



Prologue

*A pair of leopard print shoes, size 37. A bracelet in the shape
of a snake. A handkerchief with embroidered initials.
A pair of red silk ballet shoes . . .*

When I first scribbled those words in my notebook a couple of years ago, I thought that I was writing the end of a particular story, the story of Mamma and me. I imagined that I was bringing the many different pieces together – tucking in the raw edges, smoothing the seams and then fastening it all with a fancy clasp, perhaps something made from crystals and emerald-green feathers.

I'd forgotten that stories, like dresses, have a life all of their own. They shape themselves to the sway of your hips, that soft swell beneath your ribs, the curve of your collarbone, the rise and fall of your breath.

Over time, their fabric becomes a little softer, fits itself to the way that you walk, speaks in rustles or soft swishing sounds, begins to make new meanings.

Sometimes, of course, a story finds a new wearer altogether.

'You are the storyteller now, *tesora*,' says Mamma, smiling into the webcam in her kitchen on the other side of the ocean. Her sunglasses are pushed up on to the top of her head and she's silhouetted against the Californian sunshine that pours through her floor-to-ceiling windows.

'You and only you, *carissima*, know how this next part of the story goes.' And she sips from her little white cup of coffee where





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I can see that her lipstick has already left its print like the wings of a scarlet butterfly.

But when I blow Mamma a kiss, click my own webcam closed and open up a new blank page on my laptop, I find myself faltering. As hard as I try, the words don't come. The screen hums. The pigeons clatter on the roof. The books creak and whisper on the shelves.

On some days, my fingers crackle with a familiar static. A restless wind sweeps into the courtyard, whipping up leaves and litter.

On other days, the air settles in ridges of grey and dusty yellow around my shoulders, pressing me close so that I can hardly breathe.

I once wrote that all you had to do to claim a story as your own was to raise your arms above your head, like this, and let the shape of it settle over your shoulders, just so.

But now I know that the form of things is always changing. There's never one true ending to anything.

Sometimes a waistband or a collar becomes too tight, your body straining against it, longing for more room. Sometimes a hem droops or a zip gets stuck or a button must be moved.

And in the same way, sometimes you outgrow a particular story. It no longer feels quite right. You follow sentences with your finger like seams, wondering where they might lead you. You find yourself saying a word over and over, under your breath, and it begins to take on a new meaning.

That's how it is. A story is never still.

And even though she's thousands of miles away, on the other side of the Atlantic, I can hear Mamma's words, soft and low, as





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if blown in on a mischievous wind, filling the spaces between my out-breaths.

Yes, you are the storyteller of the family now, carina, she's saying, just like your great-grandmother before you . . .

Mamma's grandmother, Maadar-Bozorg, is the only mother she has ever known. Although I've never met her, she has always been there, sitting at Mamma's shoulder as she filled me with her stories.

I remember, tesora, Mamma is saying now, how people would sit in the cool of the courtyard at my great-aunts' house in Tehran, just to listen to Maadar-Bozorg's voice, how it teased you and tickled you, the words running up and down your spine. My gift, for what it's worth, lies in the fabric – the feel of it against my skin, what it tells me when I rub it between my fingers. But your gift, Ella-issima, my darling, is Maadar's gift, the gift of the storyteller herself. You only have to stop for a moment, taste the words on the roof of your mouth, roll them around your tongue. They will tell you where to go next.

And so I'm beginning to understand that it isn't my job exactly to shape this next part of the story, but simply to hold it gently in my hands for a while, to let it unfold for you. And then I'll pass it on, so that you can make it anew, stitching it with your own bright threads, spinning it into a new form, smoothing it over your own kitchen table.

I take a deep breath. I let my mind relax to its still point, let the words rise up in me from that place under my ribs and then flow down through my fingers as they move over the keyboard.

That's right, Mamma whispers. What do you already know, carina? What do you feel, deep inside you?



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My fingers drift across the keys. Faintly, I hear them tapping, as if I'm somewhere far away, translating a half-heard music.

Can you hear it too?



1

To summon dream guides from the Other World: Find the place where oak, apple and birch trees grow together. Make an offering to the spirits there. That same night, look through a holed stone before falling asleep. If you know who you wish to see, call their name politely three times.

– Miss Mary's Book of Dreams

‘Mummy. Mummy, I can’t wear these boots with my mermaid costume. Mermaids don’t wear *WELLINGTONS*.’

Ella turned to see her daughter, a whirl of wild, brown hair, glitter and turquoise nylon, in the centre of the shop floor. With one tiny hand, she was tugging at the spangled bodice of her dress. In her other hand, she waved a wand, topped with a pink plastic shell and trailing blue and green ribbons.

