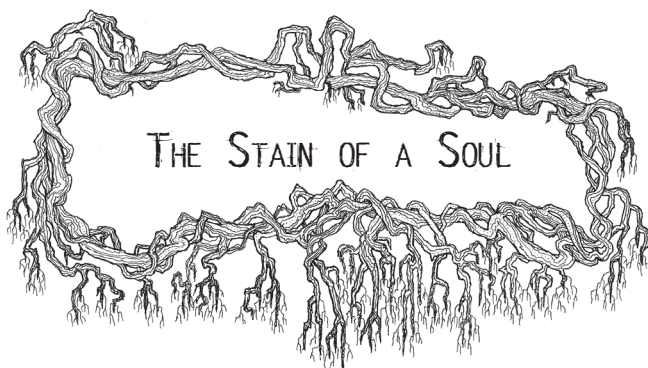


***I**t started the day I fell from the tree at Mormor's cabin in Norway. The day I became blind in one eye.*

I'm going to write it all down here, no matter how crazy it makes me sound. If I have a daughter one day, she deserves to know the truth –

The truth.

Why couldn't Mum have just told me? The thought is like a knot in my brain, and the more I pick, the tighter it gets. If I had known, I could have done something and no one would have died. If she had told me, the horror of these past few days might never have happened.



My stomach shrinks to a hard ball as we pull into Heathrow. The platform is heaving with people. Holding my rucksack in front of me, I grit my teeth and push my way through the crowd. As people brush past me I get flashes of their lives – their memories and emotions – but it happens so fast I can't make sense of it.

My hands are sweaty as I pull my phone from my pocket. I check the time, then wish I hadn't. Last check-in is in fifteen minutes. I *can't* miss this flight.

A train pulls into the platform opposite and dozens of passengers spill out. Worried their clothes will touch me, I veer left and head for the escalator. A man passes me, coming up the other way, and for a horrible

moment I think it's Dad, but it's just some other grey businessman.

Inside the departure hall people rush around me, dragging reluctant suitcases and even more reluctant children. The noise is like a swarm of bees, all wanting to sting me. It's not just the hubbub of conversation. The air sparks and crackles – it's like their clothes *know* I'm here, walking among them.

A wet-faced toddler wobbles in my direction, hands outstretched, closely followed by a tired-looking woman. I swerve but not quickly enough to avoid her brushing my arm. The woman had five miscarriages before she had her daughter. She's pregnant again but lies awake at night, terrified she might lose this baby too. My chest aches with emptiness, her loss so sharp it makes me catch my breath. I walk away, then glance back at her red coat. I've been through Mum's wardrobe enough times in the past few months to know it must be at least fifty-per-cent cashmere. Wool holds a person's emotions but cashmere is different – it makes you feel them.

Spotting the familiar sign for Scandinavian Airlines, I head towards the check-in desk, then stumble over a suitcase and nearly go flying.

'Hey! Watch it!' a man snaps.

'Sorry. I didn't see. Sorry,' I mumble.

'It might help if you took off your sunglasses!'

I join the back of the queue, my face burning with embarrassment. Being blind in one eye messes with your depth perception. I can't work out distances; when

I focus on something in the foreground it makes stuff in the distance go blurry. It wasn't a problem at home because I know where everything is, but now . . . if I can't even make it across the airport without falling over, how am I going to make it to Norway?

I hold the silver charm around my neck and tell myself to get it together. I've done the journey with Mum lots of times, and I had no problem travelling around London by myself before the accident. I just need to focus.

There are two families ahead of me; if they're quick maybe I can still make my flight. I rummage through my bag and pull out my printed e-ticket and ferry pass to Skjebne. You pronounce it *Sheb-na* – heavy on the Shh, which is kind of fitting, as it turns out. We used to spend every summer there – Dad too before he left us – but since the accident Mum refuses to talk about the island or Mormor, my grandma.

'Next customer, please.'

I step forward and lay my passport and e-ticket on the desk.

'Where are you travelling to today, miss?'

