

1

Kyle Tanner opened his eyes. Peering out from the back of a deep, dark cave. Breathing jagged and heavy, body not his own, head not his own. He was walking. Staggering.

Where . . .? Why . . .?

Memory came back in fragments. Globbs of paint dropped on a canvas, forming only an incomplete picture. His two mates. A campsite. Then there was a girl. Small, pretty. Nice smile. And some kind of spliff. Strong. Nauseatingly, sickeningly strong. Felt the smoke in his lungs, the heat prickling, stinging, head spinning . . . And then . . .

Nothing.

He kept walking, stumbling. Going nowhere. Waiting for more paint to fall, fill in the landscape. Then he heard something. A voice. Someone was talking to him. He turned, trying to trace the source.

‘I said, d’you want a lift?’

It was the girl. With the smile and the spliff. Lily? Lila? Leaning out of the window on the passenger side of a VW camper van.

‘My mates . . .’

‘Went back ages ago,’ she said. ‘Come on, get in.’

He did so. Grateful not to have to walk.

The van pulled away.

And Kyle Tanner was never seen alive again.



2

The waves roiled and pushed towards the bay, dragging with them the threat of danger and violence, to a rising accompaniment of white noise. Some didn't make the shore, crashing against the lumpen rock outliers, breaking on the cliff faces, bursting upwards and outwards, all white spume and foam, a crescendoing explosion of static. Sheer, primal power. Whatever was left made it through to the shore, curling and unfolding, then lying down flat. Thin and spent. Their threat, their power, gone. Then the sea clawed them back once more, starting the whole process all over again.

Tom Killgannon watched from a cliff top. Hooded, bundled. His bad-weather gear was supposed to keep him insulated, impassive to the elements. But it didn't, even with the hood of his waterproof pulled over his head. The rain stung his exposed features, hurled into his face by gales threatening to uproot trees and upend people, icy needles shattering against his skin. He wished he could be as impervious to the elements as the rocks below were to the waves. But he wasn't. Nowhere near.

The clouds were low, dark and heavy. They leached the colour from the surrounding landscape, rendered the world a perpetual twilight. Black birds wheeled, caught in the airstream, cawing, a murder of angry dots. Tom weathered the elements, stood his ground. Watched the bay below.

Some desperate surfers had got themselves into wetsuits and were running down over the shingle towards the sea, racing each other to be the furthest out, fastest in. Idiots, he thought. Why would they want to court life-altering injuries, or even death, by hurling themselves against nature at its angriest? What did they have to prove, to themselves or anyone else? What was lacking in

their lives that drove them to do that? He didn't know, didn't want to speculate. Just knew that these people hadn't faced real horror in their lives, real danger. If they had, the last thing they would do was actively seek it out.

He checked his watch, turned away from the cliff face, the surfers and their stupid death wishes dismissed.

Time to go to work.

The Sail Makers pub was all but empty. Sunday quiet. No roasts, no specials. No tourists ventured this way, especially out of season, so no point. Just the few daytime regulars, scattered and disparate, who would brave more than the storm outside to get their usual seat, their usual drink.

Tom came through the front door, closed it behind him, thankful that the fire had already been built up. The regulars all looked at him. Some nodded, some went back to nursing their ales. He was still relatively new here. He understood that. St Petroc, to put it mildly, wasn't the kind of community that was immediately accommodating to those who weren't just passing through and spending money, but had decided to remain and settle amongst them. He didn't mind. Welcome brought with it enquiry and interference and he didn't want either. That was one of the main reasons he had chosen the place.

Hardly anyone came to St Petroc who didn't live there. And hardly anyone came to live there. It wasn't the kind of place where TV crews would make period or heart-warming drama. It had no celebrity chef taking over all the restaurants and bars in the village, of which there were scant few anyway, to tempt Londoners down for the weekend. No hippy capitalists had based an organic confectionery business there. No Eden Project. Very few holiday cottages, no second homers.

