

# Every *Secret* Thing

Rachel Crowther trained as a doctor and worked in the NHS for twenty years, writing fiction on the side between babies and medical exams until her first novel was published after winning a competition. She has five children, two mad dogs and a kitten, and is also a keen musician and cook. This is her third novel.

Also by Rachel Crowther

*The Things You Do For Love*  
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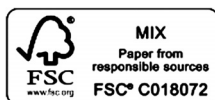
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*For my friends in Clare College chapel choir, 1983–86*

*For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every  
secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.*

**Ecclesiastes 12:14**



# Prologue

## Cumbria, September 2015

It was almost dusk when the taxi reached the top of the pass and Nag's Pike came into view. Judith had forgotten the drama of it: the way it cleaved the horizon with the sharp double peak of its pricked ears, asserting its dominance over the gentler curves of the surrounding fells. She hadn't, of course, forgotten the part it had played in their own drama all those years ago, but as it rose up now, dark against the silvered sky, the details came rushing back.

On the evening they'd arrived, in the summer of 1995, Fay had named the peaks that circled them as they gazed from the terrace, wonderstruck by the view. Place Fell, Fairfield, Helvellyn – and Nag's Pike, rearing its uncanny horse's head centre stage. She'd recounted the legend of its creation, pointing out the features local tradition conferred on it: the shaggy mane of woodland running down the straight slope of its neck, and the broad saddleback plain below. That was the way up, Fay had told them. They hadn't imagined, then, that they'd find themselves climbing Nag's Pike a few days later. Certainly there had been no whiff of foreboding about the consequences of that expedition.

The five of them had been invited to High Scarp that summer to sing in the village music festival – a perfect coda to their three years together in Cambridge, singing in the chapel choir, and to the extraordinary closeness of their friendship with each other and with Fay. The weekend had been filled with rituals which they'd found charmingly quaint, Judith remembered. The National Anthem in the solid little church; the games of charades and consequences by the fire; the fond way Fay spoke of the traditions of the place. If Fay had been a little different that weekend at High Scarp, they had all been





RACHEL CROWTHER

too preoccupied to wonder much about it. And if there had been a quiver of disquiet before the Nag's Pike outing, it had been because of the way Fay had insisted on it, as though she expected dissent. As though, Judith thought now, she'd known the expedition would change things irrevocably, and feared they had an inkling of it too.

But that wasn't possible, she told herself, as the taxi dropped down into the valley. Fay couldn't have foretold how much would be exposed that day, even if she'd known more about them all than they realised. Even so, as the turning to High Scarp appeared at last, she couldn't help wondering if there had been some malevolence in it all. In Fay's invitation twenty years ago, and in the posthumous summons they were answering now.







## Cambridge, October 1992

The entrance to the chapel was tucked away in the corner of First Court, easy to miss if you didn't know it was there. Crossing the square of grass and cobbles, already familiar after three days at St Anne's, Judith felt a twinge of doubt. Not so much about the religion as the belonging, she thought. That was complicated: whether she wanted to belong, and what to. She loved singing, she wanted to sing, but she could tell from the way people talked about it that there was more to this choir than that.

While she hesitated, two people came across the courtyard from the other corner – a tall, spindly looking boy with dark hair smoothed flat and a blonde girl of the kind there'd been lots of at Judith's school.

'No!' she heard the girl say. 'You must, of course. Nothing ventured . . .'

At that moment she glanced in Judith's direction and smiled, a more straightforward smile than Judith expected, and Judith found herself smiling back. Nothing ventured: well.

The Director of Music was waiting just inside the chapel. Lawrence; not Dr Watts.

'Welcome!' he said. 'Judith – Cressida – Stephen. The others will be along, I'm sure.'

It was still light outside, but the chapel was filled with a muted, dust-moted stillness that seemed to set it apart from the day, from the warm stone of the courtyard and the world beyond. The floor stretched away in a pattern of black and white tiles, flanked by oak panelling, towards the choir stalls facing each other at the far end, and the air was thick with smells Judith recognised from other occasions when she'd been in a church. Wax candles, old hymn books. A hint of lilies, perhaps.

'You're joining a wonderful group of people,' Lawrence was saying. 'And we're very lucky, of course, with the organ.' He glanced up towards





the organ loft as he spoke, and his last words were caught by the acoustic, echoing back from the gilded ceiling. The building, Judith thought, was flaunting itself. Doubt surged again, more sickly than before.

'Lucky with the architect, too,' said Cressida. 'Adam at his best. A late gem.'