'Bodø. Well, Skjebne, actually. But I have to change flights at Oslo and then get the ferry from Bodø. And it's Martha Hopkins. My name, that is.' My face reddens. I sound like such an idiot.

As I put my rucksack on the scales, the woman behind the desk leans over and whispers to her colleague before turning back to me. I stare at my feet, convinced she can tell I'm a runaway just by looking at me.

'Can you remove your sunglasses, please?'

My voice is as shaky as my legs. 'Why? Is there a problem?'

'I need to verify you're the person shown in the passport photo.' She glances behind me. 'Travelling alone? No parent or guardian?'

'No, but I'm seventeen and your website said –'

'The picture in this passport shows a much younger child.'

I bite my thumbnail as she slides my passport across the desk, open at the page with my photo, as if I don't already know what it looks like. I glance at the image of the pale-faced girl with long blonde hair and quickly look away. I hate seeing pictures of me from before.

'I've always been small for my age,' I blurt, then feel instantly stupid.

She studies the photo and I clutch my necklace. Most of the jewellery I made after the accident was rubbish, yet this piece came out perfectly. The feel of its cool edges always calms me. I love metal; it tells me nothing.

I take a deep breath. 'Look, I'm actually late. So if you could –'

'Take off your glasses, miss.'

Somebody behind me tuts. I snatch off my shades and stare at the woman, or rather my right eye does. My left eye is looking who knows where. Her eyes widen, then flick down to my passport. 'Thank you. A last call was put out for your flight five minutes ago.'

You'll have to be quick. Gate 33 – up the escalator and to your left.'

I shove my glasses back on with a trembling hand and turn away, but not quick enough to avoid seeing her pity smile. I don't have to touch her clothes to know what she's thinking. Her thoughts are written all over her face: poor girl, how terrible, she would be pretty too, if it weren't for that. A patronising look and then she moves on, anxious to lay eyes on someone who doesn't look a freak.

At the top of the escalator I go through security, where I have to take off my sunglasses and necklace again. Thankfully people are too busy patting their pockets for loose change that isn't there to notice my face. Once I'm through the metal detector, I snatch my stuff from the plastic tray, replace my shades and hurry to my boarding gate.

An air stewardess wearing a jaunty blue hat looks at my pass and shakes her head.

My heart lurches. 'Please. I *really* need to get this flight.'

She takes in my trainers. 'You can run?' I grin and she ushers me onto the connecting air bridge and we rush to the end. When we get to the plane I put my necklace on, grateful to feel its cool silence against my skin.

Everyone is seated, ready for take-off. I walk along the aisle, searching for my place. Boarding the plane was always the most exciting part of the journey when I was little. Now the thought of being crammed in a

box with strangers makes me feel sick. I look at the people around me: a white fur coat bristling with outrage; a chunky knit heavy with sorrow. I can't tell what secrets they hold just by looking at them, but it's hard to stop my imagination sometimes.

I find my row and my heart sinks. There's a huge man next to the aisle, and my seat is by the window. Brian – according to the stretched name on his rugby shirt – is wearing earphones, and his eyes are closed.

'Excuse me, I need to get in.'

No response.

A flight attendant is heading this way, folding up tray tables and opening blinds with the determination of a trained assassin. I raise my voice, but Brian doesn't hear. The normal thing would be to touch his shoulder, but I don't want his rugby shirt to speak to me. Maybe I should prod his face. In the end I pull down his tray table, bashing it against his knees. He jumps awake and grumbles, then stands to let me pass.

I smile a thank-you, then stash my coat and try to make myself as small as possible. Luckily my own clothes tell me nothing. I guess it's like the way you can't smell your own scent.

My phone bleeps: a message from Mum asking if I've arrived at Dad's. I text back straight away, then turn my phone to flight mode. My parents have barely spoken since the divorce; as long as I reply, there should be no reason for her to call Dad.

The plane speeds up and I feel myself pushed back into the seat as the ground rumbles beneath me.

