

# this last kiss

madeleine  
reiss

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*For my dear mother Valerie Unsworth,  
with love and kisses.*

*'The promise of such kisses . . . where would it carry us?  
No one could tell what lay beyond the closed  
chapter of every kiss.'*

*Lawrence Durrell*

# PROLOGUE

*December 2012*

She knew he was waiting for her back at the house and so she packed quickly, dismantling her old life – or what was left of it, after strangers had lived there and put their own mark on the place. There were only a few more boxes left to fill and then it would be done. She would take a deep breath, step out of the door for the last time and leave the key under the mat for the removal men.

She looked around at the empty room in which she had lived a half-life for so many years and she felt the pull of him still. She thought that maybe she always would. There were days when the sadness of the past took hold of her; when she thought of all the ways that she might have made things better, but she was beginning to understand that sorrow and regret for things left undone and unsaid were part of the deal. All she could do was hold love as close as possible, so that in the end it was worth the pain of its loss.

She took the last book down, the one right at the back of the shelf. She had time before she left for a quick look, just as a way of marking this ending and this beginning. The brown leather cover was worn, the gilt-edged pages a little swollen from a careless placing near a wet window, or maybe she and her grandmother had taken it to the beach. She couldn't remember now. *The Book of Kisses* – some of the tooled gold letters were rubbed, but inside the images were as vivid as ever. As

she carefully lifted the fragile tissue paper covering each of the captioned pictures, they glowed out at her as if they had been waiting for the light.

On page ten, Guinevere, her hair threaded with flowers, leaned down from her horse to kiss a glossy, armoured Lancelot.

*'Sir Lancelot stole a forbidden kiss from his Queen.'*

In another picture, Snow White's stepmother, her eyes dark and mad, stood with her plum-coloured lips fastened to the mirror.

*'She knew she was the most beautiful woman that had ever been born.'*

A buxom Maid Marion, her skirt tucked into the tops of her stockings, presumably for greater ease when climbing trees, swooned on a spring-green bank under Robin Hood's ardour.

*'The lovers embraced and a bird sang deep in the wood.'*

As a child, Rora had imagined her own life illustrated and captioned in this way, with her key moments taking place in forests and in rose-filled gardens, moments that were important enough to be rendered in deep red and teal and gold and covered in tissue paper.

The book also contained famous works of art . . . Rodin's lustrous marble lovers with their lips not quite touching; the clutching, ugly embrace of Judas in Caravaggio's frozen moment of treachery, *The Taking of Christ*; the fused faces of Mary Cassatt's *Mother and Child*; Brancusi's cubed essence of a kiss, his homely stone lovers cemented together for eternity. What captured Rora's imagination was that the kisses, in all their variety – maternal, illicit, erotic, sorrowful and duplicitous – were not an end in themselves, but rather a moment in a story that told of what had been and what was yet to come.

‘I knew as soon as I kissed him.’

Rora could hear her grandmother Isobel’s voice as clearly as if she was in the room.

‘I couldn’t tell where my body ended and his began.’

It was always this book that Isobel used to reach for when she was thinking about her late husband, and although the two of them were supposed to be doing Rora’s homework, Rora probably learned more than if they had stuck to crackling long division. Looking at the book always felt like a ceremony. The volume was opened with reverence so that its smooth pages were not marked, and then the green silk ribbon that served as a bookmark was delicately retrieved and laid across her grandmother’s lap. Isobel would flick through the pages in exactly the same fashion each time, until the book fell open as if by magic at the very place she claimed she was looking for. Rora learned to recite great chunks of poetry, and she became familiar with all of Shakespeare’s most famous love scenes.

Sometimes, inspired by the film quotations in the book, the two of them would make a note of the afternoon films in the *Radio Times*, making sure not to miss such breathless moments as the interrupted but extended kiss in Hitchcock’s *Notorious*, which Isobel timed as two-and-a-half minutes on the face of the Cupid clock in her living room, or Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr’s passionate surf-lapped clinch in *From Here to Eternity*. It was from the book and from her grandmother that Rora acquired the notion that love and romance, done properly, was central to everything. It made flowers twist in extravagant abundance. It made the sea foam. It turned marble into flesh.

‘How many kisses will you remember when you’re old like me?’ Isobel had once asked her granddaughter, smoothing Rora’s unruly hair off her forehead and holding her chin up towards the light, as if she was reading something in the girl’s face.

‘You may not believe it now, but you are looking at a woman with more than a few significant kisses to her name,’ she’d continued, with an arch glance.

‘Some of the kisses I remember with happiness, others not so much, but they are all part of my story, threaded together over the years like beads on a necklace.’

Even though Rora wanted to get back to him, longed for the feel of his arms around her, she was unable to stop the past from intruding and it held her there in the room. She sat on the dusty, wooden floor, marked all around by the ghosts of missing furniture, and memories filled her like a sky suddenly thick with swifts or the wriggling push of sheep bursting into a field. It was her version of *The Book of Kisses* that she remembered – the story of how she had arrived at this day, in this room, replete with the prospect of home and him, and a Christmas tree to decorate. The pictures she conjured up told their own story of loss and joy and had their own gleaming splendour.