Behind her, Billy held up his hands in a gesture of helplessness, his face contorted into an expression that was half amusement, half exasperation.

‘Tell him, Mummy.’ Grace jabbed the wand at her bare feet. ‘Mermaids *DON’T WEAR WELLINGTONS*!’

Ella sighed. Her head was throbbing from a combination of too much Pinot Grigio and a night of confused dreams. She took a slug from the coffee cup in her hand and frowned at Billy.

‘Daddy, *OF COURSE* mermaids don’t wear wellingtons. Especially mermaid *princesses*.’ She balanced her cup on a pile of books and crossed to where Grace was poised on the brink of a full-on meltdown. ‘You’re absolutely right, darling.’ She smoothed the curls from Grace’s sticky forehead. ‘Mermaids only have tails.





Poor things. Which is why they can't stomp around in all those puddles.' She glanced out of the window at the courtyard where the cobbles were gleaming with pooled water. 'Poor mermaids. Such beautiful puddles too, this morning.'

When she looked back, Grace had already hit the floor, her fingers catching in the handkerchief hem of her costume as she scrabbled to pull on her boots.

Billy applauded her silently.

'Socks?' he mouthed.

Ella shook her head.

'Come on then, Mademoiselle Mermaid.' Billy held out Grace's yellow raincoat with a mock flourish.

'Don't be silly, Daddy.' Grace was all smiles now, letting him slip her arms into the coat sleeves. 'I'm only a *pretend* mermaid, aren't I, Mummy?'

She flung her arms around Ella's neck, covering her face with moist kisses.

'Yes, darling,' Ella held Grace's face in her hands. 'For today, anyway.'

'Bye-bye, Mummy,' Grace sang. 'Love you.'

Ella put out her hand to slip the bolts on the shop door. She winced as a crackle of static, familiar shivers of green and silver, nibbled at her fingers.

'El?' Billy laid a hand on her arm. 'You sure you're OK?'

She shrugged. 'Of course. Just tired, that's all.' She found her coffee, raised it in a mock toast. 'Nothing this won't fix.'

'Write like the wind, then,' Billy said. 'Strictly no distractions.' He wagged a finger at her.

Ella watched them go. She stood in the window as they slithered hand in hand across the cobbles, Billy ducking under the



archway that led out onto Grape Lane. The tall, slim man in jeans and a navy nylon parka. The little girl with blue-green streamers escaping from the bottom of her raincoat, stomping to make the soles of her wellingtons light up. Billy and Grace. Her family. The two people she loved most in the world.

She pulled the sleeves of her sweatshirt further down over her wrists, cradled the coffee cup to her chest. There it was again. That faint humming in the air. Unmistakable this time. A haze of silver around the doorway. Whispers in the corner of the room. The Signals. How often she found herself wishing that they would just leave her alone. It was always worse when she was tired. This so-called 'gift' that had been handed down to her through a long line of Jobrani women: Mamma, Maadar-Bozorg, the great-aunts back in Tehran, and so many women before them. Most of the time, she could control it, keep it at bay. But then it would come to her at the most inconvenient moments, usually when she was worn out, reaching the end of her tether. It was enough to drive you a bit bonkers.

When she'd first tried to explain to Billy how the Signals worked, she hadn't known how to put it into words. It wasn't like all that second-sight stuff – not exactly – because it involved *all* her senses. She saw colours and shapes but she could also taste the Signals, feel them on the backs of her hands, hear them crackle and whisper in the air. Around other people, they might shimmer and vibrate or spark in sudden warning.

'Synaesthesia,' Billy had pronounced. 'That's what it sounds like. Aren't all writers a bit like that?'

'Other people will never really understand, *carina*,' Mamma had always said. 'They will say there is a simple explanation. Or they'll think you're a bit, you know.' She tapped the side of her



head. 'Cuckoo. Not quite right. Usually better not to tell them anything.'

Today, the courtyard outside the shop was empty and silent but she could already feel the air tremble around her shoulders, barely perceptibly, as if it was a second stretched skin. The marmalade cat, who usually came inside when it was raining, even allowing himself to be stroked by enthusiastic customers, was skulking in the overhang of the doorway, back arched, fur bristling.

Ella thought again of the dream she'd had last night. Mamma had appeared at the bedroom window, her fingertips tapping at the glass, and Ella had thrown off the duvet, tiptoed to the window and pushed up the sash.

Mamma's green eyes had burned into hers. She'd swung her legs over the windowsill, her bare feet spattered with mud, her dress clinging to her damply, her hair stuck to her face.