Suddenly Brian's elbow nudges mine. An onslaught of facts washes over me – they come so fast and hard I can barely keep up with them. His mother would lock him in a room as a child. Some nights he dreams he's still there, crying for his mummy. My breath catches. Anger, fear, rejection. They come at me in waves.

I flinch, then rub my head and try to make sense of the jumbled impressions in my brain. His rugby top must be made of polyester. Man-made fibres don't breathe; they throw things at you like a sobbing toddler too distraught to come up for air.

The world tips away beneath me and my stomach turns. I close my eyes until I feel the plane level off. When I look out of the window there is nothing but pale empty blue. The light bouncing off the wing of the plane is brilliant white – too pure, almost.

I close my eyes and instantly I'm back in hospital: waking up to blackness. Just remembering the feel of the bandages on my face makes me shudder. Maybe it was the shock, but after I came round, I couldn't stop shivering. Mum draped her jacket around my shoulders and then . . . even now I can't explain. Something wrenched apart inside me, as if a gust of wind had banged a door open. I saw myself under the tree, my blonde hair caked with blood, and then I felt a rush of emotion: fear mixed with guilt and love. Feelings that I knew weren't mine.

At first I was convinced I must have imagined it – until it happened again. After the operation they weren't sure how much of my sight had been saved.

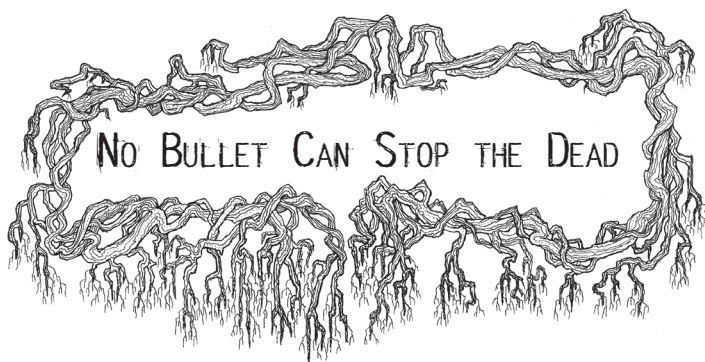
When the doctor unfurled the bandages from my eyes, his jacket sleeve brushed my cheek. As soon as the material touched me, I saw an image of a bearded man in a reflection of a hearse window, his face pale and drawn. The man's father had died and left everything to his new wife. My heart twisted with jealousy. I could almost taste the bitterness he felt. The doctor removed the last of my bandages and I blinked in disbelief – he was the man I had seen.

That night I lay awake, terrified I was losing my mind. I told myself I must have been hallucinating, even though deep down I knew it was real. The hospital psychiatrist came to see me, concerned how I was coping with my disfigured face, but I didn't tell him anything. If he knew I can tell a person's secrets just by touching their clothes, I wouldn't be on a plane right now. I'd be listening to the ramblings of a strait-jacket.

Brian takes out a book and cracks open the spine. Anyone who does that is not a good person as far as I'm concerned. It's up there with cruelty to kittens and nose-picking in public. Yet I can't help feeling sorry for him. If I touched his top again, maybe I could offer him some words of comfort. Something tells me his mother couldn't help the way she was. I'm sure lots of mental illnesses went undetected in previous generations; nowadays she would be given medication. Like Mum.

Thinking about Mum makes my head pound. I turn my shoulder to Brian and snap the blind shut. His

life is none of my business, and besides, what can I say that will make a difference? The past will always haunt him. Pain like that stays with you; it seeps out of your pores and into the fibres of your clothes, and nothing can remove the stain of a soul.



Wearing dark shades at night is a risky strategy, even if your eyesight is normal. People won't see my horrible eye, but bouncing off walls and stumbling over toddlers is pretty much guaranteed to draw attention. Luckily Bodø ferry terminal is brightly lit. Not that I have to worry. Apart from the woman behind the kiosk across the hall, I'm the only one here.

I unscrew the cap of my Coke and the fizz sounds weirdly loud. There's something creepy about busy places when they're deserted, like a school at night with rows of empty desks, or a fairground with no blaring lights or music.