He had come down the cliff path, walked through the town to get to the pub. Even in sunlight it looked bleak and depressing, on



a day like this more than doubly so. It was a dying little village, shrinking all the time. Shopfronts were boarded up and locked, dusty flyers and bills stacked up and yellowing behind dirt- and rust-encrusted letter boxes. Buildings weren't maintained, stone slab frontage green with mildew and algae, busted drainpipes and guttering giving heavy localised showers. Where nearby villages had turned amenity stores into tourist gift and craft shops, St Petroc had nothing. Old businesses were selling up and getting out, new businesses never lasted long. The hardware store became, optimistically, an artisanal bakery, the family butcher's a coffee shop. Now they were nothing. As abandoned as the rest. About the only business remaining was the village grocery store, its shelves virtually bare, a pre-Glasnost supermarket in miniature. The church stood lonely and weed-choked, its pews almost empty come Sunday, its spire pointing towards the sky like a raised middle finger.

The bar of the Sail Makers was dark, all old wooden beams, low ceilings, uneven floors. It was getting on for three hundred years old and no one really wanted to update it. The owners were holding their breath, hoping that tourists would think themselves the first to discover a cosy old hidden gem of an inn, and the locals just didn't like change on principle. It was supposed to have an authentic smugglers tunnel leading from behind the bar down to one of the caves in the cliff face on the seafront. Tom couldn't testify whether that was real or an attempt at myth-making, but there was definitely some kind of hole in the wall behind the bar. Too small for anyone but a child to get through though.

He crossed to the fire, took off his coat, water dripping off it. He shivered before the heat.

'You walked here?'

He turned. Pearl had heard the door, had come through from the back room to behind the bar. Curious to see who would turn up in this weather.



He shook out his coat one last time, dropped it on the floor. Began warming his hands. 'Yeah. Didn't think it would be so bad. Came along the cliffs.'

She laughed, turned away. Back to what she had been doing.

He knew what she was thinking. What all those in the bar were thinking. *City boy. Northerner. Doesn't know anything.*

Let them think that.

Warmed through, he picked his coat up, went round to the other side of the bar, lifting the heavy wooden flap to do so. This was his job. Bar work. He hung his coat on one of the pegs reserved for staff. Checked the sealed inside pocket before he did so, made sure the coat was within sight all the time he was on the bar. His wallet was there. It held more than just money, it held his whole Tom Killgannon identity. And it was too precious to leave anywhere else. So, like hiding a tree in a forest, he knew it would be safest in his coat. Pearl was waiting for him.

'You're early,' she said.

'Yeah. Not much to do today.'

She laughed. 'Or any day, round here.'

He liked it when she laughed. Even the gloomy back bar of the pub seemed to light up when she did that.

She wasn't a stereotypical barmaid, he thought. Or at least not his idea of what a stereotypical barmaid was, the kind who had manned the pumps in the pubs he had drunk in on the estate during his youth. Not blonde and brassy, bosomy and blousy. The kind who would come on to you one minute, want to mother you the next, blank you the moment after that. Pearl was younger than him, the daughter of Dan and Elaine Ellacott who owned the pub. She had returned to the village, and the pub, after university. Only temporarily, she had said at first. Just till something comes up. A job I'm suited for in the city. Any city. Well away from here, thank God. She had been behind the bar for over five years.

He got on well with her, though. A good working relationship. The bar had become hers to run really, her parents concentrating on keeping the struggling hotel upstairs going. She did the hiring and firing, ordering, bookkeeping, everything. And Tom had no problem working for a woman. He might not be as young as her, but he wasn't a dinosaur. He did what he was told, dispensed drinks when asked, brought out food when required, listened to customers when they needed to talk. Although most still preferred to talk to Pearl. And he couldn't blame them for that.

'Go sit down,' Pearl said. 'Have something to eat before you start. Don't work if you don't have to. I'm not exactly snowed under here.'