'Mamma, what are you doing here?' Ella had reached out and touched her mother's icy cheek. 'How did you get here?'

'I flew, *tesora*.' Mamma's voice was hoarse, hurried. 'I flew a long way. I came to tell you to pay attention, to listen to what the Signals have to tell you. To ask yourself what you already know, deep inside you.'

Mamma had raised her hand, the rings on her fingers flashing in the dark room. And then, just as suddenly, she'd disappeared, fading in front of Ella's eyes, leaving only the imprint of her wet feet on the rug and the open window, rattling in the wind.

Billy had switched on the bedside light, hauling himself up on the pillows, squinting at her. 'What're you doing out of bed, El? And close the window, will you? It's pouring out there.'

'I don't know, Billy. What *am* I doing? I had a dream and -'





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She'd prodded at the damp footprints with her own bare toes. There was no explanation. Obviously, her exhausted brain must be confusing things.

Billy had rolled his eyes, grinned at her in that infuriating way of his. 'You and your dreams, El. Come back to bed. You can tell me all about it in the morning and then we'll work out what it means.'

There was nothing Billy loved more than a spot of amateur dream psychology. Ella found it irritating. Mamma, of course, had always encouraged him. It was no coincidence that the Popular Psychology section was one of the best stocked in their bookshop, Happily Ever After. The bookshop, of course, had once been Mamma's dress shop and there had been more than a little protest among Mamma's friends when Ella had taken over the lease. Mamma had already sold off most of her stock by then, readying herself for her move to San Diego with David. But it was one thing to close Mamma's shop down and quite another to dismantle the rails and display tables, screw oak bookcases to the walls, put up hand-drawn signs for reading groups and a children's book corner.

'What do they want me to do?' Ella had complained. 'Keep it as some kind of shrine to you?'

'Never mind them, *tesora*.' Mamma had winked, laying her hand on Ella's arm. 'Don't you remember? It's exactly what they all said when we arrived here. That I was a crazy person. That the shop would never survive. People didn't need vintage dresses.' She threw back her head and laughed. 'Give it a little time. You'll show them.'

And so now the shop was a different place entirely. It had shaped itself around its new owner, like one of Mamma's dresses.





The chandelier was still there, throwing wobbly rainbows across the polished wooden floor whenever the sun hit the windows. The shop doorbell still jangled in the same way. But now the walls of the shop were lined with books. There were books carefully arranged on the mahogany counter and, very often, more books spilling over into piles on the floor. Where once there had been little tables displaying shoes and hats and scarves, now there were leather armchairs, inviting any passer-by to curl up and lose themselves in the pages of a novel for an hour. And if any further encouragement might be needed, one corner of the shop had been fitted out with a gleaming stainless-steel cafe bar and a coffee machine.

Now, as Ella stood warming her hands on her second Americano, her body straining to catch the crackle in the air, she tried not to think about last night's dream. The clammy feel of it still clung to her, the fragrance of Mamma's damp skin, that strange look in her eyes.

'Get a grip, El,' she muttered to herself, turning purposefully away from the shop door, perching herself on one of the stools behind the counter, opening her laptop. She looked up at the big, pale moon-face of the grandmother clock in the corner, another addition to the space, a present from Billy after Grace was born. Half past eight. She had two hours, with a bit of luck, before the first customers started arriving. She needed to push on with this book. The manuscript was due just three months from now and yet it was all still a tangle of characters, ideas, the vaguest plot lines.

She opened up the document, took a deep breath, dived in . . .

It seemed only moments before the shop bell jangled her out of her reverie.



She looked up to see Laura, her friend from the Mother and Baby Book Group, wrestling a buggy through the door with one hand, steering Izzie, her protesting three-year-old, with the other.

Ella clicked Save, glanced at the clock. Ten o' clock. Bang on. 'Sorrysorrysorrysorrysorry . . .'

Laura threw back the hood of her parka. Ella could see now that she was biting back tears. She slid off the stool, wedged the door open wider with her foot. From under the buggy's rain hood came a long, high-pitched wail and Izzie started to join in, planting herself on the rug in defiance, her mouth opening and closing.

'So so sorry, El.' Laura's voice broke. 'I don't know what to do. We've been up most of the night.' She pointed at the buggy. 'I've got an appointment at the doctors with him in, um . . .' She looked at the clock. 'Oh, God. Like *now*. And Izzie just refuses to walk any further in the rain and -'

'It's OK.' Ella scooped the slick bundle that was Izzie up into her arms, balancing her expertly on one hip. 'Come on, Izzie. We'll have a lovely time, whilst Mummy takes Harry to his appointment, won't we?' She started to shoo Laura out of the door. 'Off you go. She'll be fine. Go on -'

'I'm so grateful.' Laura's face relaxed. 'And you were writing, weren't you? I'm so sorry. I owe you one. Big time.' She set off again, rattling across the cobbles, shouting over the renewed wailing, 'I'll text you.'