When we came before, Mum used to pick up a rental car from Bodø airport and drive us onto the

vehicle ferry. At least being on foot means I can get the express boat. Just as well – I'm going to be knackered by the time I get there.

Suddenly it hits me. How can I have been so stupid? Mum isn't here to drive me from the harbour to Mormor's. Even if there was a taxi service on the island, which there isn't, I couldn't afford it. When we get to Skjebne I've got a long walk ahead of me – in the dark. Too late now. I haven't got the money to go back even if I wanted.

My phone bleeps with a text from Kelly. *What time you getting here hun? Hope you've got something sexy to wear, Darren is coming x*

The party! I'd forgotten. I hate missing out, but then Kelly's cousin Darren is the last person I want to see my face. I've been flirting with him on and off for about a year. We kissed at her last birthday party, and I always thought . . . Well, it doesn't matter what I thought.

I text back: *Sorry Kels can't make it. On way to see Mormor. Was a last minute thing. Waiting for ferry now!*

I feel bad for letting Kelly down, but I was always planning to make some excuse and bail. She thinks it's because of how I look, but it's not just that. I can't face being in a room with lots of people. I've tried wearing gloves but it makes no difference; people's clothes only have to brush mine for me to know their secrets.

My fingers grip my phone so hard my knuckles turn white. I can't even go to my best friend's party! If I

don't get rid of this thing, how am I ever going to go to university or have a life? Being able to tell things about people seems like this amazing gift, but it's not. Not when I can't control the flood of emotions I get. Knowing someone's secrets doesn't make you feel closer to them – it pushes you away. There are some things you don't want to know, trust me.

My phone bleeps: *What?! Is that a good idea? Text when u arrive. Worried about u x*

I sigh and drop my phone on the table. Kelly is just like Mum. She thinks I should stop hiding in my room and go back to school. They want me to forget about the accident and move on – but they don't understand. I told Kelly about my weird ability once. She hugged me and said she believed me, but her raincoat was so full of doubt I could practically feel the disbelief dripping from it. After that, I kept it to myself.

I glance around the deserted terminal and shiver, feeling suddenly alone. I take out my wallet and flick through the colourful foreign notes: I have 100 NOK left, less than a tenner. Echoes mock my steps as I cross the hall. When I get to the kiosk, the assistant's head snaps up like the dead waking. I spend the last of my money on chocolate cookies – one dark and one white. My grandma has a terrible sweet tooth; we can celebrate my arrival by eating them together.

Before me, blue ropes mark the winding path to the exit. Silly to walk miles for no reason. I shove my rucksack under and duck after it. It feels a little bit wrong, even though there's no one to queue. Blowing

my last dime on cookies *and* bucking the system. I can almost hear what Kelly would say: *You need to get out more, girl.*

I touch the charm around my neck and feel bad for being cross with her. I know she cares about me. Kelly wears her heart on her sleeve – and unlike some people, I don't have to touch her clothes to know she loves me.

'*Eie du ingen skam?*' calls a voice. This time it's not just the kiosk assistant who startles. Three teenage boys appear behind me, laughing. They're older than me by a couple of years. One of them holds a can of beer. Tall with fair hair, freckles and white teeth – a typical good-looking island boy. I carry on walking and he calls again. '*Ingen skam!*' I have no idea what it means, but he's so cute I can't help smiling.

When I get to the exit doors, I glance back. The boy is sprawled across a seat, chatting to his friends. He raises his beer in a friendly gesture and I half smile, then turn away, my face hot. I'm rubbish with boys, never mind ones that speak a different language. Besides, he's hardly going to be interested in me.

Outside, the night air is so cold it takes my breath away. A razor-sharp wind cuts into my face and blows my hair about, tugging me in every direction. I head towards the ferry and rub my arms with relief – I'll soon be at Mormor's. She might pretend to tell me off, but I know she'll be pleased I came. The thought of seeing her warms my insides. My grandma gives the best hugs.

'*Hei, fina!*' The boy again. I walk a little quicker but don't turn around. There's no one else. He must be shouting at me. A few more steps to the boat and I can hide inside.