# PART ONE

## Kiss 1

*'She had woken to find his lips on her mouth.'*

*15 May 1996*

The first time she kissed him was when she had just turned fourteen. Rora had barely talked to him before then. She had seen him once on Hastings pier with a group of other boys. He was showing off – bumping into his companions, balancing along the tops of benches, playing the fool. Something about his swagger and the way his dark hair fell over one eye had caught her attention, and she found herself staring after him. He didn't notice her looking, but one of his friends did and gave his companion a shove in her direction and made some jeering comment that made Rora blush and turn away. She heard one of them say his name . . . Carl. It suited him, she thought. It sounded compact and tough, as if everything would slide off him and leave him untouched.

He had joined her school in September, but although she watched him a lot, she never spoke to him. It seemed to her that he was always right in the centre of things, and she preferred the quiet edges where she could sit unseen. In the second term, they went on a school trip to Fairlight, a wooded area on the cliff to the east of the town. Their challenge was to identify four different types of fern and four wild flowers and press

them between blotting paper and cardboard under a flat stone. In a little clearing by a stream, they had learned how to put up tents and build a fire to cook foil-wrapped baked potatoes. She recalled the smell of damp, and rubber ground sheets, and the dry, sweet perfume of the ferns and the sensation of running fast, the earth soft under her feet. Above all, she remembered holding within herself an overwhelming anticipation of life and joy to come.

With the exception of Rora's best friend, Hannah, who eschewed boys in favour of a rather tired-looking pony called Rust, the rest of the girls in Rora's class were fixated on the quest to secure a boyfriend. Being away from the confines of the classroom had only served to intensify this obsession and the camp was rife with intrigue. Rora had caught Carl looking at her more than once and was both dazzled and terrified by his attention. The thought that he might at any moment come over and talk to her and that she then would have to find the right words made her feel queasy. She was torn by her desire to be near him and her desire to keep him away.

When the opportunity arose she slipped away. She went deeper into the woods, straight through the undergrowth, leaping over the low shrubbery, ignoring the nettles that stung her ankles and the stray branches that swung back and hit her face. A long swathe of bramble had caught the underside of her arm and fastened itself cruelly into the soft skin, drawing bright red pinpricks and livid scratches on the white. She sucked the blood from the wound, tasting the metal tang on her tongue. Although the beech and oak canopy blocked out much of the sun, she had stopped just at a point where the trees thinned out slightly and she felt the last of the day's heat on her upturned face. This was

the place where the bluebells were at their thickest, the mass of them seeming to hang in a purple mist above the ground.

She remembered being overcome with a feeling of heaviness as she rested against a tree trunk, as if the crashing run through the wood had used up the last of her energy. Her breathing was still quick after her exertions, and she could hear the low hum of life around her – the small stirrings in the leaves and twigs on the ground, the sound of water running thinly over rocks and a bird somewhere making a strange, trembling noise, as if unsure of its own song. She smelled the musk of earth trapped under its layer of vegetation and the mushroom scent of crumbling wood, and sensed the movements of wood lice, tiny legs exploring the crevices, wriggling through the bright moss.

It was as if everything she felt and saw that day was more pronounced, more vivid than usual – the sting of the scratches on her arm, the burning sensation of nettle rash spreading on her exposed calves, the blood beating in her neck, the way her new bra with its synthetic lace, bought optimistically a size too big, rubbed against her nipples, making them feel hot and sore. Her hair had fallen down while she was running and was warm against the back of her neck. She felt a tightening, a kind of clenching in her stomach when she thought about Carl, the way he swept his hair out of his eyes with the side of his hand and the set of his shoulders, straight and ready, as if he was always expecting a fight.

After a while she slid down the length of the trunk and rested her head against its sun-warmed expanse, and then when that didn't provide rest enough, she lay flat on the ground, her head cushioned by ferns. The leaves above her

had a quick, lime brightness to them, as if their sticky newness had caught the sun on their shining edges. She didn't know what to do with the feeling she had about Carl. She couldn't even pin it down. It moved in her – a kind of excitement, a kind of fear – even, though she couldn't quite explain it to herself, a kind of shame. Although Isobel and she had made romance their specialist subject, she hadn't been able to equate the glossy illustrations they looked at so often with the ragged, wounded way she felt. Young as she was, she had at least known why she had run from him. Running helped to keep the shivering longing away.

She wouldn't have imagined that she could fall asleep in such a place, but it was as if she had been drugged. She didn't hear his stealthy approach through the woods, nor did she see him standing looking at her as if what he saw made him fearful. She woke to find his lips on her mouth. Her first impulse was to push him away, but she saw his brown eyes, shining and intent above her, and felt his fingers in her hair, holding her head gently, and she closed her eyes again. And it was exactly as Isobel had said it would be. She felt the same melting softness her grandmother had described. She no longer knew where their bodies ended and the earth began.

### *May 2010*

It wasn't like May weather at all. The taxi was unbearably hot. The vanilla-scented cardboard tree hanging from the mirror did little to disguise the smell of sweat and a hastily eaten lunch. The driver had thick black hair, which glistened where it lay against the back of his neck.

‘Here on holiday?’ he asked in a vague attempt at politeness, although he could probably see from Rora’s face that she wasn’t the type to encourage conversation.

‘We are visiting my grandfather,’ said Ursula. ‘I’ve never met him before.’

Ursula was nine years old and sometimes a little too fond of imparting information that Rora would prefer to keep to herself.

