The front of the car is badly dented and the left headlight is out. Shards of glass glitter on the gravel.

Mum reaches into the car and turns on the lights, then opens the boot and removes the hazard triangle. We watch her walk up the road, unfold it and set it down.

Dad's hands are shaking. 'I hit something,' he says. 'A deer. I don't know.'

'Are you cold? I'll get the blanket.'

'Maybe a sheep. It ran off and I couldn't find it.'

'I doubt it was a sheep.'

A valley of silence opens between us and I don't know how to cross it. Mum walks back towards us, eyes on the ground.

'He hit a deer,' I say.

'Oh, no. Are you okay, Richard? Did you find it?'

He shakes his head and bites his lip, eyes scanning the dark moor.

'I'm sure it's fine,' Mum puts her arm over his shoulders. 'It must have run off.'

'We have to find it.'

'I'll go,' I say.

I head off-road, stumbling a little, onto the flat expanse of space between the tors. The land stretches out in front of me, and the wind steals my parents' voices so it feels like I'm alone. My breath billows in front of me, highlighted silver by the moon. I only go a little way before I see blood on the ground. It is dry and dark and hardly visible, but by the light of the moon I see it stretch away from me into a thicket of bushes. I follow the trail, crossing my fingers and hoping to be mistaken.

The deer is dead. A gash in its side, fur matted by drying blood. Its unseeing eyes stare at the sky. I let out a long, shaky breath.

As I walk back to the car, I realise I have to lie. 'Couldn't see it anywhere.'

'Thank God,' Dad replies.

‘It was probably a bit shocked, but otherwise unhurt,’ Mum adds. ‘They’re tougher than they look.’

Dad’s car won’t start. Between the three of us, we push it further to the side of the road. Dad strips off his overalls and leaves them in the boot before getting into Mum’s car where he sits, shivering, in t-shirt and jeans. I sit in the back and hold my breath for as long as possible.

By the time we arrive home, the heating has gone off and the house is cold. Dad goes straight upstairs to shower and Mum lights a fire. She sits beside the grate, feeding it with kindling and newspaper, while the pipes rattle in the walls. At the kitchen table, I drink one mug of sugared tea and then another. Mum wipes the worktops, takes out the empty bins and sweeps the clean floor. Then she stands at the sink and stares out of the window, unsure of what to do with herself. Finally, she tells me to go back to bed.

I wake up late in the afternoon, feeling dazed and confused and older. It’s already growing dark again. I can hear the sounds of the TV and the fire crackling in the living room. Later that evening, Mum puts a casserole in the oven and lays the table with the best crockery – the Denby set they received as wedding presents – and we wait for Dad to get home. Hours pass. I make a sandwich, which I eat in my room before washing the plate to make sure Mum doesn’t see. It’s nearly nine when he comes home. Then he spends thirty minutes in the shower.

We eat at the table, cutlery clinking against the plates. Mum opens Dad a cold beer that he doesn’t touch and when I joke that I’ll have it instead, neither of them laugh. I stare at my plate.

The silence is too much to bear. I concentrate on chewing.

When Dad finally speaks, his voice is hoarse. ‘We did the Melly place today.’ I

snap my head up. The name is familiar.

‘It’s getting closer,’ Mum says. Dad nods, ‘Six hundred, they had.’

Melly. I’ve passed them on the way to Clare’s. They keep a table of eggs and vegetables out by the road, with an honesty box that’s really an empty margarine tub with a slot cut in the lid. The food in my mouth stops tasting of anything. I put down my cutlery.

‘I’m feeling quite tired,’ I say and it’s like listening to someone else speaking.

Mum looks at the clock above my head, ‘Do you need an early night?’

I take my plate to the kitchen, scrape the leftovers into a Tupperware and rinse.

We all say goodnight as I pass the table. The food on Dad’s plate is practically untouched.

Upstairs, I take the map from the bookcase on the landing and unfold it on my bedroom floor. I find the Melly farm, small and easy to miss, nestled between the contour lines of the hills. Then I measure a circle encompassing every place within three miles. Sure enough, Clare’s home falls within the circle. I redraw it, just in case I’m wrong, but the result is the same.

Mum wakes me the next morning, April 22nd. She sets a cup of tea on the nightstand and whispers that I should get up. I can’t remember the last time she did this, and it’s nice. I would like to stay in bed a bit longer, but I have things to do. I dress and go downstairs, where I eat a bowl of Weetabix at the table. I rinse my bowl, spread my books out on the dining table and make a show of how much schoolwork I have to get through. Mum agrees to leave me to it. When she starts Hoovering upstairs, I take her car key from the bowl in the hall.

Everyone says I’m ready to take my test again, so this should be fine. I go through the motions of checking the mirrors, adjusting the seat. I take a mint from the

packet Mum keeps inside the glove compartment. I pull away slowly, without stalling. I edge through the lane, twigs and hedges scraping the side of the car, squealing against the windows. The ditch running beside the road is full of water and litter: empty crisp packets, old newspaper, take away cups. It feels like I'm going a million miles an hour, but when I look at the speedo it's not even 30mph. It's nerve wracking, and my heart is pounding in my temples but all I can think is that I have to tell them, I must warn them and maybe they can do something to stop it. Barricade the entrance. Put the cattle somewhere, hide them. Load whatever they can into the horse box and go far away.

Then the final ascent to Clare's house at the top of the hill. I feel sick when I reach the top. Chickens wander in the road, pecking at the grass as if this morning is the same as any other. But as I round the corner and the yard comes into full view, my blood runs cold. There is the now familiar sign on the gate: DO NOT ENTER. The buzzing of quad bikes. White overalls in the top field. A soldier at the gate, straight and tall. I recognise him from school.