'You're all right. I'll give you a hand.' His turn to smile now. 'Sure there's something that needs a man's touch rather than a young girl's.'

'Piss off, granddad.'

They both laughed. A good working relationship.

He started in the cellar, checking the barrels, stacking up the empties, carefully moving in the new ones. Doing all the lifting and carrying that, despite what she said, Pearl wasn't strong enough to do. In fact, he had been surprised at just how heavy the work was, even for someone as used to exercise as him. It was good, physical work. It passed the time and he didn't have to think too much about it. That suited him just fine. He came back up to the bar, wiping his hands on a towel.

'Anything happening today I should know about?' he asked Pearl.

'Round Table meeting tonight,' she said with a hint of a smile.

'Ah, the local civic toiletries all out in force. Have to be on our best behaviour. Do we need to salute?'

She laughed. 'Don't let them hear you say that. They'll find somewhere else to have their meetings. Then where would we be?'

'Yeah, like there's somewhere else round here for them to go.'

Pearl shrugged in agreement.

The Round Table meetings were one of the few things that brought in any kind of revenue to the pub. Locals got together in an upstairs room, trying to find ways to halt the decline of the village. Even Pearl's parents were involved. So far, thought Tom, they didn't seem to have come up with anything.

'Dad's all excited that the marina's on the agenda for tonight,' Pearl told him.

'Oh, that. Hope you can let him down gently.'

There had been rumours that Cornwall Council were looking to build a marina with the last of the EU regeneration money coming in. Areas had to bid and there were three in consideration. St Petroc thought they stood a chance. Tom knew it wasn't his place to tell them how delusional they were.

Pearl agreed again. 'Well, it gives them something to talk about. Makes them feel useful, bless them.'

Tom assumed position behind the bar, waited for customers. The same few regulars were still there, now using the storm as an excuse not to leave. Pirate John sat on his usual stool in the corner, rolling away at his skinny cigarette until it looked like a broken yellow twig. He was the friendliest of the locals so far, Tom had discovered. The least likely to treat him with suspicion. Although, as he had been keen to tell Tom on their first meeting, he hadn't lived in Cornwall all his life like the rest of them. No, not him. He'd actually spent some time in London. Tom didn't ask what had brought him back. He doubted he would get a truthful answer. And besides, he wasn't really interested.

He didn't know why he was called Pirate John. The only reason he could think of was that the front of his cottage had been decorated so enthusiastically and idiosyncratically, with a huge, thick horizontal flagpole sticking out of the wall, that it looked like the prow of a pirate galleon. He also didn't know what he did for a living. Pirate John drove round the village in a vintage blue-and-white two-tone Hillman, loading and unloading what could be junk,

could be valuable vintage and retro items, or could be both. Plus a never-ending supply of anonymous, nod-and-a-wink cardboard boxes. Maybe he was called Pirate John, thought Tom, because he was some kind of twenty-first-century smuggler. He also – Tom had noticed, having been on the receiving end plenty of times – fancied himself as something of a barroom philosopher.

In the far corner were Mick and Stew. Both young men, all knotted muscle and sun-hardened skin, leathered beyond their years. Long hair in beanie hats, perma-stubbed chins, T-shirts and work clothes. Labourers or surfers, Tom hadn't pried. But their actions were always shadowed, hands constantly ducking beneath the table whenever the door opened. Tom guessed what that meant. But still refrained from becoming involved.

And representatives from the local hippy grungy surfer clan had put in an appearance. They all wore variations of the same uniform, hair long and tousled, beards unkempt. Tom had just begun to tell them apart but still hadn't learned any of their names. They kept themselves to themselves. Lived in tents and camper vans somewhere along the coast. A kind of commune. They weren't like the surfers he had seen earlier, the middle-class ones in their premium wetsuits on their expensive boards pitting their egos against the elements. This lot seemed to live off the earth, be part of it, even. Or liked to give that impression. But their very presence gave off an indefinable air of menace and danger. Like Hell's Angels with boards. The rest of the drinkers gave them a wide berth.