Ouch.

Something slams against my leg. A metal post. I wince and rub my thigh. Definitely too dark for sunglasses. I snatch them off, annoyed, but without them I feel naked.

'*Hei!* Beautiful girl!' A hand on my shoulder. The boy jumps in front of me, his beer sloshing out on the wooden walkway. His grin vanishes, replaced by a look of horror, quickly followed by embarrassment. He throws up his hands and backs away. 'Sorry, sorry!' His friends see my face and howl with laughter.

I stand frozen to the spot and watch as they jostle each other onto the ferry. Is this what my life is going to be like now? Once the boys have boarded, I hurry towards the boat, the metal gangplank bouncing under my feet. At the top, I hold the door to steady myself and quickly step aboard.

I look for a dark corner where I can curl up and die, but raucous laughter from the bar persuades me to brave the upper deck. Even if it's not well lit, there probably won't be many people to stare. I put on my glasses, then grab the metal handrail and climb the steep stairway. Footsteps sound behind me. My pulse quickens. They're too close, gaining on me.

'*Hei?*'

I turn and see a tall man with a bushy grey beard.

He looks familiar, but I can't place him. His weather-worn face crinkles into a smile as he jabs a thumb to his chest. 'Olav.'

Relief washes over me. He lives on a farm a few miles from Mormor. I barely know him, but it's wonderful to see someone I recognise.

He follows me up the remaining steps and stands next to me on deck. In his hand is a long metal box, the kind that holds a snooker cue or a rifle. We haven't spoken before, though Mormor often chatted to him on our walks. He looks different: older and more stooped.

'Ja, det e dæ. Marta!'

He says my name the Norwegian way, and speaks in the lilting, sing-song cadence I know so well – an accent Mormor shares but Mum has pretty much lost.

I smile awkwardly and pull a strand of hair from my mouth. He says something, but the wind yanks my hood over my head and I can't hear. 'Sorry, what?'

He points at my face. 'Ditt øye?' I don't know if Mormor told him about the accident. She never came to the hospital – not that I'm surprised; I don't think she's ever left the island, and we flew straight home to London afterwards. I haven't seen or spoken to her since.

I shrug, feeling glad when Olav leaves it at that. We stand in silence, watching the twinkling lights of the shoreline get smaller as the ferry pulls away.

He strokes his beard, then peers around me as if expecting to see someone. 'Why no . . . ?' When I don't

answer, he rubs a thumb across his lip. 'Ja.' He says it the way all Norwegians do, on the in-breath. I wish I could help, but my Norwegian is worse than his English. He frowns and asks something about Mormor, but falls silent when I don't understand.

Holding the rail with both hands, I lean over and lick the salt-tang of the sea from my lips. The ferry pitches from side to side as it bounces through the waves. I like the feeling. The faster we go, the sooner I'll get to Skjebne.

Olav raises a finger to indicate he'll be back. He points to the metal case at my feet and I nod to say I'll look after it. There are a few couples on deck but no one close by. I slide my glasses up and gaze in wonder at the glorious full moon and sparkling sea. The night is so wild and free and full of possibility I want to drink it in.

A seagull cries overhead and I think about the last time I saw Mormor. She took me out to the tree the day before the accident, then gave me her gloves to hold and told me to listen. I tried, but all I could hear was the lonely cry of a gull.

'Keep trying, my child, and one day you will hear,' she said. When I asked *what* I would hear, she wouldn't tell me. She had done the same thing when I was younger. Took me to the tree, put her shawl around me and told me to listen.

I think about all the letters I've written her in the last few months, asking the same question over and over: Why can I tell things about people by touching

their clothes? I was so worried when she didn't write back, I thought she must be sick or that she'd had an accident. Mormor doesn't have a phone, so I begged Mum to call someone on the island and ask them to check on her. Mum told me not to worry; Skjebne often has problems with its postal service. I actually believed her – until I touched her silk blouse. Mum put her arm around me to comfort me, and I saw an image of her hands burning an envelope at the kitchen sink.