She might have said more, Judith thought, but just then the door opened to admit a squarely built, red-haired boy wearing a No Fear T-shirt and faded jeans.

'Hello,' he said. 'Am I last?'

'Not quite,' said Lawrence, as the boy shook his hand. 'Do you know . . .?'

'I've met Cressida,' he said. 'But we haven't . . . I'm Bill.'

'Stephen,' said the tall boy. 'I'm a late recruit.'

'And . . .' Bill turned towards Judith, and then he paused, the momentum of his arrival halted for the first time. The sickness in Judith's stomach curdled, twisting into something both familiar and entirely unrecognisable. Bill was smiling at her, a wide grin that seemed to take in the whole group, the whole occasion, and at the same time to be directed exclusively at her. He was so full of geniality as to be almost hateful, she thought, one of those cocksure musicians who don't even realise they're . . . but there was another feeling rising inside her too, altering the light.

'I'm Judith,' she said. 'Hello.'

'It's very nice to meet you.' Bill hesitated for a moment, appraising her, and Judith was grateful she'd got the words out before they dried in her chest. 'Are you -' he began: but then someone else was bursting through the door.

'Ah!' said Lawrence. 'Marmion, welcome!'

'Sorry.' The girl called Marmion grinned apologetically, clattering towards them across the marble floor. Judith recognised her: she was the kind of person who stood out in a crowd without meaning to, her face beaming in the centre of the Fresher's photo, carrying across the





EVERY SECRET THING

bar above the beer and the shouting. 'I'm so sorry. I was with my tutor. I lost track of the time.'

'Never mind,' said Lawrence. 'You're here now.'

As he made the next round of introductions, Judith looked back at Bill, with a tiny dart of anticipation about meeting his gaze again. But his smile had moved on to Marmion: not the same kind of smile, not at all, but even so Judith felt a shock of betrayal. Ludicrous, she told herself. Ludicrous. When Lawrence gestured them towards the choir stalls, she hesitated before following Bill and Marmion. Two wholesome people, she thought, chattering away in the way people who have things in common do; people who recognise themselves as part of the same tribe.

But after a few yards, Bill glanced back.

'Judith,' he said, 'Marmion says you play the flute.'

'Your room's above mine,' Marmion said. 'I heard you playing last night. *Syrinx*, I think. Was it *Syrinx*?'

'Possibly,' Judith forced a smile, avoiding Bill's eyes.

'I do too,' Bill said. 'We could play duets.'

'Possibly,' Judith said again. 'My flute needs a service, though. The keys are sticking.'

Bill looked at her for a moment, one eyebrow lifting almost imperceptibly, and Judith felt a flush filling her cheeks. Shit: what was she doing? What could she possibly want with someone like Bill – or with the chapel choir? Perhaps she should cut and run. There was so much else on offer in Cambridge; so many people.

But the others were in the choir stalls now, and Judith found herself following. Her arm brushed against Bill's as she took her place, and she was absurdly conscious of it, of the prickle of excitement that seemed to fast-circuit from her skin to her belly. She kept her eyes on the folder of music in front of her, the fall of light from the tall windows that straked the floor with bright narrow lines.

'Ah, good!' Lawrence said, as the door opened once again. 'Ladies and gentlemen, can I introduce Deep Patel, our organ scholar?'



Patel, Judith thought. So she wasn't the only . . . but she hated herself for the thought. That wasn't her tribe either. She didn't have a tribe. Deep looked nice, though, slight and shy and quick-gestured. He darted up the chapel to say hello, then whisked away towards the organ loft. After a moment they heard the faint wheeze of air in the pipes, then a declamatory arpeggio.

'Let's start with a hymn,' Lawrence said. 'Number 137, please.'

And then Deep was playing the introduction, and they were all singing, and the sudden shock of the sound made every hair on Judith's body stand on end. Only five of them, but they filled the chapel, flaunting themselves back to that big-hearted acoustic. Beside her, Bill's rich tenor soared up to the high notes, and she revelled in the pleasure of it: the chaste, suggestive pleasure of singing together.

This was something worth having, she thought. This was something she could do. Perhaps she wouldn't run away just yet. But, she promised herself, she would resist whatever it was that Bill kindled in her. Plenty of fish in the sea, as her father would say: why choose one who disconcerted her so much? Why deny herself the delicious, tantalising diversion of pretending she didn't care?

