



1987

*Jocelyn is disorientated when she wakes up and her mouth is sticky dry. It's light outside and she feels as if she's been asleep for a very long time. She studies the hands on her bedside clock and concludes that the time is exactly twenty-six minutes past eight. Usually, her nanny wakes her up at seven.*

*She yawns and blinks. Curvy, dancing giraffes cavort in pairs across her wallpaper and soft toys carpet the end of her bed. Hanging on the door of her armoire, where Nanny Hannah left it yesterday, is an empty padded clothes hanger. It's supposed to be for Jocelyn's special dress, the one her mother bought for her to greet their guests in, but the dress got ruined and now it's gone. Jocelyn feels guilty and sad about that, but also confused. She knows what happened was bad, but she can only remember little flashes from the evening and she pushes those out of her mind because they come with sharp feelings of shame.*

*Usually, Jocelyn's bedroom is one of her favourite places to be, but this morning it feels different, too quiet. The door of the armoire is ajar and she imagines a creature lurking inside it, with talons and long limbs that will snake out and grab her at any moment.*

*'Hannah!' she calls. There's a band of light underneath the door that separates her room from her nanny's, but no sign of the moving*

*shadows that usually tell her when Hannah is up. 'Hannah!' she tries again, stretching out the vowels. There's no answer.*

*She gets out of bed and runs the few paces across the room to Hannah's door, slamming shut the armoire as she passes by. The clothes hanger falls, the clatter it makes startling her. Jocelyn is supposed to knock and wait for Hannah to answer before she enters her nanny's bedroom, but she throws the door open.*

*She expects to see Hannah in bed, or sitting on her chair in the corner, wearing her red dressing gown and fluffy slippers, but Hannah isn't there. She expects to see a glass of water and a fat, dog-eared paperback on the bedside table. She expects to see Hannah's hairbrush and make-up, her two porcelain figurines of kittens. But there is no trace of Hannah or her belongings to be seen. The bed is neatly made, the candlewick bedspread smoothed out with hospital corners, the pillows are plump, the curtains are open and every surface is bare.*

*'Hannah!' Jocelyn shouts. It's not just the shock of the room's emptiness but also a sudden, terrible feeling of loss that makes her scream so piercing.*

*Marion Harris, the housekeeper at Lake Hall, pulls open every drawer and door in Hannah's room. Lining paper curls in the base of the drawers and empty metal hangers jangle in the wardrobe. She flips up the edges of the bedspread to peer under the bed and checks the bedside table. The girl is right, there is nothing of Hannah's to be seen. She marches down the corridor to the box room. 'She's taken her suitcases. I can't believe it.' The light cord swings in a wild trajectory.*

*'I told you,' Jocelyn whispers. Her chin wobbles. She's been holding out hope that Marion would be able to explain the situation or fix it. Marion huffs. 'It's so unlike her! She surely would have said something or left a note. She'd never have dumped us in it like this.'*

Church bells begin to chime. Marion casts an eye out of the window towards the top of the spire, just visible above the dense band of oak trees surrounding Lake Hall's grounds.

'Stay here and play,' she says. 'I'll fetch you a bit of breakfast then I'll speak to your mother and father.'

Jocelyn stays in her room until lunch. She works on a picture for Hannah, painstakingly selecting colours and being careful not to go over the lines. By the time Marion calls her down she's bursting to know what's happening, but Marion says, 'I don't know any more than you do. You'll have to ask your parents.' Her lips are set in a tight line.

Jocelyn finds her parents in the Blue Room with two friends who stayed the night. Newspapers and colour supplements are spread out all over the sofas and the coffee table. The fire is lit and the air in the room is thick with wood and cigarette smoke.

Jocelyn wants to attract her daddy's attention, but he's deep in his armchair, long legs crossed and face hidden behind his pink newspaper. Mother is lying on one of the sofas, her head resting on a pile of cushions, eyes half-shut. She's stubbing out a cigarette in the big marble ashtray balanced on her tummy. Jocelyn takes a deep breath. She's trying to work up the courage to speak. She doesn't want to attract her mother's attention if she can help it.

The lady friend turns from the window and notices Jocelyn in the doorway. 'Hello, there,' she says. Jocelyn thinks her name is Milla. Milla has brown hair backcombed to look big.

'Hello,' Jocelyn says. She tries to smile but blushes instead. She knows she was bad last night, but not if Milla knows.

Virginia Holt's attention is caught by her daughter's voice. 'What do you want?'

Jocelyn flinches and glances at her father. He's still behind his newspaper.

*'Hello!' her mother snaps. 'I'm talking to you; he isn't.'*

*Jocelyn swallows. 'Do you know where Hannah is?'*

*'She left.' Two words and Jocelyn feels as if the bottom has dropped out of her world. Hannah is her everything. Hannah cares. Hannah listens. Hannah has time to explain things to Jocelyn. Hannah loves Jocelyn. Hannah is better than Mother.*

*'No!'*

*'Don't stamp your foot at me, young lady. How dare you?'*

*'Hannah didn't leave! Where did she go?'*

*'Alexander!'*

*Lord Holt puts down his newspaper. He looks very tired. 'Mummy's right, darling. I'm sorry. We'll find you a new nanny as soon as possible. Mummy will make some calls after the weekend.'*

*Jocelyn screams and her mother gets to her feet instantly, the ashtray falling to the carpet, its contents scattering. Virginia grabs Jocelyn's arms and leans down so her face is only inches from Jocelyn's. Her eyes are horribly bloodshot. Her hair falls across her face. Jocelyn recoils but her mother's grip clamps her in place.*

*'Stop it this instant! Hannah left and you may as well know she left because of you. You are a bad girl, Jocelyn, a very bad girl. Is it any wonder Hannah couldn't stand to look after you any more?'*

*'But I'll be a good girl, I promise. I'll be the best girl if you get Hannah back.'*

*'It's too late for that.'*

## JO

The hotel tearoom has high ceilings and pastel walls. In a far corner, the plasterwork is in need of patching. Rain is falling so hard outside it seems to liquidise the window panes. The room is almost full, and humming with chatter. Crockery and cutlery chink. Live lite piano music and occasional laughter provide cheerful high notes. The room is warm but too large and formal to be cosy. I expect the glowing chandelier bulbs are reflected prettily in my eyes, but behind them, my state of mind can be summed up by that famous painting by Munch: *The Scream*.