‘He’s very ill,’ Ursula continued, tucking her hair behind her ears in that endearingly prim way she had, as if she felt let down by her head of wayward dark curls. By rights Ursula should have been born with a neat, sleek bob.

‘We are on an errand of mercy,’ she said.

‘Is that so?’ asked the taxi driver, looking at her in the mirror and smiling.

‘Yes. We have to give him medicine and drinks and check that his pillows are plumped up,’ Ursula said, and turned her attention once more to the contents of her purple, furry handbag.

Rora had lost count of the number of times her daughter had done this meticulous inventory during their journey from London: laying out the small pink hairbrush, the packet of unopened sweets, her best doll, a colouring book, a lucky stone, a feather, a box of plasters and – particularly important – the packet of wet wipes that she was forever pulling out with a triumphant air to mop up even the most minor of spillages and smears. Rora was concerned about her daughter’s constant need to check and recheck her possessions. She thought with a pang that perhaps this was part of what they had done to Ursula at school – made her feel as if her things might be taken away from her at any moment. She felt a familiar spurt of helplessness and anger. She should have protected her better.

Rora opened the window of the taxi and leaned out, breathing in the sharp tang of the sea rising clear above the smell of stalled traffic and the medicinal scent of the marigolds in the municipal beds. She felt the old dread. It lined the streets, it hung in the curtains of the passing windows, it lay like a mist over the golden, sandstone cliffs. She carried it with her always but, driving along these streets that she remembered so well, it was as if the story she had been trying to forget had come back into terrifying focus. When she was away from the place it had been possible to smudge the past and render it less vivid, but here there was no escaping it. She felt a rising panic, an irrational, almost chemical reaction, since surely now there would be nobody left to remember what had happened. It was a long time ago, she said silently in her most sensible, soothing voice, but she didn't feel reassured. Looking out of the window the fear of it was as vivid as if it had happened yesterday.

When Hannah had rung to tell her the news about her father, her immediate instinct had been to stop listening, to stick her fingers in her ears and make a chanting noise as she used to do as a child.

'He's very ill, Rora. I don't think he has long,' Hannah had said tentatively on the phone a month before, knowing that she was stepping on dangerous ground. 'He has leukaemia. I spoke to one of the nurses as she was coming out of the house.'

'And I'm supposed to care, why exactly?' said Rora, holding her phone away from her ear. Hannah had an unnecessarily loud telephone voice.

'I know you don't owe him anything at all. Nothing. It's just that you'll not get this chance again,' she said.

‘What if I don’t want the chance?’ said Rora, knowing that she was sounding childish, but unable to hide her resentment.

‘I’m thinking as much about you as about him,’ said Hannah, persisting even though she could hear the ice in Rora’s voice.

‘I’ve barely spoken to him for years. Why do you imagine I would want to see him now?’ she asked. ‘The man’s a cold bastard, and I don’t much care that he’s on his last legs.’

‘Rora!’ said Hannah, shocked at her harsh words. ‘You don’t really mean that.’

‘I do, you know,’ said Rora, smiling slightly at the outraged tone in Hannah’s voice.

‘Well, just think about it. If it’s too much to actually stay there, you’re always welcome here.’

‘I know I am,’ said Rora, her voice softening as she thought of Hannah’s warm, noisy house. She could picture her friend standing in her bright yellow hallway, scuffmarks all along the walls from muddy boots and bicycle handles. She would no doubt be wearing one of the appliquéd sweatshirts she was so fond of.

‘He’s the only father you’ve got. Anyway, I’ve got to go. The cat’s just crapped on the carpet,’ Hannah said, and rang off.

Hannah was surprised when Rora called a day later to say that she was coming back after all.

‘I’m so glad you decided to do the right thing,’ she said approvingly.

Rora wasn’t at all sure that she *was* doing the right thing. It had been an impulsive decision. One born not out of feelings of duty towards her father – she felt no such bond – but provoked simply by her desire to take Ursula to a place that was free of unhappy associations for her. Sea air, a new school, time spent

together, just the two of them – these things might be enough to restore her daughter's happiness. She didn't stop to think about the damage that coming back might do to herself.

Once she had made the decision, Rora did everything as quickly as possible so that she wouldn't have a chance to change her mind. The ease with which she made the arrangements to leave London revealed to her exactly how little there was attaching her to the life she had created for herself and Ursula there. She had done her research carefully before they left – ringing all the possible schools in Hastings and having lengthy conversations with a series of head teachers. The junior school she most liked the sound of, and which Hannah's daughter currently attended, was in the catchment area of Rora's father's house, and she had used the address and the fact of his illness to plead Ursula's case. At first she was told there were no places available and that it was too near the end of the year to be a practical option. But another phone call in which Rora mentioned that she wrote historical books for children and would be happy to come give to the school and do a talk, and even run a small workshop – plus the employment of a strategic wobble in her voice when talking about her ailing father – did the trick. The head teacher finally capitulated.

Rora let out her flat in Lewisham on a six-month contract and put a few personal possessions and the contents of Ursula's bedroom into storage. She was leaving behind no relationships that mattered – it required too much effort to create the necessary intimacy. She had finished her latest project the month before – a children's book written from the point of view of a girl of eight who was employed at Henry VIII's court as an acrobat – and she was able to take a break for a while until



she thought about what she wanted to write next. There would be a bit of a tour around schools and a few readings, but she could do that from anywhere. It wouldn't be long before Rora thought of her next idea – her head teemed with stories and she knew she was good at creating characters and situations children could identify with – but her priority now was to get Ursula away from her old life.