# Part I

**June 1995**

## **Marmion**

From the bath, Marmion could see the fells through the window, dazzlingly vivid in the sunlight. They looked grander than they had last night, when they'd all surveyed the view for the first time in the soft haze of dusk – although that had been a magical moment, standing together on the terrace after their long, long journey and gazing out at the valley, not being quite sure what was empty space and what solid rock, or whether the glints of silver were stars poised above the tops or moonlight caught in the tumble of a waterfall. An enchanted landscape, she'd thought then: the kind where dragons might lurk. Where anything might happen in the fold of a hill or the tangle of a thorn bush.

Closing her eyes, she let her mind fill with the joy of the moment. The shapes and colours of the fells beneath the placid blue of the sky, and nearer at hand the smell of frying bacon mingling with the astringent scent of Fay's bath salts; the plain white tiles, soft with steam, and the voices of the others in the kitchen. Even the chipped edges of the old-fashioned bath and the whale song of the pipes, which you could hear when you ducked your head underwater, as though the house had a language of its own and would share its secrets if you knew how to listen.

It all represented, she thought, both the pleasure of this particular day and the more nebulous and enchanting possibilities that lay beyond it. In this wide landscape she could see the world opening its arms, the breathtaking sweep of adulthood laid before them. Wriggling her toes in the warm water (not much of it: High Scarp's plumbing arrangements were not among its chief strengths), Marmion felt a wash of gratitude to Fay, who had already done so much for them all, and had now laid this new gift at their feet.



The invitation had first been mentioned several months ago, when life beyond Finals had seemed impossibly distant. The timing was perfect, Fay had said, since the little music festival in Griseley fell between May Week and graduation, and a few days away from Cambridge would be just what they all needed by then. Marmion didn't remember it being mentioned again, but two weeks ago Fay had produced a programme for the festival, and there had been, then, a little jolt of guilt because they'd almost forgotten about it in their preoccupation with exams and celebrations.

When it came to it, none of them had been as keen to leave Cambridge as Fay had predicted, and the journey had seemed endless – almost a whole day, driving up the A1 and across the A66, the five of them and Fay crammed into her old Volvo with their luggage, and Marmion, for one, feeling too sick to enjoy the views as the flat plains of Lincolnshire gave way to Yorkshire and the Dales. But there had been an irresistible drama to the final approach, the fells looming up on either side, the trailing lines of dry-stone walls, the glimpses of lakes and tarns and then the final steep climb to High Scarp – which was, as its name suggested, built on the side of a mountain – a fell, rather – above the village of Griseley and the shores of Ullswater, in a wilderness of gorse and sheep and soaring heights.

None of them had been to the Lake District before, and as they stood on the terrace yesterday evening it had felt like a revelation. They'd shared in a smug kind of pleasure, Marmion thought, as if this was a reward they had earned: not just by enduring the car journey, by surviving all those exams, but by honouring the friendship Fay had offered them. But she felt a dart of conscience, now, as she gripped the curved enamel rim and heaved herself out of the bath. This was a blessing bestowed rather than merited, she told herself firmly. She mustn't take the delights in store for granted.

The towels were plentiful, but of the flimsy, well-washed variety, and not quite big enough for any combination of them to cover her





## EVERY SECRET THING

properly. As she rubbed her hair, she caught sight of herself in the long, thin mirror on the back of the door. Designed for Fay, she thought. Marmion was almost as tall as Fay, but differently constructed: no sparing of materials, her father used to say when she was a little girl. For a moment she stared at her reflection, the collage of pink flesh and white towel undeniably erotic, with tendrils of hair falling damply over her shoulders. It wasn't Quakerly, she knew, to admire herself, but surely it was a good thing to be happy with the form she'd been blessed with: to be happier with it than she'd been as a teenager. She had Bill to thank for that. Smiling, she rearranged the towels around her hips and emerged into the corridor.

As she passed the kitchen, she could hear a babble of good-humoured banter. It showed how well they knew each other, Marmion thought, that she could tell through a closed door not only who was speaking, but what the expressions on their faces were, and indeed – within a whisker – what they were going to say next. Their catchphrases, at least: Bill's 'quite', amused or terse or approving as the situation required, and Cressida's colourful exclamations of disbelief, and Judith's profanities, which Marmion was used to by now but which still raised a frisson sometimes. And Stephen's deadpan contributions, hard to place between the philosophical and the utterly practical. 'That's an interesting way to toast bread,' Marmion heard him say now, and then there was Cressida's loud flusterment as she retrieved a slice that had evidently caught fire, and the running of a tap, and the peaty smell of doused charcoal. 'How did that happen?' wailed Cressida's voice. 'Please don't tell Fay: I can't believe I've burned it all.'