However, I'm making a big effort, because it's Ruby's birthday. 'Salmon and cucumber, Jocelyn?' Mother says.

There's no point in reminding her yet again that I prefer to be called 'Jo' now. I must have told her a hundred times already since Ruby and I got here, and still she refuses to accept it. I wish she hadn't overdone the rouge today. Her cheeks are as pink as a picture-book piggy and her steel-grey hair is teased into a smooth quiff and fixed immovably under a velvet hairband.

Mother reserves the corner table in this tearoom every time she comes into town. It has the best view of the room. She tells

me the food has gone downhill since she brought me here when I was a child, which is, she says, a shame. I get the impression the only reason she comes now is because she enjoys talking down to the employees. I hated coming here with her when I was little, and I don't feel any different thirty years later.

'Thank you.' I take one of the limp white triangles and place it neatly in the middle of my plate.

'Ruby, darling?' Mother has launched an unexpected charm offensive. Her target is my ten-year-old daughter Ruby. They met for the first time a month ago and I thought they would be like oil and water.

My mother: a seventy-year-old relic of the English aristocracy, cold, old-fashioned, snobbish, selfish, greedy and fluent in the Queen's English.

Ruby: a kid who was born and has been raised in California, whip-smart, kind, an Internet gamer, ex-member of a girls' soccer team and lifelong tomboy.

I was so wrong about their compatibility. I have been the absolute centre of Ruby's world since her dad died, but I have acquired some serious competition from my mother now. A bond between them is forming right in front of my eyes. I feel as if my mother is manoeuvring herself, uninvited, into the void Chris left in my and Ruby's lives after his death, and I'm not even a tiny bit comfortable with it.

'Thank you, Granny.' Ruby treats my mother to a blinding smile and takes a sandwich from the four-tiered cake stand. It's the tallest in the room. On the menu it's described as 'Decadent Afternoon Tea'. My mother ordered it with relish although the cost per head is eye-watering. I think she's done it to shame me

for not making Ruby a birthday cake. I did buy one, but it was from the budget range at the supermarket. Needs must.

Ruby's eyes are bright with excitement and she's nibbling the edge of her sandwich in an affected way. I don't like it. Ruby is a gulp-it-down-so-you-can-run-back-outside sort of girl. Or she used to be. I have been amazed by the way she has thrown herself into English life since we arrived here. It's as if she's using all the new experiences to fill the gap her dad's death has left. I wonder how long the novelty of it will last, but for now at least, she fills her Instagram feed with photos of Lake Hall and the surrounding countryside, of curiosities and objects she finds in the house and the people who work there. Since we've been in the tearoom, she's already posted several close-ups of the cakes. She tags her pictures as if they're curiosities in a museum or props at a British theme park. 'Sooooo cute!' her California friends respond.

I guess I shouldn't fret about such harmless stuff. I should feel grateful she's coping at all, especially as today is special: not only is it the first birthday Ruby has had since her dad died, it's a milestone birthday.

'How does it feel to be ten?' Mother asks.

'Same as being nine.' Ruby speaks with her mouth full and automatically I brace myself to defend her if Mother tells her off, but she doesn't. She smiles, instead. 'You look very pretty in that cardigan,' she tells Ruby.

We arrived here after spending an arduous length of time in a department store where Mother bought Ruby two bags full of clothes and insisted Ruby take off her favourite hoody and wear her new red cardigan to the Swallow Hotel for her birthday tea.

'I love it,' Ruby says. 'It's so retro.'



‘What?’ Mother says and I wonder if she has become a little hard of hearing.

She’s aged remarkably well since I last saw her. The only obvious impairment the years have brought on is arthritis. Her knuckles are noticeably swollen on both hands. It is the only sign of physical weakness, of diminishment, I have ever noticed in my mother. I admit it makes me feel as if I have won a small victory, because when somebody has bullied you for your entire life, when you’ve felt driven to put an ocean between you and your upbringing to try to forget it, then you can’t help it. I’d be lying if I claimed I was above this petty brand of *schadenfreude*.

Ruby doesn’t repeat her comment because she’s distracted by figuring out how to use the strainer provided for pouring the loose-leaf Assam tea, which she and my mother ordered; they’re sharing a pot.

‘You’re almost a proper young lady now,’ Mother says. Her fingers aren’t so bent she can’t efficiently swipe a pistachio macaroon from the top tier of the cake stand.

‘La di dah,’ Ruby sings. Little finger extended, she sips her tea in a parody of gentility.

Again, I expect my mother to scorch Ruby with a reprimand, as she would have done to me, but she laughs, showing gums and long teeth. A macaroon crumb is stuck between her incisors. ‘La di dah,’ she repeats. ‘What a funny little thing you are.’ It’s her highest form of praise for a child.