Ella closed the door behind her, held the little girl firmly on the edge of the counter, easing off her wet boots, keeping up a steady stream of soothing chatter. 'Now then, Izzie. What a treat. Just you and I, together. But let's see. What shall we do first? I don't think you like hot chocolate, do you?'



The little girl's face dissolved into dimples. She nodded vigorously and her fat, damp curls bounced on her shoulders.

Ella jumped her down from the counter and led her over to the Children's Corner. 'Oh? You do, do you? OK, well that's good to know. Because if you sit here . . . that's right, just like that . . .' She settled Izzie into one of the special fairy thrones that Billy had made, gilt carved frames, blue plush upholstery. 'And look at one of these nice books . . .' She opened up a copy of *The Queen's Knickers*. 'There we are. This is a very funny one. Yes. Exactly . . . Well, now, I'll go and make us a treat.'

And what could she do, Ella thought, as she spooned miniature marshmallows onto a mountain of whipped cream, trying to squash down the disappointment she always felt at being jerked so suddenly out of that other world, the one that she'd been making with words, just moments ago? She'd got in a good hour and a half, anyway. That was better than nothing. And Laura was a lovely woman, someone who'd become a dear friend over the last year or so. Ella knew that she'd do the same for her, if she could, but Laura was struggling. Anyone could see that. On her own with two very young children. Her husband just up and leaving like that, out of the blue. It wasn't easy at all.

She knew what Billy would say. 'You're too soft, El. They take advantage of you.' And sometimes that was probably true. The problem with the shop was that it was in such a central location, all too ideal for easy drop-offs. And the Children's Corner, Ella's pride and joy, was a natural draw. She'd designed it this way, of course, with the thrones and the strings of twinkling fairy lights and the dressing-up box and the blackboard table with its pots of coloured chalks and – everyone's favourite – the three iPads loaded with the latest children's titles. But she hadn't





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quite envisaged how popular it might be for parents looking for potential babysitting.

'I wouldn't care if the people who dropped their kids off here ever bought anything, the buggers,' Billy would grumble, picking his way through a knot of noisy children.

'Well, it gets people in, makes the shop look busy,' Ella would say. 'And it's lovely for Grace.' But she knew what he meant. Running a bookshop wasn't the easiest way to make money.

Now Izzie waved *The Queen's Knickers* at her, expectantly.

'OK, darling,' Ella said. 'I'll be right there.'





2

***To dream of someone who is dear to you: Sleep with an item
of the person's clothing under your pillow.***

– Miss Mary's Book of Dreams

Fabia struck a match and moved between the tealights in their mercury glass holders, humming to herself softly under her breath as she lit each one.

She still hadn't got used to how suddenly dusk fell in California. Out on the shop's wooden porch, the strings of multicoloured bulbs had already flickered on and the cut-paper decorations fluttered pink and orange and yellow in the glow from the mock-Victorian gas lamps. There were nets of white fairy lights wrapped around the trunks of the palm trees all along Main Street. It gave Fabia that Christmas feeling.

Except that it wasn't Christmas yet. These were the weeks leading up to Halloween and, most notably for the traders in San Diego's Old Town, the Mexican Day of the Dead.

She wished she could share all of this with Ella. All Hallows' Eve, or 31st October, meant only one thing to Fabia – Ella's birthday. And it didn't seem right that she should be here, lighting candles, making her shop look festive for other people, whilst her daughter and granddaughter were on the other side of an ocean.

'Go,' David had said. 'Book yourself a ticket. Go and be with them.' But that didn't seem right either. David was working long hours at the university hospital. She wanted to be there when he came in from work. And who would take care of the shop?



'Close it,' David said, smiling. 'Take a couple of weeks off. When was the last time you took a holiday?'

Fabia tugged at the hem of the dress on the mannequin in the shop window, smoothing the silk so that it fell just so. Then she folded a piece of ribbon around the waist, pinning it expertly with a crystal brooch in the shape of a spider. The spider's eyes were made of little chips of red glass and its diamanté legs were hinged at each joint so that it could hook itself cleverly over the collar of a dress or a coat lapel. It was a lovely piece and she'd thought about saving it as a gift for Ella – except that she knew that it would probably languish at the bottom of her daughter's drawer. Ella would never remember to wear it. She smiled to think of Ella on her last visit, leaning into the wind at La Jolla Cove, her crazy brown hair whipping across her face, a beach towel knotted any-old-how around her shoulders. Despite herself, a sad little sigh forced its way between her lips.