She could have gone anywhere, and yet she had come back to Hastings. Sitting in the taxi, letting herself be taken where she had vowed never to return suddenly seemed like madness. Perhaps she should tell the driver to turn around and take them back to the station. He would grumble and she would feel foolish, but she could still save herself. Her life had been easy to set aside and therefore just as easy to restore. She could find another school for Ursula in London, even if it meant selling the flat and moving somewhere else. She almost spoke her thoughts out loud, but just then Ursula turned to her with the wide, hopeful smile that her mother hadn't seen for a long time.

'It's going to be brilliant, isn't it, Mum?' she said. 'An adventure.'

And so Rora sat back and let the taxi drive on.

They turned off the seafront and started the ascent through the streets of the Old Town, passing a mixture of medieval timbered buildings and Georgian houses. It seemed that this part of town had no bearing on the rest of Hastings with its wind and sea-spoiled houses. It was as if the real living happened elsewhere, and these streets and their haphazard history no longer represented the true character of the place, but simply remained for show – the last vestiges of a grandeur that belonged to another time. She didn't allow herself to think about what it would be

like to see her father again, but she had a sudden image of the house, shuttered and dark, waiting for them. She thought of the attic set into the eaves, its tiny window high up in the wall. The room that none of them had gone into afterwards. The shock had never left her and she could feel it now, fizzing through her arms, making her throat tight.

When she was a young child she had loved the house's creaking floors and sloping ceilings and the fact there were so many places to hide. Coming home after being away, it had always seemed to embrace her because everything about it was known and loved – the warm patch on her bedroom floor above the boiler, the silky smoothness of the kitchen table against her arms, the gulping sound the water made as it came through the taps at bath time. A school friend had once stayed the night and had woken in terror, seeing shapes in the crumbling plasterwork on Rora's bedroom wall.

'Those are not monsters,' Rora had said of the imagined creatures, picked out of the cracks and dents. 'They're my friends.'

But everything had changed at the turn of a door handle. What she had witnessed that afternoon had taken away the safety and comfort she had always felt there. Overnight, the house had become strange and heavy with half-understood secrets – his secret and hers, and all the others that followed. The taxi stopped suddenly, causing both mother and daughter to lurch forward, but Rora was so deeply submerged in the past that she barely noticed. She was still a child in a house that no longer felt like home.

'Are we nearly there?' asked Ursula, who had put her possessions back into her bag and was now sitting with her face pressed up against the window.

‘Yes, almost,’ said Rora.

‘Bloody kids,’ the taxi driver said irritably, as a couple of skateboarders crossed the road, rubbing the back of his fat neck as if he had been stung by a wasp.

‘Bloody is actually a swear word,’ said Ursula reprovingly.

Rora smiled and squeezed her daughter’s hand. Was it this habit she had of saying exactly what she felt that had caused her to be picked on by other children? What was it about Ursula that provoked such venom? Then Rora chastised herself for the way her thoughts were going. None of it was Ursula’s fault.

They inched along the High Street, stopping and starting in the snarled-up traffic. The metered minutes seemed to turn over more quickly when they were not moving at all. Saturday shoppers searching for old chemist’s bottles and felt cushions walked slowly, imagining their houses transformed. A man threading his way along the congested pavements caught Rora’s eye. It was his walk that she recognised first – a slightly rolling gait, wide-stepping and fast. She froze. It couldn’t possibly be him. Dwelling on the past had made her pluck phantoms from the air. He was surely just a trick of the light. He stopped to make way for a couple coming in the other direction and he turned his head briefly. She saw the side of his cheek, the dark hair across his forehead. It *was* Carl. She had not thought for one moment that he would be back in the town. She almost said his name aloud, but bit it back. It was strange after all this time that her instinct had been to call out to him. Her heart turned in her chest. He looked harder and older, but still had the same intent purposefulness about him. She hunkered down in her seat, her heart hammering, her face flushed. She hoped he would not turn again and see her there, staring out of the

window at him. If the feelings of dread had been acute before, now they threatened to engulf her. Why hadn't she followed her instinct and stayed away? When she looked again he had moved past them, and the taxi found a stretch of clear road and accelerated.

## Kiss 2

*'The world cracked open under her feet and she was lost.'*

*9 July 1996*

After their kiss in the wood, it seemed to be taken for granted by them and by their classmates that Rora and Carl were a couple. They spent every lunch hour together, Rora often sharing the doorstopper sandwiches that were Isobel's specialty, since Carl never seemed to have any food of his own. People got used to the sight of them walking close together, heads down, talking. Hannah, who now had to share the friend she had been able to monopolise before, was predictably dismissive of Carl.

'Can't see his allure,' she said loftily as she and Rora walked home one day. She was very fond of the word allure and used it in all sorts of contexts, particularly when describing her lust for Mr Brampton, their science teacher, who arrived at school in the morning on a motorbike, clad in faintly ridiculous leather. He only lived ten minutes away and Rora thought he didn't really need to dress as if he was taking part in the Grand Prix.