Mum had bought the blouse a few days ago, and it was the first time I'd touched silk. I know from going through her wardrobe that different types of fabric reveal their secrets differently – cashmere holds a person's emotions and makes you feel them like your own; cotton shows images and facts without emotion – but silk is like nothing else. It speaks of deceit.

I rub my head, angry with myself for not figuring out Mum's lies sooner. Olav reappears and I quickly drop my shades into place. He's clutching two polystyrene cups and two *Kvikk Lunsj*. I recognise the striped red, yellow and green packaging instantly: the Norwegian version of Kit-Kat. He gestures for me to help myself and I take the cup and chocolate with a smile. The coffee is hot with no milk or cream to dilute it.

Olav sips, stroking his beard. When he thinks I'm not looking, he studies me with a worried frown. Several times he starts to say something, then stops. Most Norwegians speak perfect English, but it's different for some of the older generation.

Rain. At first one or two drops, then it hammers. Olav grimaces and gestures below deck. I hurry down the steps after him, grateful when he makes his way to the far side of the ferry, furthest from the bar. I take off my coat and we sit next to each other in silence punctuated by awkward smiles.

To pass the time, I scroll through photos on my phone. Mormor's elkhound dog, Gandalf – I was so pleased when she let me name him; some shots of the harbour, and a selfie of us having a midnight picnic on the beach. In summer it never gets dark. They call it the land of the midnight sun, and that's how I think of it: a place where I was free and happy, an endless summer.

I come to a photo of Mormor at her spinning wheel, her long blonde hair in plaits. The evenings when she told stories were my favourite. My heart would thud to the beat of her foot as she spun her words into the yarn – filling the cabin with magic and wonder. Her tales usually revolved around my ancestors, women who had all kinds of strange adventures, but sometimes she would speak of the terrifying *draugr*, the dead who walk again at night or under the cover of fog. After one of her scarier stories I would insist on taking a candle to bed. 'Blow it out before you sleep now,' she'd say. 'You don't want the dead to find you!' I knew she was only joking, but some nights I lay awake in fear, every creak of the floorboards a walking corpse. When I called out, Mormor would be there, smoothing my hair and singing me a lullaby. Sometimes she would

vow to stop telling me frightening stories, but they were my favourite ones and I would always ask to hear them again.

As we arrive at Skjebne, Olav grabs my rucksack and insists on carrying it. I thank him with one of the few words I know –‘*Takk*’– and he rewards me with a thumbs up in reply. If only I knew the Norwegian to ask for a lift.

As I wait for the ferry doors to open, a grin spreads across my face. I made it! I actually made it! My smile doesn't last long. An icy gust slams into me, pushing me backwards. The wind screams past my ears as Olav's hand steadies me from behind.

No bullet can stop the dead.

I shudder and turn around, but there's only Olav. I'm sure I heard a raspy voice, but maybe it was just the wind.

I keep my head down and battle up the slope, boots crunching on ice as sharp as broken glass. Beneath me, waves suck and splash at the harbour wall. At the top, I push my glasses up on my head, but what I see isn't Skjebne. At least not the Skjebne I know. The cheerful red fishermen's cabins that stand on stilts along the water's edge are gone. In their place are wooden huts the colour of dried blood, brooding over the waves with dark intent. Even the jagged mountains beyond seem sharper in their shroud of winter white.

I follow Olav as he trudges around the huts, the path beneath our feet obscured by mist. The red is faded in places. From a distance, it seemed as if they'd

been bleached by the sun, but looking up I see dozens of seagulls nesting under the dark pitched roofs. The vertical lines of white are streaks of birds' mess. In summer I loved to hear the gulls cry as they circled above the boat. It felt like my own special welcome party. With only the crash of waves and bluster of the wind, the night seems strangely quiet.

Olav walks past an old guesthouse with what looks like a 'for sale' sign, then enters a small gravel car park. Beyond it is a line of A-shaped wooden frames, taller than a house. In summer there would be hundreds of stockfish hanging down like fruit, drying in the sun. Now they're dark and empty, a gallows with no one to hang.