‘Excuse me,’ I say.

In the tearoom bathroom, surrounded by suffocating chintzy wallpaper and chilled by a draught, I get my phone out. The last texts Chris and I exchanged were two and a half months ago. It was a beautiful California morning. He was at work. I was

standing in our light-filled kitchen watching a hummingbird at the feeder in our garden. The blur of its emerald wings was mesmerising.

Got you a present he texted.

Thank you! Exciting!!! What is it?

Wait and see ... Back by 7 xx

It was a small Japanese ceramic vase. It had a beautiful deep crackle glaze. I'd been longing to add it to my modest collection for ages. The vase survived the impact that took Chris's life. As he drove home, a delivery van ran a red light and smashed into the driver's side of Chris's car as he pulled out of a junction. The van driver was drunk. A police officer handed me the vase the next day along with Chris's messenger bag. 'It was in the passenger seat footwell,' she said. The vase was giftwrapped.

I scroll back through the texts Chris and I exchanged multiple times every day when he was alive. It's a compulsion I can't resist even though I shouldn't do it because it always hurts. If anybody else looked at the texts they might seem banal, but I can vividly reconstruct moments from our shared life when I read them. They allow me to imagine Chris is still alive. When I've finished looking through them I do what I always do. I send a message to his number saying *I love you so much*, and within seconds I get one back: *Unable to deliver*.

Sometimes my grief for him is so intense it feels as if I'm bleeding out. When that happens, I am seized by the fear that if I'm this broken, how can I possibly be the mother that Ruby needs me to be? And that thought leads inevitably to the next: If

I can't, does that leave room for my mother to try to take my place? The idea of it is unbearable.

'Would you like me to hang your things up for you?'

Anthea, my mother's housekeeper, has regularly asked me the same question since Ruby and I arrived at Lake Hall a few weeks ago. She is troubled by the fact that I'm still living out of a suitcase. My clothes are in a messy heap, half in the case and half all over the rug. She must think I'm a lazy slob. Normal me would have unpacked as soon as we arrived, but inertia has crept into my bones since Chris died.

*It's grief*, a friend advised me over email when I described how I felt. *Don't be too hard on yourself. Let yourself feel it.*

She was right, but I know it's denial, too. Unpacking would mean accepting the reality of my situation and admitting to myself that Ruby and I are stuck living here at Lake Hall for the foreseeable future, and I can't bear to do that. Not now. Not yet.

'No, thank you,' I tell Anthea. 'I'll do it later.'

'Will I do Ruby's?'

'No. I'll do hers, too.'

Anthea has a terrific poker face, but even so I sense her disapproval and her pity. Both wound my pride, because as soon as I could leave home, I did. I walked away from Lake Hall and my parents and I distanced myself from them as much as I could. I changed my name from Jocelyn to Jo and refused to accept a penny from them. It's why it hurts so much to be here now, dependent on my mother's charity.

I go downstairs to get out of Anthea's way. I had forgotten what it's like to have a housekeeper and, though I accepted it as

a child, I've found it deeply uncomfortable since we arrived here.

In the kitchen, there's an empty sherry bottle on the side, waiting to go out to the recycling bin. Mother and I got tipsy on sherry last night. I don't even like the stuff, but I was making an effort because the local priest dropped round unexpectedly to offer snippets of commonplace advice about grief as if they were rare pearls of wisdom.

Mother and I are both widows. My father died of a heart attack two months before my husband. It came out of the blue. He was only sixty-nine. I didn't return home for his funeral. I considered it, but I hadn't seen him for over a decade. His death blindsided me. I loved him very much. I didn't come back to bury him because I couldn't face being an extra at his funeral while Mother played leading lady and owned all the pain.

While the priest droned on last night, Mother refilled our glasses too often and I drank to alleviate the boredom. By the time he left, the sweet heat of the evening had been sent on its way by a breeze coming up off the lake and gusting through the open windows, and the sherry had loosened my tongue.

'Do you ever feel awkward about employing people in the house?' I asked Mother. My father's Labrador, Boudicca, shifted on the rug and stared at me. It's what she does if she hears a harsh tone of voice.

'The Holts have always employed people from the village. It's expected. Honestly, darling, you sound like a bloody communist.'

Her jibe needled me, as she intended. What I took away from the conversation was that the class bubble Mother lives in remains, in her mind at least, intact. I felt incredulous and disappointed. Most of all I felt an intense claustrophobia.

I'll never be able to change this place, but if we stay here long enough I'm afraid it will change my daughter and me.

Almost nothing inside Lake Hall has altered since I left. Accompanying Ruby while she explores drives this home. She has almost free rein, though I warn her off taking the steep back stairs up to the attic where the nursery rooms are. She races around the place, otherwise. Rare Chinese vases and elegant Hepplewhite chairs quiver in her slipstream.

I feel strangely spooked when I watch her run her fingers along the pitted stone walls or the yards of dark wood panelling or when she examines the antique objects strewn through the house like badly tended museum exhibits. Lake Hall feels stagnant and obsolete to me now, especially in the absence of my father. The walls seem to harbour a cold, uncomfortable energy, pervasive as damp. Sometimes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up unaccountably. I don't want Ruby to acquaint herself with every detail of this place, because this is not the backdrop I want her to grow up against.

The only things in the house that feel like old friends to me are the artworks. I didn't pay much attention to the Holt Collection of paintings and drawings when I was a child, but at university I took an option to study art history and was immediately hooked. As my interest grew, I began to understand and appreciate exactly what my family was custodian of. I studied hard in the hope of becoming a connoisseur like generations of Holts before me. It's about the only family trait I inherited that I'm not ashamed of.