'He understands me,' Rora said, and then seeing Hannah's face fall she added 'You understand me too, but you have a million people in your family and Carl's a bit lonely, like me.'

'He's fearfully immature,' said Hannah turning into her street with a toss of her head. 'And a little grubby,' she added meanly as she walked away.

‘What do you two find to talk about?’ asked the English teacher, exasperated that Carl and Rora were whispering to each other in class again rather than paying attention to Malvolio’s cross-gartering.

‘Nothing,’ said Rora, who until her alliance with Carl had been reliably studious and attentive but who was now regularly reprimanded for chatting and inattention.

‘I started it,’ said Carl, sliding down inside the grey collar of his school shirt; already singled out as a troublemaker, he had nothing to lose and was glad to take the heat off Rora.

On Saturdays, the day it was possible to slip out of the house without attracting too much attention, she would meet Carl and they would walk up the steep steps to the café on the West Hill and make a Coke last two hours. From this vantage point, with its view over the town and the sea, they felt as if they owned the world. Sometimes they followed the paths of the Country Park above the town and on down to the beach along a sloping, perilous track they had discovered, taking care when they arrived to avoid the naturists in strange-shaped hats and terrible sandals. On other days they would set up camp in the deserted cabin on the edge of the cliff, an old lookout post now left to lovers and rabbits and the wind that blew off the sea through its open window.

When the weather was very bad they would take shelter on the pier. Damaged by a severe storm the year before and teetering on the verge of bankruptcy, the patched-up walkway and its view of Pelham Crescent and the castle above it had always featured in Rora’s childhood as a place of glamour and excitement. It had become increasingly shabby over the years and was now mostly frequented by anglers, bingo players and elderly

dancers in their best shoes, who moved with stiff grace across the ballroom floor on Friday afternoons. But there were still the arcades, which were warm and fusty on rainy days, and the delicious smell of frying onions, and a fortune-teller who had a curtained outlet next to the sweet shop on the apron of the pier. Her name was Sophie and she was an acquaintance of Isobel's. She wore her hair in an elaborate topknot. Sometimes Rora and Carl peeped in through the purple velvet drape, stifling their giggles as she bent her head, odd hairdo bobbing, over the hands of her visitors, all with the same sunburned shoulders and hopeful questions. Carl used to mock the absurd theatricality of it, but Rora, always less cynical, was impressed by the secret solemnity. She was moved by the way people allowed themselves to believe that their future was visible in the cloudy glass ball and in the markings on their palms. She understood how eager they were to hear their stories. Once Carl almost gave them away by sneezing so loudly both occupants of the room looked up sharply and the fortune-teller came to the entrance and saw them running away.

'You're always sneezing,' Rora said accusingly, after they had run far enough away and she had caught her breath. 'You'd be useless as a spy. You'd give the game away every time.'

'I can't help it,' he said. 'I sneeze when my eyes go from darkness into the light. I read about it. It's called photic sneezing and twenty per cent of the population has it. It's genetic. I'm a sun worshipper and a sun sneezer.'

Once they had a go on the 'Love Detective', a machine in the arcade that tested couple compatibility. They had to give their star signs and provide other information, such as their favourite colour and which animal they most resembled. Rora and

Carl had scored a ninety-eight per cent match, which made her wonder what the two per cent was that prevented them from being a perfectly one hundred per cent pair. Sometimes when she lay in bed at night thinking about him, she worried that the missing percentage would turn out to be the thing that broke them up. It rankled that this potential flaw in their relationship was something she couldn't identify and therefore couldn't put right.

Carl may have been unconcerned with percentages, dismissing her worries as being based on unscientific data, but he had his own way of testing whether or not Rora was a keeper. Hardly a week went past when he didn't present her with a new and frightful task. Although he never admitted it, even to himself, he used Rora's willingness to do the outlandish things he suggested as proof that she wanted to be with him.

When he initially suggested the cliff challenge, Rora refused even to contemplate it. She had already, among other things, played shoplifting bingo (five pilfered red items in under an hour), climbed to the top of the statue of Queen Victoria in Warrior Square and garlanded the sovereign's head with a length of tinsel, shaved off an eyebrow, rearranged the items on the altar in the local church, and pretended to faint in assembly. After all the effort she had put in, she felt she had earned her stripes.

Rora's parents, who had a dim grasp of her activities for much of the time, had insisted that Carl should come round for tea so that they could meet the person who was leading their daughter astray. Rora had been worried that they would think him a wild, unsuitable friend, but she was amazed at Carl's previously hidden social skills. He had eaten three helpings of Sandi's vegetable curry, told Isobel that he wished he had a grandmother,



and talked to Frank about the history of Hastings Castle. When he left Sandi said he had eyes like river water and the fingers of an artist.

‘You’ll be perfectly safe,’ Carl said, tickling the inside of her ear with a length of grass as they sat on a bench on the West Hill.

‘Safe, how?’ she said. ‘You want me to walk, blindfolded, along the edge of the cliff above Rock-a-Nore? The bit with the steepest drop?’

‘I’ll be guiding you all the time,’ said Carl. ‘I’ll tell you exactly where to put your feet.’

‘Why do you want me to do it?’ she asked.

‘It’s the ultimate test. After this, I’ll know that you would put your life in my hands. How about I do it first? That way we’ll be equals.’