The throaty caw of a raven makes me jump. It swoops past my head, then lands on a wooden post. I step back, a little nervous. Most wild creatures don't get that close. But then I remember how Mormor used to feed a raven from her hand on the porch each morning . . . and these ones are probably just tame thanks to the tourists giving them titbits. The raven plumps its grey-feathered chest and fixes me with a beady stare before cawing again.

Olav gestures to an old blue Volvo, the only vehicle in the car park. I shout, '*Takk*,' but the wind whips away my words. He throws my bag onto the backseat and holds open the door, but I hesitate. Mum has warned me so many times never to get in a car with someone I don't know. But then Mormor has always seemed friendly with him and his wife, and it's got

to be safer than walking in the dark on my own. I glance at the deserted car park and climb inside, happy to escape the sting of the wind.

Olav starts the engine and turns a dial to demist the windscreen. He sneaks a look at my eye, then coughs awkwardly. Even if he could speak English, I doubt he'd know what to say.

'*Bo hos mæ?*' He jabs a thumb to his chest. '*Hjemme til han Olav?*'

I shake my head, then rub my hands together. Even with my gloves, they are numb from the cold.

He tries again. 'Olav's *hus?*'

Finally I understand. Why does he want to take me to his place? Unease ripples through me. I reach for the door handle – maybe I should get out.

Olav looks alarmed. '*Med Yrsa! Wife Yrsa!*'

I smile with relief, but as much as I'm grateful for the lift, I haven't come all this way to see him or his wife.

'Mormor house. I want to see Mormor.'

Olav grips the wheel with both hands and gives me a serious look. Maybe he's worried about me travelling on my own. He starts to say something in Norwegian, but gives up when I shrug and smile apologetically.

He drives in silence, seemingly lost in thought. When he takes the road to Mormor's cabin, I sit a little taller. She'll be so surprised, I can't wait to see her. She'll throw an extra log on the stove and brew some coffee and I'll give her the cookies. After that I'll explain why I had to come.

Olav stops the car and I peer out of the windscreen at Mormor's little cabin on top of the hill. Maybe it's the shadowy moonlight, but the plants on the roof look like they've doubled in size. Lots of rural buildings in Norway have living roofs as insulation, and Mormor is proud of the neat rows of herbs she grows in summer. Now the roof seems overgrown with weeds and there's even a miniature Christmas tree up there.

A light comes on. Good, she's still awake. Olav stares at the cabin, wide-eyed. Surely he isn't going to drop me here, at the end of a dirt track? He rubs a thumb across his lip and looks at the house and back to me. When I don't say anything, he drives up to the cabin and then points at the house. '*Mora di*, yes?' I don't know what he means, but I nod anyway.

We get out of the car and he lifts my rucksack from the back seat. I grab it and we have an awkward tussle as he tries to carry it for me. In the end I hold it to myself with a firm *takk*. I know how Mormor likes to chat and I want her all to myself.

Olav offers me his bare hand, which I shake. Unable to say much else, I smile and repeat, '*Takk . . . takk . . .*' again and again. I honestly can't thank him enough. The idea of walking all that way in the dark makes me shudder. He raises his hand and says something else about *mora di*, then gets into his car and drives away.

Without the lights of the vehicle, the night is that much blacker. I turn to the cabin as a cloud drifts across the moon, throwing it into shadow. Like

everything else, it looks different to when I've been in summer. Darker and smaller; hunched in on itself. I glance at the weeds rustling on the roof. They make the place seem neglected, abandoned almost.

A mound of logs sits next to the woodshed, waiting to be chopped. I walk past them, then climb the few rickety steps to the porch and knock at the wooden door. An icy drop of rain lands on my face, making me shiver. I wish I'd let Olav see me inside. I knock again, louder this time. Where is Mormor? Even if she was in the bath she should be able to hear. It's not exactly a big place.