As I wander around Lake Hall with Ruby happier memories sometimes pierce my darker feelings. They feel like respite. I remember when my nanny, Hannah, was my world and Lake Hall felt like our private, perfect domain. That sweet nostalgia never lasts long. The memories inevitably sour when I recall it was my behaviour that drove Hannah away and how in the aftermath my relationship with my mother took a downward spiral we haven't recovered from.

Even before Hannah left I avoided contact with Mother. When my parents were at Lake Hall – usually only at weekends – everything here felt different. I longed to spend time with my father but was so desperate to avoid Mother that I steered clear of the formal rooms they occupied, my heart thumping as I crept through corridors and up and down stairs from nursery to kitchen to garden: safe places where Hannah and I would be undisturbed.

Ruby knows very little of what my life was like then, and I hope she never has to.

As the honeymoon period of Ruby's love affair with England comes to an end, and the reality of Chris's death bites more with each day he's absent, Ruby withdraws into herself and begins to spend more time online.

I'm struggling, too. I'm afraid I'm losing Chris all over again as my memories of him threaten to fade with each passing day. And it's not just memories of what we did, I fear I'm losing his face.

It seems impossible. Chris and I met in London and fell in love when I was just twenty-two years old and he was twenty-four. It

was a coup de coeur. We moved in together almost immediately. Joining my life to his was the best decision I ever made. We became soulmates and best friends, we were inseparable, but there are times now when I panic because I can't precisely picture his features and I scroll frantically through my phone to revisit photographs so I can study them.

My memory isn't perfect, I know that, but some things should be sacrosanct. I want it to provide me with a perfect image of Chris forever; I shouldn't have to rely on my imagination to colour in the forgotten bits.

I get my favourite photograph of Chris, Ruby and me printed and framed: one copy for her room and one for mine. It helps a bit.

I try to distract Ruby from her absorption in her iPad. One night, when she won't even answer basic questions, I ask her to put it down and look at me.

'What's wrong, honey?'

'I just want to play.'

'You don't want to talk?'

A tight shake of her head.

'Are you sad?'

'A bit, but this helps.'

'Are you sure?'

She nods and I haven't got the heart to take the iPad from her. I can't deny that her closed expression is new, though, and I feel terrified she's starting to drift away from me.

After our talk, I message her with a penguin emoji, even though I'm sitting right beside her. It's a joke she and I and Chris shared: you get a 'well done' penguin if you've done a good job. Ruby's iPad pings when the penguin appears on her screen and she smiles. A few seconds later, she sends one back to me.

She pushes me away at times but at others she still needs me fiercely. We've slept together almost every night since Chris died. Most nights she starts off in her own bed but later creeps in with me. I always wake before her in the morning and the sight of her beautiful, innocent little face on the pillow beside mine cracks my heart. I love her so much. I can't bear to see her hurting. I can't bear to see her here.

I monitor her use of the iPad and her phone and decide that the elaborate online worlds she spends time in are not harmful. The gaming communities she joins are a form of company, at least, and contact with kids her own age. Mother notices the increased screen time and snipes at both of us about it. She believes it will 'rot Ruby's mind'.

When Ruby and I ignore her, Mother tries more actively to distract Ruby. She offers to show her how to prune the roses in the walled garden. Ruby says 'no' in a rude tone of voice. Her manners have slipped as her boredom increases. I don't correct her. Let my mother have a taste of her own medicine.

Mother offers to teach Ruby how to play bridge. They start well but Ruby loses interest quickly. 'She's too young,' I say and Mother says, 'Well, at least I'm trying.'

At lunch, Ruby asks, 'Can we sail a boat on the lake, Granny?'

'That's a good idea!' I'm thrilled there's something she's enthusiastic about.

'No. I'm afraid not,' Mother says. 'The boats aren't fit for purpose any longer. They're rotten and very dangerous. It would be like going out in a sieve. Do you remember the charming rhyme about that, Jocelyn?'

"'They went to sea in a sieve, they did/In a sieve they went to sea ...'" I dutifully quote. The lines come back to me instantly.



I remember every inflection of Hannah's voice as she read them aloud to me.

'You used to love that poem when you were a little girl,' Mother says.

'How would you know? You never read a book to me in my life!'

I didn't mean to raise my voice. Ruby stares at me and Mother blinks before she says, 'No. I suppose I didn't. Somebody must have told me.'

'Can't we fix the boats?' Ruby asks.

'I would love to if we can. Can we ask Geoff to open the boathouse?' It's been locked for as long as I can remember, certainly since I went to boarding school.

'Don't bother. Nobody is to go out on the lake,' Mother says, 'and that's a rule.'

Disappointment drags Ruby's expression down. Her chair scrapes sharply across the floor and she runs from the room.

'Don't run up the stairs!' I shout. I look at my food but I've lost my appetite. I'm furious with Mother for putting a damper on the idea. Mother, with pursed lips, hacks a slice of Cheddar cheese from a huge hunk, hardened at the edges. I wonder if I could afford to fix a boat or buy a second-hand one.

My financial situation is dire since Chris died because every penny we had was invested in his business and it will take time to get the money released. Chris and I rented the sweet little home we had in California and we had no life insurance. We also had an overdrawn current account. That wasn't the end of my troubles because my immigration status wasn't secure either and I was prohibited from staying on in the US after Chris's death.

When Chris died, Ruby and I were not just shorn of him but of every single other thing she had ever known.

I put my cutlery down. 'I'm going to see if she's alright,' I say. 'It's not good for children to have too much attention.'