The other regulars, Isobel and Emlyn, retired history teachers, hadn't shown. The weather must have put them off. They would probably turn up later for the Round Table meeting.

Pirate John shook his empty glass in Tom's direction. Tom nodded in return. He could see that Pirate John's lips were moving in preparation for one of his usual philosophical rambles, the empty glass a ruse to find an audience. Tom crossed to him.

This was his life now. This was his world. Shrunk down to the inside of an old pub in a remote part of north Cornwall. Constantine nearby got the majority of the surfing trade, Port Isaac the TV tourist trade. St Petroc got neither. And, though he doubted others in the village agreed with him, he was happy with that. His only responsibilities to pour drinks correctly, listen and nod when talked to. A lot of people would find the repetition, the anonymity, the mundaneness of life behind the bar of a dying pub in a dying village stifling. Maddening, even. But not Tom Killgannon.

After what he had experienced, it was exactly what he wanted. The closest thing to nothingness he could find.

But that was all about to change.

3

Lila was scared. Really scared. She had run before but that had been away from something bad and hopefully towards something better. And nowhere near as bad as this. Now she was running for her life.

She was soaked. And cold. The garage she was sheltering in had a leaking roof and no matter where she tried to position herself, on the floor in the centre, in the corners, the rain found a way to soak her. She had tried covering up the gaps with things found around the place – old tarpaulin, plywood sheets – but nothing worked. The water still found her.

She pulled her clothes tight around her in an abortive attempt at warmth but that just added another layer of cold against her skin. She tried to think of somewhere to go. Somewhere she could be safe. Couldn't think of anything, anywhere. So she sat, huddled, shivering. Alone.

Again, she tried to work out how she had come to be in this situation, again she came up with no answer. She had done what was asked of her. Picked up the boy. Stood smoking with him so he got a good look at her, made sure he got in the van and Kai drove away. That was it. Her part, finished. When she asked what would happen to him she was told it was none of her business. Even Kai had ignored her. And she had left it at that. She knew not to ask too many questions. It wasn't healthy. Just accept, that's what Noah always said, what she was always told. So she did. Or tried to.

And then she saw him on TV. On the screen in the pub. A photo of the boy.

She turned to the other two she was sitting with. Kai and Noah.
'Hey, that's—'

A look from Noah silenced her. Kai looked away from her.

She kept watching. The sound was down low but she still managed to make things out. He had gone to Cornwall with his university friends for a small break before their exams. And hadn't come back. Police wanted to question a young woman who was seen with him on the night –

She stared at Noah once more.

'Do they mean me?'

'Keep your voice down,' he said, eyes half lidded, face blank. 'You're attracting attention.'

Lila did as she was told, but kept staring at the screen. Deliberately not looking at Noah, hoping he wouldn't watch her, gauge her reactions, knowing he'd be doing exactly that. Kai looked anywhere but at her.

A couple came on the screen, sitting at a table, flashlights going off all around them. The woman couldn't stop herself from crying and the man had his arm around her, was doing everything he could just to hold her upright. He looked like he wasn't far off joining her. Beyond the pain, they looked nice. That was the only word she could think of to describe them. Nice. Pleasant. A middle-aged, middle-class couple. The kind who were sure of their home and their life, their place in the world. And now their world had caved in, now they weren't sure of anything any more.

They were talking about their son, Kyle. How much they missed him, loved him. How they just wanted him to come home safe. The mother not keeping it together by this point, collapsed into a sack of grief. The father still going, pleading with the camera, looking directly at Lila.

'If anyone knows where our son is, please . . . any . . . anything at all. Please get in touch. We just want to know he's all right. We . . .'