She was proud of what she'd managed to build in the three or so years since she'd started up here. Fabia Moreno, San Diego-style was, in many ways, so much better than her shop in York had ever been. Certainly more lucrative, anyway. There seemed to be a larger appetite for what she could do here. Perhaps it was simply that the climate leant itself so much better to the wearing of dresses. The shop had been full of a steady stream of customers – a mix of locals and tourists – since its opening. They cooed over Fabia's carefully crafted confections, stroking the silks and embroidered cottons, and savouring the opportunity to have clothes made as one-offs or altered to fit.

'Darling,' they said.

'Charming.'

'So English.'



Fabia would smile. Life seemed full of such ironies. Here in the States, being different seemed an advantage. In England, she'd always felt uncomfortable, a foreigner, an incomer.

'Penny for them.' Rosita's face appeared at the shop window, her voice muffled by the glass.

Fabia threw the door wide. 'You wouldn't want to know.'

Rosita rubbed at her arms in her pink lambswool sweater. 'Try me,' she said. 'Getting chilly out there now.' She stomped her sheepskin boots.

'You have *no* idea.' Fabia pulled a face. 'Seriously. You Californians. You don't know what cold is. I was standing on the deck this morning in just my cotton robe. *In the middle of October*. In England, I'd be wearing two pairs of socks and a winter coat.'

Rosita grinned. 'Socks? I'd love to see that. Bet you've never worn socks in your entire life.' Her eyes sparkled with mischief. 'But how are things over there? In York? Made up your mind about visiting yet?'

'No.' Fabia shook her head. 'And it's not like me to be this indecisive but, well, I don't want to be in her way. You know how it is. Maybe Ella doesn't want her Mamma around for her birthday celebrations. I never really know what she wants, to be honest, even after all these years.'

Rosita rolled her eyes. 'Daughters, huh? I've always thought sons would be so much easier. That is, once they got past the throwing-themselves-out-of-trees-and-beating-one-another-up phase.' She shook her head. 'But then they wouldn't be half as much fun, either. And of course, sons grow up, get married, move away. You lose them in the end. But daughters will always need their mothers, don't you think?'





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Rosita's daughter, Gabby, owned a beauty salon in LA. Just last month, Rosita had brought her into the shop where she'd cooed over 1920s embroidered kimonos and bought up silk scarves and beaded evening purses as gifts for her friends. Fabia had liked her immediately.

'But how come you never told me how beautiful this girl of yours is?' she'd said as Gabby flicked her glossy black curls and pulled a face.

'Oh, she'll do, I suppose,' Rosita had winked, beaming with pride.

'That's the thing, Rosita,' Fabia said now. 'I'm just not sure that Ella *does* need me anymore. I mean, in some ways, me coming out here was the best thing. Ella is different. She's changed. She's more confident. More independent. She has her own life now, completely separate from me. Perhaps I'm just a nuisance.'

'*Dio mio*.' Rosita pretended to cross herself. 'Are you kidding me? We'll never be free of our girls.' She held out a paper bag and grinned again. 'Anyway, I came over to give you this. Compliments of the season. It's the first one. Made it today. I wanted you to have it.'

Fabia opened the bag and drew out a small flat package wrapped in brown paper and pink and white twine, the trademark wrapping from Rosita's shop, the San Diego Tinsmith.

She tore the paper and the gift glinted in her palm. A bird, the breast and wings brightly painted in ruby and emerald with a tail made of long feathers of delicately punched tin. It twirled and flared from her fingers as she held it up to the light.

'It's exquisite. You're so clever.'

'It's a quetzal, the sacred bird of Guatemala, where my mother comes from. It's something new I'm trying this year.'





I was looking through some old photos and I remembered that we had Christmas ornaments just like it when I was a kid.'

'Quetzal.' Fabia tested the word on her tongue. 'I like it.'

'Quetzalcoatl is the feathered serpent god, so the legend goes,' said Rosita. 'The Indian people, like my mother, think of the quetzal as having magical powers. It should never be caught or caged.' She smiled. 'I love the long, green tail feathers. Somehow, it reminds me of you.'

Fabia laughed. She nodded towards the framed poster behind the counter, her younger self in her favourite stage costume of emerald feathers and crystals. 'Thank you, Rosita. Thank you *so much*.'

She hung the bird from one of the fake cherry blossom branches that she'd arranged in a vase on the counter to display choice pieces of jewellery. It nestled among the diamanté necklaces and glass beads.