My fingers clench into fists. 'Don't ever tell me how to raise my daughter.'

'In my home, I'll do and say whatever I want.'

I felt it was too late in the year to enrol Ruby at school when we first arrived back in the UK. There were only a couple of weeks of term left and I wanted to give her time and space both to grieve and to settle in. To make sure she doesn't get too much of a shock when school starts in September, I contact them and arrange for her to spend a day there in the last week of their summer term. I hope she'll meet somebody she likes, someone we can arrange play dates with during the summer holidays. Ruby needs friends and she needs fun. Most importantly, she needs somebody her own age to dilute Mother and me.

The teacher is waiting for Ruby at the school gate. A warm breeze whips her hair around her face and makes her voluminous shirt balloon. I'm horrified to hear Mother's voice in my head: *shapeless*. I think she looks lovely.

'You must be Ruby? I'm Mrs Armstrong. Welcome to Downsley Primary School. We're all so excited you'll be joining us next year.'

Ruby manages a half-smile and I'm proud of her because I know how nervous she is.

Back at Lake Hall it feels strange strange to be without her, as if I've lost a piece of myself, or my armour. She has been a Velcro

child since Chris's death and I feel as if I haven't had time to experience a single thing alone, or process any of my own emotions.

I know precisely what I want to do, even though the thought of it fills me with nerves. I can't help it, I feel drawn to do it in the same unhealthy way you can't look away from a car accident. Some urges are impossible to resist.

I climb the main staircase to the first floor, where its threadbare crimson carpet bleeds onto a wide landing overlooked by a stained-glass window.

To get to the attic floor you take the back stairs, the original servants' stairs, which go all the way from the bottom to the top of the house. I access them at the far end of the landing. The narrow treads are stone, worn shiny from centuries of footfall. The hand rope is saggy and not securely fixed onto the wall. I climb carefully, holding on gingerly. I have never liked these stairs.

At the top, I flick a light switch and three out of the four ceiling bulbs illuminate weakly along the length of the low-ceilinged corridor. The light shades are stained and crooked. The doors to the nursery suite, where Hannah and I had adjoining bedrooms, are halfway down the corridor. The door handle to my old room has a smooth familiarity as I turn it. My old bed and armoire are covered in dustsheets, but the dancing giraffes on the wallpaper are brighter than you might expect after all these years, and somehow they don't look quite as I remember them.

I moved out of this room after Hannah left. I didn't want to be up here alone without her, and anyway, Mother insisted I take a room downstairs. It was one of the rare times we have been in agreement.

I open the door to Hannah's bedroom. In here, the furniture is also covered in dustsheets and moth-eaten blankets, but the curtains are closed. Floorboards creak as I cross the room, and dust snowflakes tumble from the rail when I move the curtains, making me cough. As light fills the room, it's clear there's nothing to see apart from the same horrible emptiness I discovered on the morning Hannah left.

I feel bereft all over again. I shouldn't have come up here. It brings back too much, none of it happy. I was hoping to reconnect with the gorgeous, warm feelings I had for Hannah when I was a child and the positive memories: all the wonderful times we did things together, the way she made me feel safe and loved, the absolute devotion I had for her. Instead, I feel nothing but the same coruscating hurt and confusion that assaulted me on the morning I first found her room empty.

I want to get out of here. I move to re-close the curtains, but as I do I notice something: this room has a view into my father's study. I never knew that before. I guess I wasn't tall enough to notice when I was little, because the sill is high and I wouldn't have been able to see out at the right angle. I wonder if he knew he could be observed in his sanctum. The thought makes me feel uneasy.

I arrive late to collect Ruby from school because I misread the email her teacher sent. By the time I get there I've missed the opportunity to meet any of the other parents. Ruby is waiting with her teacher on a bench on the playground, head down and kicking. The soles of her shoes scuff the tarmac. My heart sinks but I try to sound bright: 'How did it go?'

‘Ruby was brilliant,’ the teacher says. ‘Hasn’t she got beautiful handwriting?’

In the car, Ruby says, ‘They said I sounded stupid because of my accent and they said I was stuck up because I live in Lake Hall. They hate me!’

I could murder the kids who spoke to her so cruelly. I should reassure her, tell her everything will be OK. Instead, shamefully, I begin to weep uncontrollably and Ruby looks scared. She tells me it wasn’t that bad really because the teacher was nice and they have a class hamster and a cool system for looking after him where people take it in turns to bring him home. She says she thinks it’ll be OK. I pull myself together and apologise and tell her how brilliant she is and how everything will be fine, and feel like the worst mother in the world.

‘Please don’t tell Granny you didn’t like school,’ I say as we park at Lake Hall.

I’m afraid my mother will try to take over Ruby’s schooling and get her into the local private school I went to and hated. It prides itself on preparing children to go to boarding school. I’m afraid Mother will try to shape Ruby the way she tried to shape me. She will train my daughter for a life of snobbery and privilege and it will involve crushing Ruby’s spirit until she learns to repress every single raw and healthy emotion she ever felt.

I will not let that happen.

In an effort to help her with friendships I dip into my dwindling pot of cash and enrol Ruby on a tennis course. While she’s out I seek the help of mother’s gardener, Geoff.

‘What does your mother say?’ he asks when I tell him I want to get into the boathouse. He’s tending the geraniums in the glasshouse. Their smell has a velvety intensity.

‘She wants Ruby to be happy and I think this would be a lovely surprise.’

‘Haven’t seen Ruby smile for a while.’

‘Exactly.’ His expression tells me he knows I’m being economical with the truth about Mother, but he agrees to help.