‘I don’t want you to do it and I don’t want to do it,’ said Rora. ‘I’m going home.’

Such were Carl’s powers of persuasion that a week later Rora was standing on the edge of the cliff wearing the sleep mask he had stolen from Boots expressly for the purpose. She was very nervous; she had never been comfortable with heights, but she knew that Carl’s challenge was nothing to do with testing her courage, and everything to do with testing her devotion. The sensible part of her resisted the idea of subjecting herself in this way, but the other part found it difficult to turn him down. Besides, she wasn’t without pride and had a wilful determination not to lose face.

Although she couldn’t see, she could feel the empty space to her right and the breeze that stirred the grass at her feet. She was aware of the crumbling rock at the edge of the cliff, pockmarked

with caves and cormorants' nests. Over the melancholy sound of the ice cream van and the blithe hum of the summer town, she could hear the beating of her heart. Carl took hold of her hands and spun her round three or four times so that she was completely disorientated.

'Now take one small step forward,' instructed Carl, 'and another.'

She shuffled her feet, feeling the slide of the grass under her flip-flops.

'Now, just turn slightly to the left,' he said, 'not too much, just a fraction.'

'How far am I from the edge now?' asked Rora.

Last summer a dog had dragged a woman off the cliff at this very spot. Behind her mask, Rora could see the thrown stick, the leaping dog, the owner tied to the lead by devotion and habit. Rora put her arms out as if she feared she might be approaching a wall.

'There's nothing in front of you,' said Carl, 'just keep on going exactly the same way. Don't deviate.'

'How much longer?' asked Rora.

'Twenty steps,' he said. 'Twenty small steps.'

'Left a little. Right a little,' said Carl, no longer able to keep the laughter out of his voice. She shouted out when she felt the rush of him knocking her over onto the grass.

'Carl! What are you doing?' She lay breathing heavily, her heart in her mouth. He pulled the mask off and his grinning face was above her, so close she could see the downy hairs above his curved top lip and feel his breath on her face. She was lying a safe ten feet away from the edge of the cliff in the opposite direction from where she thought she had been going.

‘Did you really think I would’ve risked you falling?’ he asked her.

‘Let me get up. I’m lying on something sharp,’ she said at last, when the way he was looking at her had begun to make her feel even more breathless. He pulled her to her feet.

‘I wouldn’t have let you fall,’ said Carl again earnestly, and he touched her disordered hair gently, moving it off her face and tucking it behind her ear.

‘I know you wouldn’t,’ Rora said, and kissed him. His lips were dry and he tasted sweet and sour. She could feel the shape of his bony shoulders under her hands and the way his body leaped at her touch as if he had been burned. The world cracked open under her feet and she was lost. It was as if she had fallen off the cliff after all. Their kiss might have lasted a minute or an hour, the dizzying swoop of it made it hard to tell, but when she stepped away from him he smiled.

‘I could do that all day,’ he said.

‘You’d get nothing done,’ she said, since being brisk helped to bring the world back into focus and stilled her hammering heart.

‘Who cares?’ he said, and swung himself onto his hands and she stood and watched as he did one perfect, straight-legged cartwheel after another, all the way down the hill.

## *May 2010*

The taxi came to a halt at the bottom of Pilgrim Street, a walk-way lined on one side with narrow Regency terraces in various states of repair, and on the other, a strip of a park with a bench and a patch of green. Some of the houses had clear

signs of gentrification: glossy black iron railings, front doors painted the requisite olive green and vaulted glass roofs filling up side returns. Others had remained largely untouched, with weeds pushing through the cracks in the pathways and window frames blistered by the sun.

‘This is the nearest I can get you to the house,’ said the taxi driver and reluctantly unfolded himself, releasing a fug of yeasty, unwashed flesh, to make heavy work of taking their suitcases out of the boot.

‘I’d help you with your luggage,’ he said, ‘but I have a bit of a back.’

Rora tipped him too much regardless, and felt a familiar disgust with her own cravenness and eagerness to please. She still felt shaky, almost tearful after the shock of seeing Carl, and her weakness made her feel even less prepared to confront her father.

‘I can’t stop you,’ is what he had said to her on the phone when she rang to tell him that she and Ursula were planning on coming. During their brief conversation, she hadn’t mentioned that she had shut up her life behind her, preferring to make the visit seem like a casual, spur-of-the-moment thing, something that she could cut short at any time. She pulled her suitcase up the street, its wheels catching on the uneven paving. Ursula, with her handbag now strapped efficiently across her chest, followed behind with her own luggage, a small case fashioned to look like a ladybird, another receptacle in which she took an inordinate amount of pride.

Rora stopped at the bottom of the steps that led to the front door of 14 Pilgrim Street and gazed up at the house. It looked exactly as it had when she had last seen it; the cream stucco was marked with traces of damp, the sixth step broken right across,

as it had always been, the roof tiles green and patchy. The front garden and what she could see of the back were overgrown with nettles and convolvulus and rampant ivy that twisted its tendrils up from the bottom of the wall. It was as if the outside was encroaching on the fabric of the building, softening the edges, making it indistinct. Despite the obvious neglect and its shuttered, watchful air, the house had elegance; the windows were placed a pleasing distance apart, one next to the front door and then two by two on the remaining floors. The windows at the top of the house were headed with two curling scrolls, like eyebrows. The second floor had an ironwork balcony, onto which both rooms opened, which was so delicate it looked like filigree. Rora thought it was a wonder it hadn't rusted away.