And then he collapsed too. The screen changed, went back to a reporter frowning at the camera. He gave some contact information, emails, phone numbers, drew out an ending to the report in clichéd prose poetry, then it was back to the studio.



Lila didn't say any more for the rest of the night in the pub. But she was aware of Noah staring at her the whole time. And of Kai not staring at her.

That night she found herself lying awake, still thinking about the boy. But more importantly, about the boy's parents. To have someone care about you, love you, the way they did for their son. To be heartbroken when that person is gone from their lives. It was so alien to her, like she was watching a documentary on a different culture, a different world. One she had never been part of. A sudden revelation came to her: *That was the way it should be. That's what's supposed to happen in families.*

She lay awake the rest of the night.

The next day she started asking questions. Quietly, subtly. Or so she thought.

The first person she approached was Kai. But he was suddenly unavailable. Avoiding her, walking away when she came towards him, his friends surrounding him when she tried to get him alone. That hurt. He was the nearest thing to a boyfriend she had ever had. A saviour, even, considering how he had picked her up and brought her to the commune. And asked for nothing from her in return. Well, not much. Well, nothing she wasn't happy to give in order to feel safe and wanted in return. And she had become quite fond of him. More than she would admit. But now he just blanked her. So, trying not to let the hurt show, she tried again with others.

What had happened to the boy? Where was he now? And the answer was always the same. No one knew who he was, where he was, what she was talking about. Or if they did, they weren't telling her. And then she became aware of Noah. Watching her, watching those she questioned. Saying nothing, but warning them against talking to her all the same. Judging her.

A word kept cropping up. Slipped out when Noah wasn't looking. She didn't understand the meaning or significance but she knew it must be important.





Crow.

That night he approached her. 'Lot of questions,' he said.

She didn't know how to respond. He was right.

'Why?'

This one she knew she should answer. The way he'd said it told her there was a lot riding on the right answer. But she didn't know what to say. What could she say?

'Just . . . just thinking about that boy. That's all. Hoping he's all right.'

Noah's face was impassive, eyes hard. 'Best that you forget you ever saw him.'

She looked straight at him, questions tumbling through her mind, bubbling into form on her lips.

He stopped her. 'Just do it. For your own good. Right?'

And that was that.

But she couldn't let it go. Another sleepless night followed. And by morning she had reached a decision.

Before anyone else was up and without being seen, she left the commune and began walking. Down the steep, narrow lane towards the village of St Petroc. And its one working phone box. At least she hoped it was working. She had memorised the helpline number from the TV broadcast and she didn't care what Kai would say, what Noah would do. She thought of those two parents, grieving for their lost son in a way her own parents never had and never would over her. Heart hammering, hands shaking, she stepped up to the phone box, ready to pull open the door.

And Noah appeared from behind it.

'You going to phone one of those numbers, are you? Tell the crying mummy and daddy where their precious little boy is?'

She stared at him, dumbfounded. She didn't know what to say. Didn't need to say anything. It was written all over her face.

'Can't have that, can we?'





And he grabbed her by the hair, pulling her along behind him.

She screamed for help, but Kai was there with his camper van within seconds and she was thrown in the back, speedily driven off.

Back at the commune, Noah threw her into the yurt. Locked the door.

That was when the storm hit.

It raged all night. Smashing against the canvas walls, like it would tear it from its moorings. But despite its fierceness the yurt was in no danger of moving. It was why they'd put her in there. Well anchored to start with, the more rain that hit the canvas, the more rain it absorbed and the more its weight increased, pulling it further into the ground.

She ran through a whole range of emotions. Anger, denial, more anger. Stomping about, kicking the walls, trying to tear through the heavy canvas, leaving her nails, her fingertips, in stripped, bleeding stumps. Screaming all the time, before collapsing, exhausted. But no one came. Then eventually, giving in to fear, scared about what they would do to her next, how long they would keep her here. Too scared to move.