They had met Fay soon after they'd arrived at St Anne's, a new cohort of choral scholars for the chapel choir. Two men and three women, surprised to find themselves elevated to those adult titles from the girls and boys who had left school a few months before. Marmion was an alto, Judith and Cressida sopranos, the three





of them as different, at first glance, as it was possible to imagine. Cressida was small and slight and fair, the product of a famous girls' boarding school who'd grown up with horses and brothers in the Home Counties. Judith – a Jewish Hindu atheist, as she called herself – was the only daughter of two doctors from Bristol, strikingly beautiful and ferociously strong-minded. The men were unlike too: easy-going, ginger-haired Bill, whose parents ran a small hotel on the outskirts of Birmingham, and Stephen, tall and gangling and less at ease with himself than the others, who had rarely spoken of his family since that evening in their first week when they'd all talked about home and he'd revealed, in an uncharacteristic confiding rush, that he was adopted, and had a brother who was severely disabled – as though he wanted them all to know that much, and to understand that those topics were off limits thereafter.

None of them, anyway, remotely resembled anyone Marmion had met at her North London comprehensive, where her placid Quakerism had made her an oddity even among the ethnic and social mix of her classmates. None of them remotely resembled her family, either, which came as more of a surprise. Marmion had imagined Cambridge as a world full of Hayters, earnestly committed to a life of intellect and art.

But they had got along from the start, the five of them. A motley crew, Fay had called them, when she'd invited them to dinner a couple of weeks into their first term. It seemed aeons ago now, that time when they were still getting to know each other. Fay had some connection to St Anne's, and to the choir – she often came to evensong, and had a seat reserved for her at concerts and carol services. But she had taken a particular interest in their little group. She'd adopted them, people said, sometimes enviously – because there were certainly benefits to Fay's friendship. She had a beautiful house in Newnham, and membership at Glyndebourne. And she was interesting, too. Fascinating, at least in the sense of being a puzzle. She wasn't well-preserved in the



## EVERY SECRET THING

conventional sense – her hair was being allowed to go grey without resistance, and she rarely wore make-up or jewellery – but it was obvious that she had once been beautiful, and when you saw that, you had to admit that she still was.

As to who she was, that was less easy to tell. She hinted at having been a professional musician, but none of them had ever found any record of her career. She sometimes mentioned business commitments, but they never saw her occupied with them. She seemed to be alone in the world, but she often spoke as if there were other people in the shadows, an extended family of ghostly siblings and cousins and retainers who filled the house when they weren't there. Her generosity was lavish, but every time they began to be sure of their importance to her, there would be a casual reference to other calls on her time that made it clear they weren't by any means at the centre of her world. And then, as graduation approached and they could feel their association with Fay waning, the trip to High Scarp had been proposed, and they had understood that the invitation was a compliment she rarely extended, an honour they couldn't refuse.

Fay herself was both the same and different up here, Marmion thought, crossing the garden now to the wooden outhouse where she and Bill were sleeping. Her hair was swept up in the same unfashionable bun she wore in Cambridge, and the colour and style of her clothes was the same, although the skirts had turned into trousers for Cumbria and a thick jumper had replaced the famous long grey cardigan. It was as though someone had designed her, an art director in a theatre or an opera house, with wardrobes for town and country. A Britten opera, perhaps. The powerful matriarch without a family to rule over.

That thought made Marmion smile: it was the kind of thing Bill would say, she thought. Well, perhaps after three years you did start to think like each other. She let herself imagine Bill saying those words and looking at her with a grin that suggested he saw her as a different





RACHEL CROWTHER

kind of matriarch: a happier and more fruitful one. She halted for a moment to enjoy the view, and to savour her own good fortune.

\*

The atmosphere in the kitchen owed as much, Bill thought, to the four people crammed into it as to the efforts of the elderly range. The window had long since steamed up, and the smell of bacon and toast was making his stomach rumble pleasurably.

‘Plate,’ said Judith, and he grabbed a dish from the table and held it out to receive fried eggs from the pan. There was a sizzle of fat, a flare of steam in their faces. Judith smiled, nudging a lock of hair off her cheek, as he slid the plate into the oven. ‘Good boy.’

‘At your service.’

This was fun, Bill thought. At home, the hotel kitchen was out of bounds, and in the family’s poky little kitchenette cooking was a chore, not a pleasure.

Cressida, flushed with heat and exertion, thrust a handful of cutlery at him.

‘The table needs laying,’ she said.