'Stay with the suitcases just a moment,' she said and climbed the steps to the arched front door of her father's house, which was glazed with a pattern of coiled ferns and framed by peeling Doric columns. She pressed on the bell but didn't hear it ring. There was no doorknocker, so she rattled the handle on the letterbox. After a few seconds a middle-aged woman in a pale green uniform opened the door. She had heavily pencilled eyebrows and a severe fringe, which made her look as if the top half of her face didn't belong to the rest.

'Can I help you?' she said. She spoke quietly and with a slight local accent, the edges of her words blurred.

'I've come to see my father,' said Rora. The woman gave her a sharp, assessing glance.

'He never mentioned that he was expecting visitors,' she said. 'I suppose you'd better come in.'

She stepped aside, leaving Rora and Ursula to drag their suitcases up the steps and through the front door.

‘He’s in the living room,’ she said once they were inside the hallway. ‘I’ll leave you to get on with it.’

The door to the living room was shut, and Rora found that she was holding her breath. If Ursula hadn’t been there, she might well have turned round and left the house without seeing him, but her daughter was looking expectantly at her and she had to muster at least the semblance of grown-up behaviour, even if being there made her feel like a child again.

The house caught her up in its grand, forlorn air, as if it had been waiting to show itself to her and had felt neglected by her absence. The weight of the place bore down on her, the rooms heavy above, the tangled greenness of the garden pushing against the walls as if conspiring to seal the place up. There was a fetid, trapped quality to the air, and yet the nurses who looked after him must have opened windows and aired the bedding. It was what nurses did. Her hand hesitated on the door-knob. After the years of silence that had lain between them like a dark river it seemed suddenly impossible that she would enter the room and make small talk. Maybe he would think she had forgiven him, although he ought to know that she never would. What he had done had been the start of all the fear and sadness she now associated with this house, this town. She swallowed hard and pushed open the door.

Her father was sitting in an armchair by the empty fireplace as if he was waiting for another season, when it might be cold enough to warrant the blaze of logs and the pine cones her mother used to burn because of their sweet resin smell. Rora was surprised to see how small he looked. It was as if someone or something had pressed down on his head and shoulders as he sat there in the chair.

Until his retirement, Frank had been a part-time history lecturer at the University of Sussex, but for much of Rora's early childhood the real focus of his efforts had been on writing a book about Hastings, a lengthy work that seemed always to be just a chapter away from completion. He had been absent-minded to the point of absurdity, regularly mislaying keys, hats, cars, pets and on one occasion young Rora herself, whom he left on a bus in her Moses basket. He spent his time immersed in details: researching the way fishing nets used to be made in early Victorian times or mapping out the narrow passageways, better known as 'twittens', which laced the Old Town. He had been a benign presence around the house, forgetting to eat or button up his clothes or change out of his slippers when walking into town. When he emerged from the past long enough to allow conscious thought about his circumstances, he felt himself to be a lucky man, with a wife he adored and a daughter who was the apple of his frequently befuddled eye.

That man no longer existed. His diminished stature was emphasised by the high ceilings and elaborate cornicing of the room. She could see, even in the dim light, that the illness had claimed him. His skin had a yellowish tinge and his eyes had been stretched wider by his weight loss, giving his face a strange new openness. Despite the way she had armoured herself, the sight of him made her falter. He seemed vulnerable in a way that she had never allowed herself to imagine.

'You've come, then,' he said, and his voice was expressionless, without expectation.

'Yes,' she said. 'Hello, Dad.' The word felt unfamiliar on her tongue.

'This must be Ursula,' he said, looking beyond Rora to her daughter, who was hovering behind her.

‘Ursula, meet your grandfather Frank.’

Not for the first time, Rora was grateful for Ursula’s matter-of-fact manner and lack of apparent shyness.

‘It’s very nice to meet you,’ she said, and came and stood in front of him, readying herself for inspection. Frank looked at her gravely for a moment.

‘You look just like your mother,’ he said. His voice had gained some warmth. ‘Why don’t you go into the kitchen, along the hall and down the stairs on your right, and ask Pauline – she’s my nurse, you know – if she has a glass of juice? You must be hot after your journey,’ Frank said, and Ursula obediently complied.

‘If you’ve come because you heard I’m ill,’ he said as soon as the door closed behind Ursula, ‘you don’t need to feel obliged.’

‘I don’t feel obliged,’ she said. ‘I thought you might need some help.’

Any softening she had felt when she first arrived hardened again and she reverted to seeing him as he had been before death had begun to drag him away and prompted her fleeting pity. She was consoled by her anger because it made her stronger, more able to deal with him.

‘I’ve got all the help I need,’ said Frank.

As if on cue, the nurse came into the room and hovered protectively by his chair, then began fussing with the blanket he had over his knees. Ursula followed her in, drinking from a glass.

‘Your father shouldn’t be disturbed,’ Pauline said. ‘He’s not used to visitors.’

‘Don’t worry, we won’t stay here,’ said Rora. ‘We’ll go to Hannah’s for the night.’



‘Aw, Mum!’ said Ursula, her face falling. ‘I don’t want to go anywhere else. I haven’t had a chance to meet Grandad properly yet.’