She knew it would be nothing good. She had heard stories of people who had challenged Noah, even just disagreed with him. They had disappeared. Suddenly. Left the camp, everyone said, their eyes darting round, seeing who was listening as they spoke. Didn't want to be here any more. But she knew – they all knew – there was more to it than that.

Because the bodies would show up eventually, washed ashore somewhere along the coast, bloated and chewed and smashed by the rocks. A surfing accident or a cliff walk gone horribly wrong. Unidentified at first, then someone would remember the commune. And come asking questions. And be met with shrugs, indifference. People come and go. Stay as long as they want, leave whenever they feel like it. Were they here? Probably. Do you know





anything about this? No. Sad shake of the head from Noah and that would be that. Case closed. Accidental death, death by misadventure, whatever. But death all the same.

And that, she knew – feared – was what would happen to her. It was Noah's way of dealing with problems. And that's what she had become.

Knowing what she knew. There was only one way Noah would let her leave the camp.

Anger and fear spasmed through her. No . . . no . . . no . . . not her. Not this way. Not now. She stood up, looked round once more, her eyes long accustomed to the darkness.

There must be a way out, must be . . .

Nothing. They had cleared all the furniture from it except what she needed. A mattress on the ground. One of their home-made bio toilets in the corner with a bucket of sand next to it. And a strong lock on the wooden door. No light, not even a candle. She might use it to burn her way through the canvas.

So she sat in the dark, listened to the storm.

And that was when she felt it. Water. Dripping on her.

She looked up. Daring to hope, hating herself for that emotion.

She saw it. A chink of darkness against the lighter colour of the canvas. A possible way out.

Lila looked round, tried to find something she could stand on to reach the hole. Found only the bio toilet. An old wooden armchair with a hole cut out of the seat and a tin bucket placed underneath. Another bucket next to it filled with sand, a scoop to put the sand in the bucket with. That would have to do. She pulled the toilet chair until it was underneath the hole, stood on the seat, tried to reach it. There was a length of rope hanging down, a binding for the canvas that had come loose during the storm. Lila jumped for it, caught it. Tugged. The rope held. Good. She gave a grim smile and, heart hammering, pulled herself up the rope.





The hole was small and the more she pulled on the rope, the more she tightened it. But she managed to get her hands on the seams, her toes just about balancing on the back of the old armchair.

Her fingers were almost shredded from trying to find a way out through the walls. Earlier wounds were reopened, earlier pain revisited as she pulled, riving it apart until the hole was big enough for her to fit through. Her stomach muscles and arms were cramped from stretching, but every time she felt like stopping she reminded herself what lay in store for her if she didn't make it. That gave her the extra spurt of energy she needed.

Eventually the canvas started to give. The hole became big enough. She just had to pull herself through it . . .

That was the hardest part. Grasping the canvas with her bleeding fingers, pulling her cramping body up with her, the rain, wind and cold slicing against her exposed face.

But she had no choice. Eventually she managed it. Lay on the roof of the yurt, gasping for breath, gulping down oxygen, hoping it would rid her body of the pain of getting there. For a few seconds she didn't even feel the cold, the rain. The pain in her fingers.

But she couldn't lie there for ever. She sat up, looked around. Lights were burning inside the tents, camper vans and the old bus but no one was moving about, the storm having kept them all in.

She slid down the roof, clambered down the side of the yurt. Looked around. She couldn't go back to her tent for clothes or belongings. Too dangerous. So she would have to just go. Head into the town, see what she could find there. Set out on her own. Just get away from here.

And that was how she had ended up in the battered old garage.

She didn't know where she was, or how long she had been running. All she knew was that she had to keep moving, that she couldn't stay where she was for too long. She couldn't think about Noah or the commune, or about how much Kai had hurt her. That



was all for later. No matter how cold she was, how wet, she would have to move on eventually.

So she opened the garage door, looked out. An old stone cottage was nearby. It looked empty. No lights on. Perhaps it was connected to the garage. Maybe a holiday let that no one would want out of season.