‘Don’t fancy our chances of finding the key to the padlock, though,’ he says.

He’s right. He has to bust open the lock in the end. We do it while Mother is out at a bridge game.

Inside, the boathouse is dark and matted with cobwebs, though the decking floor feels sound. We find a small wooden rowing boat but it’s rotten and half-submerged. The name on its prow is crudely hand-painted: *Virginia*. I have a sudden memory of my father painting it on a hot afternoon.

‘She’s had her day,’ Geoff said.

‘Can we do anything?’

‘No. But if you want to get Ruby out on the water I can lend you my brother’s kayak. It’s been in my garage for years.’

I feel my excitement rise. Chris, Ruby and I went on a kayak trip in California. It was one of the best holidays we had.

Geoff and I work together, behind Mother’s back, for the next couple of days. Once everything is ready I can’t stop smiling as I collect Ruby from tennis. When we arrive home I beckon her to follow me around the side of the house.

‘What are we doing?’ she asks.

‘It’s a surprise.’

I take her hand and lead her to the boathouse.

‘Help me,’ I say and she puts her whole weight into pulling open the doors. She’s tense with excitement.

Geoff and I have removed the broken rowing boat and replaced it with the inflated kayak. Paddles, two life jackets and all the other kit we’ll need lie on the decking beside it.

‘Wow!’ Ruby says. ‘Can we do it now?’

We get kitted up and cast off. The surface of the lake is glassy and we float smoothly out onto the lake.

‘I want to go to the island!’ Ruby shouts from the front. She has a lovely paddling technique her dad taught her and I’m happy to sit behind her and let her take the lead. It feels, for the first time since Chris died, as if we’re doing something together that we can truly enjoy without thoughts of what we’ve lost or where we might end up. Our paddles slice the water easily and we move swiftly towards the island, which is small and circular and crowned by a lone tree.

‘Can I go on it?’ Ruby shouts as the nose of the kayak nudges the island’s shore. She starts to clamber out and I hold the kayak steady against the bank. Tree roots delve into the water, tangled with flotsam and other debris. ‘Careful,’ I say but she’s too hasty and her foot slips. I lunge for her and catch her by the back of her life jacket before she loses her balance. The kayak rocks but doesn’t tip.

‘I’m stuck,’ she says. Her foot is tangled in the roots just below the surface of the water.

‘Hold on!’ I say. ‘Hold the edge!’

She clings on as I climb out of the kayak and onto the spongy edge of the island shore.

‘Pull your foot up gently,’ I say.

She tries but it’s well and truly stuck. Her chin wobbles.

‘It’s OK. Don’t panic. Just stay really still.’

The lake isn’t clear enough for me to be able to see Ruby’s foot so I sink my hand into the water and run it down her leg until I can feel where her foot is stuck. The tree roots are tangled like spaghetti down there but I manage to dislodge some sticks and an object that’s wedged above her ankle.

‘There!’ I say as she pulls her leg up and I help her onto shore. ‘Well done. You were so brave!’

She gives me as tight a hug as you can when you’re both wearing life jackets and we sit side by side on the shore of the island, facing Lake Hall.

‘I don’t think this view has changed for hundreds of years,’ I say.

‘What’s that?’ Ruby gets up to examine an object being gently tossed against the shore by the lapping water. It’s about the right size and shape to be the thing I dislodged to free her foot. She picks it up and as she turns to show it to me, I freeze.

‘It’s really weird,’ she says. She can’t see what it is, yet, but I can.

‘Ruby, put it down! Now!’

She catches the fear in my tone and drops the object as if it were scalding her hands.

It lands at her feet with a moist thump. It’s a human skull. The deep orifices where its eyes and nose would have been gaze blackly at me. Even though it’s dirty I can clearly see fracture lines tracking across the dome of the skull like ancient pathways through a landscape.

Ruby peers at it.

‘It’s a skull!’ she says. ‘Oh my gosh. That’s so cool. I wish I had my phone so I could take a picture!’



She crouches down to take a closer look at it.

'It's broken on the top,' she says.

'Don't touch it!'

'I'm not! But can you see it's broken?'

*That's not just broken, I think. Whoever this is, they almost certainly didn't die naturally.* I feel a cold, visceral fear. I want to get as far away from it as possible.

'Do you think it's, like, from history times?' Ruby asks.

'I don't know, Rubes. Most likely it is. Step away from it.'

'Why?'

'Because we have to report this to the police.'

'No. Way.'

I nod. 'It's human remains. That's what you have to do. Come on. Step away. Let's go now. We'll leave it where it is.'

'Can't we take it with us?'

'No!' I don't mean to snap at her but I can hardly bear to look at it. The fractured skull is a horrific thing, tangible proof of a dark current running from past to present.

Ruby sits behind me in the kayak on the way back to shore and forgets to paddle because she keeps looking back over her shoulder, even when we're too far away to make out the shape of the skull any longer. I chivy her to pick up the pace. I want distance between us, and the island. When we reach the shore, she jumps out, discards her life jacket and sets off across the lawn.

'Hey!' I call after her. 'Where are you going?'

She stops and turns. Excitement lights up her face.

'To tell Granny what we found!'

I shudder involuntarily as I watch her go.