'There. He looks right at home.'

Rosita laughed. 'So. Any chance of a coffee?'

'Is that a serious question?' Fabia pulled back the curtain on the alcove at the back of the shop where she kept her little stove and poured fresh coffee beans into her grinder.

'Great.' Rosita nodded her approval. 'And I'll just have a little rummage through your rails here, if that's OK? Moises is taking me out for dinner tomorrow. I can't remember the last time we went out, just the two of us. I want to look nice.'

'In that case, *cara*, I've got just the thing for you.' Fabia pointed to a seventies wrap-dress in chartreuse silk jersey, hanging from one of the hooks on the wall. It was cinched in at the waist with a belt of the same fabric, finished with a large enamelled buckle in the shape of a panther, black and gold





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with jewelled amber eyes. She watched Rosita rub the buckle between her fingers.

'Perfect, don't you think?' Fabia reached up and slipped the dress from its hanger, laying it in Rosita's arms. 'It came in just this morning. I could have sold it three times over already. But the minute I saw it, I knew that it was yours. I've been keeping it for you. Now, what about shoes?'





3

To summon someone who is special to you: Wrap an acorn in a piece of their apparel, sleep with it for seven nights and then take it into the woods. Hide the parcel in the roots of a tree or dig a hole and bury it. Walk around the secret spot seven times sun wise, calling your beloved's name.
– Miss Mary's Book of Dreams

'I hope she enjoys it.' Ella laid the receipt in the man's palm, along with his change.

'Me too.' He pushed the coins into his trouser pocket, placing the paperback, which Ella had wrapped so carefully in the pale blue paper covered with tiny gold stars, at the bottom of his backpack. Wrapping was a kind of magic. She'd learned this from Mamma, of course. It made things special, transforming an ordinary item into something extraordinary. Later, this man's girlfriend would cut the ribbon and tear off the paper with anticipation. She would hold the book – a collection of contemporary reworkings of fairy tales – in her hands and it would seem not a last-minute panic purchase but a carefully considered gift.

'Thanks for your help, then.' The man turned to go, lingering for a moment at the small display of local interest titles by the door – maps, guidebooks, local history.

Ella glanced at the clock and then down at her laptop, now tucked safely under the counter. Five minutes to five.

She made herself wait, watching the man as he strode across the courtyard and out onto Grape Lane. If she closed up now,



before anyone else could come in, she'd have another precious hour before Grace's bath time. Grace had been tired and crotchety after the morning's mermaid adventures and then a couple of hours spent playing with Izzie in the Children's Corner. Billy had gone to buy sausages from Braithwaites and then taken them both back to the flat for an early tea.

'I'll drop Izzie off with Laura,' he'd said. 'You see if you can grab a bit of writing time.'

Ella tried to think her way back into the scene she'd been writing that morning, before Laura's visit. She could already feel it slipping away from her. She felt the familiar mix of shame and frustration. Billy was only trying to help, she knew, but sometimes it just made her feel more pressured. He didn't understand that she couldn't always drop back into the writing like that, as easily as snapping her fingers. But she had to try. She had to push through this.

She came around the counter, ready to turn the sign to Closed, and that was when she saw the woman.

She was standing peering up at the shopfront. She looked uncertain, as if she were plucking up the courage to come in.

Ella's heart sank. It was always this way. The last-minute Saturday customers were what Ella dreaded. They always stayed longest, wanting to browse, killing time for a train, perhaps, or they were just a bit lonely.

The woman had seen her now. She looked startled. Ella opened the door wide, forcing her best smile.

'Were you closing? I'm so sorry. I -' The woman's voice was half snatched away by a sudden gust of wind.

'No, no. Come in. Please.' Ella hung on to the door, gesturing the woman through.



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As the customer brushed past, Ella felt the air crackle between them, caught the faint scent of grass after rain, the woody fragrance of moss. The back of her neck prickled. Great. This was just what she needed. It had been a very long day indeed and now her imagination was playing tricks on her, picking up on Signals that weren't even there.

'Welcome to Happily Ever After,' Ella found herself saying. 'Can I help you at all? Or are you just looking?'

Her voice sounded too loud in the quiet of the shop.

'Oh . . . I'm definitely just . . . just looking.' The woman's face flushed and she fidgeted with the shoulder strap of her bag. Ella noticed her blue tweed coat, slightly too large for her tiny frame, and the toes of her sturdy brown walking boots, which were flecked with mud.

'Well, if there's anything I can help you with, just give me a shout.'

She smiled and the woman smiled back.