Looking around once more, knowing they could be anywhere, watching her, she left the garage and made her way quickly towards the back of the cottage.

It had to be warmer and drier than the garage.

4

The last of the Round Tablers – coming down to the bar for drinks after their meeting – eventually staggered off home and Tom and Pearl locked up the pub. Pearl called Tom stupid for venturing out along the cliffs when a storm was brewing and he had, reluctantly, agreed. She had insisted he couldn't do it again, especially not at night when the weather and darkness combined to make the path even more treacherous and had first offered him to stay the night in one of the many unused beds in the hotel upstairs. After he had politely turned the offer down she had insisted on driving him. Grateful, he thanked her and said yes.

She pulled up as near to the front of his cottage as she could. He was renting a place in Port Cain, just along the coast from St Petroc. When he first discovered it he had been surprised that somewhere so small actually had a name. A few stone cottages, mostly in bad repair, a shingle beach and cliffs on either side. Not even big enough to encourage tourists, developers or TV drama makers. But perfect for him.

Pearl looked at him. He knew he was expected to say something. 'Thank you.'

'You're welcome. I saved you from a soaking.'

She was right. The rain had, if anything, intensified during the journey.

'You going to be OK getting home?' He asked out of politeness because no matter how much he enjoyed her company he just wanted to get inside, wrap himself up in solitude, and not have to make conversation he wasn't being paid for.

She must have read his mind. 'I'd better be getting back.'

He thanked her again for the lift and got out. If there was a slight awkwardness between them, boss and employee together

outside working hours, he didn't feel it. Or if he did, ignored it. As he approached the door he looked back at the car. She was still sitting there, watching him. He couldn't gauge her expression. Told himself the rain stopped him from doing so.

He waited until she had turned the car round and pulled away, then opened the door of his cottage. And stopped dead.

He heard a noise. Noise meant movement. Which in turn meant someone was inside.

He froze, the door key still in his hand. His first thought: *they've found me.*

Standing as still as he could, he listened. Tried to pinpoint the location of the noise over the blare of the wind. The back of the house. The kitchen.

As quietly as possible, without closing the front door in case he needed to get away quickly, and with the keys held firmly in his hand, the only weapon he could find close by, he stealthily made his way towards the kitchen.

As he crept along the hallway, he could see a figure through the open kitchen door, silhouetted against the window on the far wall. The window had been broken; rain blew in through the shattered panes.

He moved closer.

The figure hadn't heard him. He tried to force his eyes to become accustomed to the dark. Then didn't need to. A sudden light illuminated his invader. A girl, a teenager, he thought, bedraggled and shivering. Wearing too little clothing for the weather outside. And raiding his fridge.

Conflicting emotions ran through him. Relief at it not being whom he had expected. Confusion, amusement even, at who it actually was. And further puzzlement over how he was going to deal with the situation.

'Hey,' he said softly, knowing that if he said anything more she might just run. And he wasn't angry with her for breaking in. Curious, more than anything.



She froze, the full rabbit in the headlights. Or rather fridge light. He saw that she was about to bolt, held up his hands to show he meant her no harm.

‘Hey,’ he said again, ‘It’s OK. It’s OK. I’m not going to hurt you.’ He slowly stretched over, put his keys down on the kitchen table. ‘It’s OK. It’s OK.’

Sensing no immediate threat, the girl relaxed slightly but still stood her ground, ready for fight or flight if she had to, a lump of cheese in her hand as a weapon.

‘Help yourself,’ he said, pulling out a chair and sitting by the table. ‘Not much in there, though. Been meaning to stock up. Unless you like bacon. D’you like bacon? I could do you a bacon sandwich. And a cup of tea. Fancy that?’

The girl looked around, eyes darting to all corners of the room, sensing a trap.