1976

**HELP REQUIRED.**

**Four hours per day for busy family household.  
Cleaning, ironing, other household tasks as required.**

*The advert itself didn't stand out much from the others pinned around it on the bulletin board in the newsagent. The difference was that Linda saw the person who pinned it there. He was a man who she guessed to be in his thirties. Quite old, she thought, but not too old. He wore a beautiful suit, quality shiny shoes and his thick hair was neatly cut around his ears, showing off a lovely profile.*

*Linda lurked behind the humming refrigerator until he was gone, pretending to consider the latest issue of Jackie, even though she couldn't afford to buy it. She watched him take the notice out of his inside jacket pocket – a thrillingly intimate place – and unfold it. He took his time to find a good spot for it before placing a pin carefully in each of the four corners, making sure it wasn't crooked. She fell a little bit in love with him.*

*She watched as he picked up his briefcase, chose and paid for a packet of cigarettes (Benson & Hedges, no tips – she considered them a*

*gentleman's choice) and left the shop with the bells on the door jangling in his wake. Then she approached the bulletin board and read the advert. The job was just the sort of thing she was looking for. When the shopkeeper wasn't looking, she unpinned the advert and slipped it into her pocket.*

*Linda started work a week later. An advance on her wages enabled her to rent a tiny bedsitting room in a red-brick terrace in Chapeltown in Leeds. She shared with another girl to save money. Her roommate had run away, too. Her name was Jean.*

*Jean worked in Woolworths and brought home stolen make-up and magazines. They got on well from the first moment.*

*Linda could walk to work from her lodging, passing from her own neighbourhood where the only greenery was dandelions growing through cracks in the pavement, into better areas, where cultivated hedges and shrubs marked property boundaries, and on further still, into his neighbourhood, where fine specimen trees, heavy with scented blossom or bright green buds, bordered wide avenues.*

*His house was a handsome, detached property, tall and wide. It suited him, she thought. It was the sort of place he should live. A Silver Cross pram nestled in a corner of the porch and a black Ford Granada was parked under a carport. She imagined what it would be like to push the pram or to ride in the car.*

*Whenever she arrived at work, she thought of where she'd come from originally: the tiny cottage on the moors where her filthy siblings ran riot underfoot; the bruises on her late mother's face after her dad spent his pay cheque at the pub; the way her father loved his racing pigeons more than any of them; the manner in which he took the birds out of their cages as if they were precious objects, cradling them and*

*stroking their heads with a filthy finger, making kissing noises that seemed to mesmerise them.*

*Linda wrung the neck of his favourite bird before she left home, slung its body onto the floor of the shed. 'Let's see how much he likes you now,' she said to the limp carcass.*

*The work was easy enough if you didn't mind getting your hands dirty, and Linda didn't. It was all she'd ever known apart from desultory, disengaged hours she'd spent in overcrowded classrooms. In the man's house, she scrubbed bathrooms and floors and dusted and polished surfaces and banisters and ornaments just the way his wife told her to. She was a clever girl and a quick learner. The wife increased her hours some days.*

*He was hardly ever there, which was disappointing. She studied photographs of him that were around the house, and fingered the objects on his desk, but the next time she saw him in person was the summer holidays. He wore shorts and a T-shirt. His hair looked sun-bleached. He backed the car out of the carport onto the drive and washed it while Test Match commentary played on the radio. She decided to learn the rules of cricket.*

*Linda was never jealous of his wife because she thought the woman was spineless: too old for him and incompetent. The wife bought clothes that never looked right on her; she tried to make a black forest gâteau one day and wept when the tiers slid, one off the next, into a creamy, red-streaked mess. The wife didn't care much for their children, either – twins, one of each – but he seemed devoted to them on the rare occasions he was home.*

*One afternoon that summer he lay on the carpet and played with them, tickling them, making watery popping noises like a cartoon fish,*

*laughing when they laughed. They curled their bodies towards him, their little fingers clutched at their little toes, and he blew raspberries on their tummies until the babies' nanny, whom everybody called Nanny Hughes, cleared her throat and said it was nap time. Linda tried not to stare, but the father with the babies was such a lovely sight. It thrilled her. She told Jean everything about him.*

*'Isn't he a bit old for you?' Jean said. She and Jean had begun to share clothes and secrets and to go out together on Saturday night. Jean was dating the boy who worked in the ticket booth at the cinema. He couldn't smoke without coughing.*

*'He's just right,' Linda replied.*

*'I'd take his money,' Jean said. 'But you can have his horrible old body.' Their landlady said Jean had a 'dirty laugh' and she needed to 'learn to keep it down'.*

*When she was at work, Linda watched Nanny Hughes closely, and felt twitchy with envy. Nanny Hughes wore a uniform, which sometimes included a hat and white gloves, because she was a Norland nanny. She had trained for three years at the prestigious Norland College and graduated the previous summer. Nanny Hughes enjoyed telling anybody who would listen that one of the girls who recently left the College was working for a member of the royal family and that she herself had hopes of a similar position once she'd gained some experience. Nanny Hughes never raised her voice and had won a prize for her excellent posture.*

*Linda watched and listened very carefully, taking note of everything, but especially the way Nanny Hughes spoke to the babies, the way the babies gazed adoringly back, and clung to their nanny when the wife held out her arms to take them. When Linda emptied her buckets of filthy water out in the drain at the side of the house, she sometimes lingered to watch Nanny Hughes pushing the big pram up the driveway*

*with shoulders back and confident steps. Linda was interested in power, and she recognised that, in this family, Nanny Hughes had it in spades because the man loved the children and the children loved their nanny. When Nanny Hughes was out of the room, Linda mimicked her. Soon the babies grew to love Linda too.*

## VIRGINIA

The advantage of sitting in the front row pew in church is that nobody can see you cry.