Ella turned and, to give the customer some space, she began to walk a line of shelves, running her finger along their spines, taking comfort, as she always did, in their solid shapes, the smell of the paper. She selected one – a slim volume scattered with engravings of wild plants and flowers – and began to leaf through it: *dog-eyed daisy*, *lady's slipper*, *brideswort*, *coltsfoot*, *mallow* . . .

The woman cleared her throat. 'Um, excuse me. There *is*, actually, something I'm looking for.'

Ella closed the book, retraced her steps. The woman had taken out a pair of reading glasses and was peering at her over the top of the lenses.

'Yes. One of those dream dictionaries. You know. A good one. Not one of those books that say, "Dream of your teeth falling





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out and you'll meet a handsome stranger.” The woman blushed. ‘I mean, not that there’s anything wrong with that, of course. But I’m looking for something with a bit more, um . . . substance.’

Ella felt her breath catch.

There it was again. That humming in the air. The shiver that seemed to pass right through her. This was all getting a bit much. She should have closed up when she had the chance. She was on edge today. She really wasn’t herself.

She laid the book in her hands aside and pointed to a large and extravagantly carved bookcase up against the wall. ‘This is our Psychology section. Billy’s . . . my husband’s pet project. There’s Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* and then Jung, of course, and then all kinds of other things, some of it a bit obscure, to say the least. But I’m sure you’ll find something useful there.’ She gestured to one of the leather armchairs and plumped up a red velvet cushion. ‘And please. Feel free to make yourself at home. Take as long as you need. I can make you a cup of coffee, whilst you’re at it?’

The woman looked flustered. ‘Oh, it’s late. I don’t want to impose.’

‘You’re not. Not in the slightest. I was just making another cup for myself. Coffee and books go together, don’t you think? At least, that’s always been the idea here at Happily Ever After.’ Ella pointed at the shining Gaggia machine and the shelf of white cups. ‘And I don’t know about you, but I need something to keep me going at this time of day. Now, let me guess. This is a little game of mine. For you, I think, something milky, perhaps with a hint of sweetness? A latte? With a splash of mocha syrup?’

The woman smiled and Ella noticed, for the first time, her dimpled prettiness. She had one of those old-fashioned faces





that always look slightly in soft focus, milky-white skin, dusted with freckles, blue eyes that actually sparkled. Her faded brown hair was pulled into a chignon, wisps escaping around her face, and a pair of antique earrings set with tiny sparkling stones – opals, Ella thought – swung from her ears, catching the light.

‘Well, yes,’ she was saying. ‘I am rather partial to a latte. But please don’t go to any trouble.’

Ella watched as the woman dropped her bag to the floor and unbuttoned her coat. Her movements were small and nervous, as if she were used to doing things as quickly and quietly as possible, without taking up too much space.

‘I’m Ella, by the way.’ Ella held out her hand.

The woman’s fingers were cool, her grasp limp in a way that usually made Ella recoil. But as their hands touched, she felt a surge of warmth infuse her palms and travel up her arms as far as her elbows. For a moment, she imagined that she heard the sighing of the wind and saw a flash of white branches against a blue sky.

She dug her fingernails into her palms. Ridiculous. She was being ridiculous.

‘Bryony Darwin,’ the woman was saying, ‘and it’s very nice to meet you.’ She took a small square book from the shelf, its spine decorated in gilt-tooled lettering. Her fingers traced the letters as she read aloud. ‘Miss Mary’s Book of Dreams . . .’

‘Ah. You’ve found Miss Mary. She’s a particular favourite of my husband’s. He’s fascinated by her. Apparently, she lived somewhere up in the hills around here. A cure-wife, a cunning-woman, as they used to call them. In other words, a witch.’ Ella searched the woman’s face. ‘If you believe that sort of thing, of course. She was imprisoned in the Tower here in York, so Billy





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tells me. But this isn't a dream dictionary. It's more like a book of instructions, a collection of Miss Mary's thoughts, a store of knowledge that she wanted to impart. Recipes, guidance on mending all kinds of things, from broken bones to marriages. Spells, I suppose you might call them. But part of the book is about dream prophecy, about using your dreams to tap into your intuition, to divine the future or heal the past. There are very few copies. Hence the awful price, I'm afraid.'

The woman smiled again. 'Intriguing,' she said, opening the book carefully at the first page.

Ella tapped the old coffee grounds from the filter into the sink and watched out of the corner of her eye as Bryony Darwin perched on the edge of the armchair, an expression of intense concentration on her face.