‘There’s just me,’ he told her. ‘And I’m not going to hurt you. Put the light on instead of standing there in the dark.’ He pointed to the wall where the switch was. She gingerly reached out and, eyes never leaving him, turned on the light. ‘There. That’s better.’

She stared at him and he realised for the first time just what a state she was in. Her clothing was thin, ripped and torn and covered in mud. It looked like she had been running through thorns. Very large thorns. Her hair was likewise matted and tangled. But it was her fingers he noticed the most. Bleeding and sore-looking, like she had tried to claw her way out of something.

‘Sit down,’ he said. ‘Please. I’ll put the kettle on.’

She did so. And sat round the opposite side of the table, as far away from him as possible.

He stood up carefully, not making any sudden movement, lifted the kettle and crossed to the sink, filled it. Switched it on. Turned back to her. ‘Bacon sandwich? Or bacon and eggs?’

‘I . . . either.’

‘How about bacon and eggs with toast?’ He looked at what she was still holding in her hand. ‘With cheese if you want.’



She nodded. He set about making it.

She sat in silence while he prepared the meal, occasionally eating from the lump of cheese until it had disappeared. She volunteered nothing about herself and he didn't ask, not wanting to appear to be interrogating her, at least not until she had been fed. He glanced at her as he cooked, though. There was something familiar about her. He couldn't immediately place her, but he knew he had seen her before. Probably something to ask her when she felt more confident about talking.

So much for his solitude.

Although he found the house warm after the cold outside, she was shivering. He took off his jacket, handed it to her. 'Put that on for now. I'll build a fire in a while. Get you warmed through.'

He placed the bacon and eggs on the table, mug of tea next to it. 'Knock yourself out.'

She devoured it like she was starving.

After she had finished he slid his own plate over to her. 'Think you need this more than me.'

She devoured that too.

Once finished she sat back. Looked at him. And in that look, her defences began to come down. 'Thank you,' she said.

He shrugged. 'No problem. So,' he said, head cocked to one side, studying her, 'you're not a thief, I can see that. You wouldn't have broken in here if you weren't hungry.'

She nodded.

'And you look scared. So you must have been really hungry to let that overtake your fear.'

She didn't reply.

He leaned across the table towards her. She instinctively drew back. He stopped moving. 'Look, all I'm saying is, you needn't be scared. Not now. I'm not going to hurt you.'

She looked at him as though she wanted to believe, but still couldn't allow herself to.

‘What’s your name?’ he asked. ‘I’m Tom.’

Her mouth moved but nothing came out. He could tell she was deciding whether to tell the truth or make something up. ‘Lila,’ she said eventually.

‘Lila. Nice name. Pleased to meet you, Lila. So what’s got you so scared?’

Her lips clammed together. Eyes widened. Wrong question. Or rather right question, he thought, but too soon.

‘Look, whoever, whatever it is, if you want to tell me, that’s fine. If not . . .’ He shrugged.

Why had he said that? Most people would immediately attempt to detain their intruder and call the police. He tried to analyse his actions. As far as he could tell, there was nothing malicious about Lila’s break-in. She was hungry, wet and cold. There was also an element of relief for Tom that she wasn’t who he had first imagined it might be. The remnants of his former life finally catching up with him. So why did he care who this girl was and what she was running away from? Was it for the same reason he found himself extra jobs to do in the bar? To stave off boredom, to not have to think too much? Or did he have another motive, one he couldn’t yet admit even to himself?

‘They . . . it’s all about the boy,’ she eventually said.

He was startled by her words. ‘The boy?’

‘The one who went missing, on the TV. His parents . . .’ She sighed. ‘It wasn’t . . . wasn’t me. I did . . . I saw . . . I didn’t think they would . . . Not Noah, not even Noah . . . and Kai . . .’ She sighed. ‘The boy. The missing boy. He was . . . Crow . . . the Morrigan . . .’

Before she could speak further, they heard a voice.

‘Hello? The door was open . . .’