A gust of wind flings grit in my face and I turn away. Then I catch sight of it. The twisted tree. At first it's just a blurred shape at the bottom of the garden, shaking in the breeze. I squint and its black branches come into focus. It looks even more gnarled and ancient than I remember. I don't blame the tree for the accident; it was my fault for losing my footing. Even so, seeing it makes me shiver.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

I hammer on the door and scan the windows. Suddenly the light inside goes out, plunging the porch into darkness. My heart leaps into my throat. Why would she turn it off? I blink as my sight adjusts to the pale moonlight. The wind is so loud Mormor can't have heard me knock, that's all. She must have turned off the light and gone to bed.

I peer through the dark window and see an oil lamp on the table, its flame dying. Mormor would never go

to bed and leave a flame burning, even a low one. Something is wrong.

'Mormor, it's me, Martha!'

A shape inside the cabin darts past the window. My legs turn to water. I'm sure it was a man, bent low. Why is there a man in Mormor's kitchen? There has to be an explanation. Think, Martha. Where is Gandalf? Why isn't he barking? Maybe a burglar poisoned the dog. Or maybe Mormor went somewhere with him. Maybe she's looking after a sick neighbour, and that's what Olav was worrying about.

I grab my bag, the taste of vomit in my mouth. My hands shake as I scrabble for my phone. One bar. Even if I get through to Mum or Dad, what are they going to do?

My pulse quickens as a shadow races behind me. *Get a grip, would you?* It's just a cloud passing in front of the moon. But what if Mormor is in trouble and needs me? I can't stay out here. I sling my bag over my shoulder and gently nudge the door. It opens with a creak.

'Mormor?' My voice is barely a whisper. I reach to turn on the light, but I can't find the switch. I turn on the torch of my phone and hold it out before me, then lick my lips and swallow. The sound that comes from my mouth is a frightened squeak. 'I know there's someone in here. I saw you from outside.'

I scan the kitchen to my right. The oil lamp gutters on the wooden table, its flame casting strange shadows about the room. The little dresser is there with its row

of blue flowery crockery. The colourful rag rug is where it should be. Mormor's books are all in place. The wooden chairs are tucked neatly under the table.

The kitchen smells strange – of boiled potatoes and vinegar. The tap drips with a rhythmic *plop*. A pan and dirty plates are stacked on the draining board. Mormor would never do that. What's going on?

My fingers tighten on the strap of my rucksack as I enter the open-plan living room. Embers glow red in the cast-iron stove to my left. It looks sinister in the dark: a pot-bellied monster on stumpy legs. Above it is the painting Mum did of the island, the choppy waves of the sea glinting in the half-light. The blue and white checked sofa facing it is empty. I go to the back of the cabin. Three more rooms: Mormor's bedroom, the spare room and the bathroom.

I walk on tiptoes, glancing in every direction. A creak of a floorboard makes me freeze. I spin to my left, expecting someone to jump out on my blind side, but there's just shadows. Forcing my legs to move, I make my way to Mormor's room. It's darker on this side of the cabin. I hold out my phone, but it only illuminates a tiny patch of wall. I hesitate outside her door.

Someone is breathing on the other side.

My heart skitters in my chest. I lean my ear against the wood and gasp. There's a faint shuffling sound.

What if they're doing something to Mormor? I have to stop them!

My hand trembles as I grasp the knob.

I open the door and scream. A boy is standing there. Tall and wiry, about the same age as me. He has long dark hair, a pale face and wears black eyeliner under his eyes. He stares at me and holds up his hands in a bizarre act of surrender, as if my phone is actually a gun.

Fear turns to rage. 'Who the hell are you?' For a crazy moment I think he must be an apparition, not a real human being. But a ghost wouldn't look so terrified.

'Sorry! I can explain, please. I can explain.' He says something in Norwegian, then tries again. 'Please, it's not what you think.'

My legs won't hold me a second longer. I collapse onto the bed while he stares at me like *I'm* the intruder.

'Where's my grandmother?'

He looks at me aghast, then says in a small voice, 'I only know what I heard.'

'Which is . . . ? What? Just tell me!'

'The woman who lived here is dead. Her funeral was last week.'