Who was she, this decidedly odd person? Ella rubbed at a teaspoon. It was irritating. She didn't like it, this pull she was feeling towards some random woman who'd quite literally blown in from nowhere at all, asking for books about dreams. Something about her brought back the texture of her own dream, the memory of Mamma's hair stuck to her cheeks, the smell of rain and wet earth, the rattling window.

She splashed milk into the chrome jug, held it under the steam. No, it was all a load of nonsense, a product of her oversensitised imagination. What was it that her friend, Kate, had said in a stage whisper only a few days ago, leaning against the shop counter, gesturing just a bit too wildly with her coffee cup.

'You get some real weirdos in bookshops, don't you? They seem to attract, well, how can I put this, El? Misfits. Dropouts. Life's eccentrics?'





Ella had raised an eyebrow. She'd felt the sting of Kate's words. She knew, after all, what it was like to feel like a misfit herself.

'*Readers*, do you mean?' she'd thrown back, trying to keep her tone as light as possible. 'People who bother to read actual, real books? With difficult words in them?'

Kate had laughed. 'OK. Point taken,' she'd said. 'But you must know what I mean. How about What's-Her-Name in our book group, for example? Takes it all so, well, *seriously*.'

Ella had smiled. 'To some of us, Kate, reading is a very serious matter.'

Now, as she spooned frothy milk into a cup, Ella tried to let her mind go quiet, to relax it to that still, small point, to feel her way out of herself and towards the birdlike figure perched on the edge of the armchair. She didn't let herself do this very often. It was a skill that, over the years, she'd found best used only in very small doses.

But as she breathed deeply, staring into the bottom of the sink, she saw tendrils of softest green, the texture of moss, unfurling into flickering strands of white, patterning the air in the way that light filters through leaves.

She heard a sound as this odd little woman turned the page, like the rubbing together of dry branches. Her head bent closer over the book and a strand of her mousy brown hair fell over her cheek. She barely seemed to notice as Ella set the coffee cup down on the little reading table beside her then crossed to the door and turned the sign to Closed.

And now the shop was silent, except for the tick, tick of the grandmother clock and the sound of Bryony Darwin turning a page.





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Ella opened her laptop and stared at the screen, but the words wouldn't come. They never did when there were customers. And this one, in particular, was very distracting. She tried not to sigh out loud. The cursor blinked at her, taunting.

Half an hour ticked round before the rain began again, flung against the shop windows in cold, hard handfuls. Bryony Darwin leapt up then, her coffee untouched, checking her watch, hastily buttoning her coat.

'I'm so sorry. I completely lost track of time. This is fascinating.' She fished in her bag for a bulky purse and drew out a fistful of notes. 'Thank you. Really. You've been so helpful.'

'A pleasure.' Ella smiled. 'And I hope we'll see you again some time.'

Ella watched as Bryony crossed the courtyard, the collar of her coat turned up against the rain, her boots treading firmly over the cobblestones. She stood for a little while after that, staring out of the rain-streaked window. Quite apart from the fact that she'd just sold the last copy of Miss Mary, one of the rarest, hardest to get hold of books in the shop, she had the sense that something important had happened, something that she couldn't quite put her finger on.

Who was this Bryony Darwin? Why was she looking for a book about dreams? What kind of person wore muddy hiking boots with a blue tweed coat and opal earrings?

She sank into the armchair where Bryony Darwin had been sitting just a moment ago and, as she ran her hands over the leather, she caught the ghost of that clean, green fragrance. But there was something else beneath it. Something that Ella couldn't quite hold in her mind.



‘What do you feel, *tesora*?’ Mamma would say. ‘What do you know deep inside you?’

Ella closed her eyes, let her thoughts move to the rhythm of her breathing. Yes, there it was. Right there.

A blue-grey feeling, ragged around the edges, like the sky after a storm. And in it was such longing. And loneliness, perhaps. Something that pulled at your sleeves and wouldn’t let go. Yes, thought Ella, Bryony Darwin was lonely. Perhaps even a little desperate. She was looking for answers. Well, wasn’t everyone, in their own way?

She sat and watched as the rain stopped and the shop windows filled with orange light from the street lamp on Grape Lane.

She thought again of her dream, Mamma’s voice still circling in her head: ‘*I flew, tesora. I flew a long way. I came to tell you to pay attention . . .*’

In the corners of the room, she felt the Signals stirring. Shivers of blue, tongues of silver. ‘Ella,’ they mocked. ‘Ell-la. *Ell-LA*.’

‘Oh, get lost,’ Ella said, out loud, jumping to her feet, snatching up the cup of cold coffee and sloshing it into the sink. ‘I’m too tired for your stupid games. And you’re not even real, anyway. Leave me alone.’