The white overalls walk amongst the cows, herding them towards the gate. They all look very small. Another man stands in the yard. The doors to the barn are wide open and waiting. I walk towards them and the soldier walks towards me. He says something and then his hands are on my shoulders, holding me up. He takes me over to the wall and makes me sit against it.

'I got here too late,' I tell him.

'Are you hurt?'

'I was trying to warn them.' I hold my head in my hands.

'You're ever so pale. Do you want one?' He pulls a packet of fruit gums from his pocket and peels the paper away, hands it to me. A row of soft, colourful gums in foil.

I put two in my mouth and chew and swallow and breathe. Two more and a long

drink of water from the bottle in my bag. Then I can feel my body again. I stand and look back up to the empty field. The cows make their slow way into the yard. They try to turn and run back but are scared of the quad bikes.

‘You should be in school,’ the soldier says.

The animals are completely spooked. They are like a chain of anxiety. Skipping around, trying to run.

Clare’s dad is arguing with one of the men in overalls. I hear shouting but I can’t make out the words. He points at the cows, at their healthy feet. Clare appears from behind the barn and tries to lead him away, but he shakes her off.

‘These are contiguous premises,’ the soldier says to me. ‘You shouldn’t be here. Are you listening?’

After some struggle, they get the cattle into the barn, then shut and bolt the doors. Only those wearing overalls can go inside. Clare and her dad stand around outside, at a loss. Her dad obviously hasn’t been sleeping properly; even at this distance, I can see large purple bags under his eyes and he looks gaunt, his skin pale and sickly, full of shadows. A stubbly beard has taken over the lower half of his face. He keeps rubbing it, roughening his hands on it.

The first shot makes me jump and the soldier flinches, too. Then there is another, and another. It seems to last for hours. By the end, my ears are ringing.

A week later, the pyre burns in Clare’s field, and Clare is gone.

## Epilogue

The school looks so small and the lights in the windows seem so far away. The cold of the wall starts to bite into me, so I get up and start walking again, without really thinking about where I'm going. I need some space away from everyone to clear my head. I only walk to the end of the lane where I stop and am able to look down the hill below me. Clare and I were here not very long ago but it feels like forever. Am I the only one who knows how to find her?

After the police came and left, I went back to the lesson as if nothing had happened. When I sat down, Gabriel shuffled over so he's sitting next to me. My first instinct was to recoil.

'What did the police want with you?'

'They were asking about Clare.'

'You'd think they have better things to do.'

'Can you go away, please?'

The rest of the day passes in a blur; I can't stop thinking about how I lied to them, and I'm pretty sure that's a crime. Because I do know more than I'm letting on, but my first instinct is to lie – always has been.

Would it be too late, now, to go back to them and admit I lied? That I have a

pretty good idea of where she might be? It would be a violation of her privacy. She was obviously unhappy when she caught me reading the postcards, and she didn't even know how much I'd actually read. Plus, her father doesn't even know about them and she didn't want him to. I still don't think it would be so bad if he found out, because what is the problem? But also I don't know what happened and why, exactly, her mother left. Doubtless, Clare will never want to speak to me again if I tell other people about what was in the postcards. And especially if her dad finds out she had received them at all. What would that do to him?

I stand at the bus stop although there are no buses coming in the next hour. This must be how she did it – the bus to Exeter, then a train up north. I could wait here and follow, just turn up on the doorstep like a surprise. And if the bus came now maybe I will do that. But it's not responsible – my parents would worry about where I'd gone, and I don't know the way. I've come out here without my purse. The sky is pitch black now, clouds covering the stars, but still, and pyres burn all around me. The plastic shelter isn't much use against the wind, which pulls at my hair, and I haven't got a coat so I'm standing here shivering, covering my nose and mouth with the collar of my sweatshirt.

I turn and start to light my way back to school with the torch on my key ring, although the torch is dimming and it is now much more difficult to see. It's slow going. There's a dead bird on the side of the road, its feathers exploded all around its broken body. A car comes from behind me, its headlights illuminating everything ahead, showing me the way back and then instantly it's gone again the engine shushing behind me.

I haven't been that long and really no one has noticed that I'm gone. The car park has emptied out a bit, but my mum is talking in the hall with Mrs Hellier like nothing happened. I walk up to them deciding what I'm going to say. I'll probably be in



trouble but I come out with it:

‘The Angel of the North.’

There’s a moment’s silence before I add the address I remember: ‘25 Knighton Avenue.’

It’s Mrs. Hellier who comes to me first, but my mother beats her to it. ‘How long have you known?’

‘I don’t know, I mostly guessed. It’s an educated guess.’

‘I’ll get Mr. Hall on the phone,’ Hellier says, rushing to the Reception, desperate to be useful.

As people realise what’s happening, they soon leave. I overhear one of the parents complaining they felt tricked. The Well-wishers book disappears. Hellier scolds me when she comes back from the Reception.

‘If you had told us earlier, you would have saved everyone a lot of bother.’

For the first time, I realise I don’t particularly care what she thinks of me. I only care about Clare, kissing me in the barn during the lightning storm; making swans from tin; leaving Gabriel’s clothes outside the bathroom for me. It doesn’t matter what Hellier does to me, all that matters is that she is okay.

When I get home, there’s a postcard waiting on my mat for me. I grab it, immediately recognising her handwriting. There is a picture of a sheep on the front, standing against a pink and orange sunset. It says: ‘Just got here. Thought you might like this. Come and see me.’