*But what about the vicar? you might ask. Surely he surveys his flock as he preaches and, like his predecessors for centuries, pays particular attention to the reception his words are getting in the Holt family pew? Chantry roofs don't repair themselves, after all.*

You're right, of course. The vicar does peer at me frequently, but I happen to know our current representative of God is extremely short-sighted, too cowardly to try contact lenses and too vain to wear spectacles. I could replace my nose with a carrot and he would still press my hands between his and tell me I was the very picture of elegance. A tear shed during his sermon will certainly go unnoticed by him and I shall not draw anybody else's attention to it by wiping it away.

I should be at a bridge game, but I wasn't in the mood and came here instead. Once a month there is an early evening communion service and I'm seeking refuge here since I need a reprieve from being in my own home. I am sitting alone as I have done in church since Alexander died. The empty seat

beside me belonged to my late husband and all of the Lord Holts who came before him. My Alexander didn't attend church regularly because it bored him – he preferred to walk the dogs – but it is his seat nevertheless and it would be presumptuous of anybody from the village to take it.

The tear tracking down my cheek feels as viscous as a snail trail. My shoulders, back and buttocks ache but I force myself to maintain good posture. A widow in my position must be careful if she is to retain the authority she previously held as half of a couple. My hands are gloved and folded neatly on my lap. I tune out of the sermon and stare at my interlinked fingers. My gloves are made from the softest, scarlet calf leather. They were a gift from Alexander and are a devil to put on over my arthritic joints, but too beautiful not to wear. I wish I could slip off one of my gloves and reach for his hand, as I used to. I imagine feeling once again the warmth, contours and textures of his palm, his fingers.

Widowhood is lonely and the responsibility of being the sole representative of this family is a heavy one. My daughter, Jocelyn, thinks I feel nothing but she is wrong.

Behind me the pews are sparsely filled, though not as sparsely as you might suppose. Tradition runs strong through the veins of many people who live in this area and attendance at this small church, built hundreds of years ago by our family, is a part of that. The Holts and other local families have lived cheek by jowl for centuries and know each other well. We have been mutually dependent, at times, in the old circle of employer and employee. As far as attitudes towards us go, there are both sycophants and haters amongst this congregation and the residents of our local village.



To some, the Holt family is an essential part of the landscape here, as unchanging and important as the ancient cluster of trees in the dip on Downsley Hill. Some consider that to lose the Holt family from these parts would be to lose some essence of this landscape, this land even. To others, we are entitled, exploitative and undeserving of our status and our financial fortune. We deserve to be taken down a peg or two, or three. The worst of these people used to line the lanes and hold placards if we hosted a fox hunt. 'Fascists,' they chanted, or 'Hunt Scum!' or worse.

'Let us pray,' the vicar says. Behind me they lower themselves onto their knees; I hear the muted groans that elderly joints can tease from the mouths of even the most faithful. I bow my head. If I go down I will not come up again without help. My kneeler hangs uselessly in front of me. A woman from the village has made a tapestry cover for it: the Holt coat of arms. It's rather botched but of course I appreciate the effort.

I close my eyes but not before another tear has escaped. If anybody behind me was to notice, they would probably assume I'm grieving for Alexander, but they would be wrong, because it's my daughter who has brought me to tears.

When I agreed to Jocelyn and Ruby moving in, I had a fantasy that Jocelyn and I might, for the first time in our lives, get along with each other, or at the very least offer each other some comfort and support in widowhood. It turned out to be nothing more than wishful thinking. Jocelyn has missed no opportunity to make it crystal clear that she is only back at Lake Hall only because she has nowhere else to go. Any port in a storm, as they say. It fills me with sadness, though I know better than to let her see that. To do so would risk her contempt.

The final prayers seem to go on forever as the vicar mentions every unfortunate you can imagine and describes their physical ailments in excruciating detail. *What about the invisible afflictions?* I think. *How many people are suffering in this church at this very moment?* I know I am.

To have a child whom you love, but who does not love you back, is a particularly intense and unrelenting source of pain. Jocelyn has never loved me, not even when she was a very little girl, not even when she was a baby. In that situation, it can only be the fault of the parent, but I have never worked out what I did wrong.

But – and this is an important ‘but’ – there is a silver lining and her name is Ruby.

Ruby is a true gem, an absolutely darling girl, full of whimsy and confidence and potential. She sparkles. When Jocelyn first bothered to let us know she’d had a daughter, I hated Ruby’s name. I thought it sounded very common, but I’ve changed my mind since meeting her. Now, I believe it’s just the right name for a girl like her. I have so many hopes and dreams for Ruby, if only Jocelyn will allow me to get close to her.

I join in with the ‘Amen’ at the end of the Lord’s Prayer and open my eyes. I tilt my head back, stretching out my sluggish muscles. I think my tears have dried well enough to permit me to safely face even the most sharp-eyed congregation members.

Boudicca, Alexander’s Labrador, is asleep on a blanket on the back seat of the Land Rover. Alexander brought her to church with him on the rare occasions he came, so I keep up the tradition. Like me, the dog misses him.

The car windows are open and I keep them that way as I drive home. I enjoy being buffeted by the warm evening air. The

Land Rover gears crunch as usual when I make the turn between the gateposts and glimpse Lake Hall at the end of our drive. The acid green leaves on the beech trees form a lush canopy overhead and are attractively sun-dappled, even this late in the evening. The sight of them lifts the heart in summer, though in winter I feel the branches resemble the bare bones of a leviathan.

Boudicca stirs on the back seat as I try to negotiate the potholes on the drive without jarring us both too severely. I expect she and I have the same thing in mind: we are wondering what Anthea has left for supper.

What neither of us expects to see is a police car in the drive.