‘Right-oh.’ Bill saluted, suppressing the unreasonable feeling that he liked being bossed about by Cressida less than by Judith, and pushed through the door to the dining room.

This was the nicest room in the house, he thought, as he set the silverware down. It doubled as sitting room and dining room, and apart from the long table which ran beneath the window, there were several shapeless chairs and sofas, grouped around the wide hearth, and a rather battered piano. Everything about High Scarp spoke of a long history in the same clan: the once-elegant china that was stained and crazed with age; the black-and-white photographs on the walls; the antique radiators that were never more than lukewarm, despite the chill of the summer nights. The traditions of the place were clearly





## EVERY SECRET THING

long-established too – the ancient walkers’ maps, and all the music in the village church that High Scarp visitors had contributed to over the years. *We always*, Fay kept saying. Bill liked the sense that they were part of a pattern.

He looked out of the window, letting his gaze roam over the hills and the serene blue of the sky above. A feeling he’d first noticed a day or two ago gathered in his belly: a tightness, a density, that might be pleasure or pain. He was filled with an inexplicable mixture of contentment and impatience – as though he wanted to prolong this moment, this weekend, forever, but also to seize what it held for him and devour it in a greedy rush. That landscape, he thought – that great empty space out there – was all his, just now. Everything was possible. Anything he might want.

That thought caused a lurch of uncertainty. *Anything he might want.* Was that really true? In his mind’s eye he saw the sheen of sweat on Judith’s neck, the sudden flash of her smile, and something else stirred in his memory. Buried deep beneath the rich silt of the last three years there was another image he had never quite forgotten. His first sight of Judith, that day in the chapel. Her fierce, see-if-I-care gaze, and the sense he’d had . . . No, it was impossible to be sure, now, what he’d thought or felt back then. It was impossible to untangle the threads of the years that had followed, the way their paths had all unfolded. But as his eyes swept down across the garden to the fells and the sky beyond, there was another lurch in his stomach. Marmion was standing on the lawn wrapped in a towel, staring out at the same view as him, with her head lifted to the early-morning sunshine.

\*

Gazing out at the valley, Marmion wondered whether you’d ever get used to this scenery if you lived up here: to living among hills rather than people. This valley must be almost the same size as her corner of





London, the densely packed streets between Crouch End and Archway, and there seemed to be absolutely no one else in it this morning.

But as she scanned the distant fells for the moving dots of walkers she caught a glimpse of someone much closer at hand, down in the lower part of the garden. Not exactly hiding, but – lurking, she thought. A hiker, perhaps, who had strayed in through the gate? But as she watched, the figure moved, and she saw that it was Fay. Unmistakably Fay, who had every right to lurk in her own garden, of course, but even so Marmion felt a flicker of unease. Something about Fay's stance, the way she lifted her hands now to cover her eyes, seemed odd. Had Fay seen her? Was she all right? For a moment longer Marmion hesitated, then she pulled the towels more tightly around her and hurried on towards the cabin with the disconcerting sense that she'd been caught spying.

She dressed quickly, impatient now to be with the others again. When she came into the house, Fay was standing in the hall beside the phone.

'Hello,' Marmion said brightly. 'What a beautiful morning.'

Fay smiled in an unfamiliar way: a little distant, as though she was disappointed by something. *Had* Fay seen her, then, out in the garden? Had she thought . . . Marmion felt a flush around her ears. She was being idiotic, surely; imagining things. But she was grateful when the others appeared, their noise and bustle filling the little gap of awkwardness.

'This bacon looks delectable,' Stephen was saying, and behind him Bill raised his eyebrows and said, 'Ah! Is madam ready for her breakfast?'

Marmion mimed guilt. 'I'm completely ravenous,' she said. 'I've been smelling it for the last half an hour. What marvellous people you are.'

And then, as they found their places around the table, there was a sudden moment of silence – the result of chance, not intention, Marmion thought, but even so it seemed to fall upon them like a gift. At home, this would have been the moment for the Quaker form of grace – a few minutes of quiet thankfulness – and she shut her eyes





## EVERY SECRET THING

and reached for that sense of calm and sanctity she had been used to having within her grasp her whole life.

When she opened them again, she smiled at Fay across the table. It was too nice here to let shadows trouble her. But in the moment she held Fay's gaze, it occurred to her to wonder what Fay might expect of them all after they graduated this summer, when what they'd offered her until now – a share in the closed world of the choir and their undergraduate life – was over. It occurred to her to wonder whether this trip was supposed to signal a reckoning of some kind.