‘We can come and visit tomorrow,’ said Rora as calmly as she could. The tick she got whenever she was particularly tired or stressed started to flutter over her left eye.

‘Please let’s stay here,’ said Ursula in her most irritatingly wheedling voice.

Rora looked at her father and noticed his tight, triumphant smile, even though he bent his head to disguise it. He was enjoying her discomfort.

‘OK,’ she said at last. She had no choice really. It would look odd to go so soon after they had arrived and Ursula seemed set on staying. ‘Just for a couple of days.’

After making Ursula a meal of pasta and tuna from the rather sparse contents of the kitchen cupboard, Rora unpacked the ladybird suitcase and settled her daughter into what had been her grandmother’s room. Tired from her journey and the excitement of being somewhere new, one story was enough to set Ursula’s eyelids flickering.

‘There’s an awful lot of stuff in this room,’ said Ursula, gazing around at the paintings that covered almost every inch of the walls.

‘Your great-grandmother was a bit of a collector,’ Rora said, feeling suddenly bereft. She remembered the way Isobel used to tell tall tales of her amazing exploits. Part seductress, part spy, her grandmother had turned down the marriage proposals of fifteen panting young men, smuggled important documents in the lining of her bra, fought tigers bare-handed and trained herself to hold her breath underwater for fifteen minutes. Rora

wished Isobel was there now and could tell them one of her stories or perhaps get down *The Book of Kisses* and banish everything else for an hour or so.

‘It’s a funny house,’ said Ursula, pushing off the quilt that covered her. Although it was seven o’clock in the evening the heat had not diminished, and Rora pulled open the sash window to let in what little breeze there was.

‘What do you mean?’ she asked.

‘It smells strange,’ said Ursula. ‘A bit like Burney Bear did when we left him out in the rain and didn’t dry him properly. There are rooms with all the furniture covered up. It gives me a weird feeling.’

‘Well, your grandfather has been living here by himself for quite a long time and he doesn’t use most of the rooms anymore,’ said Rora.

She stayed until Ursula fell asleep, and then went to her old bedroom and lay down on the small bed, immediately recognising its loose headboard and lumpy quilt. Rora had been christened Aurora by parents who had given little thought to how an unconventional name might be received in the playground. She was named in honour of the Northern Lights, the Roman Goddess of the Dawn and Disney’s Sleeping Beauty. The young Rora had been unable to pronounce her own name, her mouth struggling with the awkward sound, and she had shortened it to Rora, a nickname that had stuck over the years, despite her parents’ best efforts to call her by her given name. In fact, its short, slightly prickly sound was much more suited to Rora’s personality. She had a mass of blonde curly hair and wide, green eyes, but her whimsical appearance belied her serious soul. From a very young age, it was all too apparent to Rora Raine that if any sort of order was to be

maintained she would have to be the sensible one in her family of dreamers and storytellers.

The ceiling still bore the traces of where she had stuck the fluorescent stars that had glowed all the way through her nights until she had left home. The dressing table with its oval mirror was still in the corner where the ghost of a teenage Rora sat applying eye shadow and religiously turning the gold studs in her newly pierced ears. A seagull started up its insistent cry, and the sound was so loud it was as if the bird was in the room with her. She got up and went over to the window and pulled aside the curtain. It was sitting on her windowsill. It turned an unperturbed eye towards her. She banged on the glass and after a last insolent stare, the creature flew off to splatter roofs and rummage through bins for chips and steal the warm pasties from children's fists.

At some point Rora must have fallen asleep, because she woke to the sound of her father and Pauline climbing the stairs. She could hear him breathing heavily and the nurse making encouraging noises as she helped him up. He stopped to gather himself on the landing outside her bedroom, and she remembered the many nights she had lain on this bed in this room wanting someone, somehow, to put right all the things that had gone wrong. He had never come into her room, even though she sometimes heard him make this exact same pause outside her door, as if he was thinking about it. It had been an unhappy house in those years after her mother had gone, and the fabric of the place had seemed to reflect the sadness: the walls, left too long unattended, flaked plaster onto the floors, and the condensation trickled down the windows like tears.

\*

It seemed that Frank was making some kind of protest about her arrival at the house, because the next day he didn't come downstairs.

'He's very tired,' Pauline said as she washed up his breakfast dishes, and Rora could hear the barely veiled censure in her voice.

'I've hardly seen him. You can't blame me if he's taken it into his head to stay in bed,' Rora said.

'You've been away a long time,' said Pauline. 'Your arrival has been unsettling for him.'

She leaned her not inconsiderable bulk against the kitchen sink and dried her reddened hands on the tea towel. She gave Rora one of her assessing stares, as if she was contemplating a purchase and was finding the object wanting.

Rora noticed again the strange dislocation between the two halves of Pauline's face. She looked as if someone had glued her together.

'Well, we wouldn't want Frank upset, now, would we?' Rora said bitterly.

'He's very ill,' said Pauline. 'It's my job to make his last days as comfortable as possible.'

'How long do you think he's got?' asked Rora, and then wished she hadn't been quite so blunt.

Pauline seemed unperturbed by the question. She was obviously used to the vagaries of relatives, even one like Rora, who had shown up at the last minute and who clearly didn't have any of the attributes associated with a loving daughter. Rora wondered if the woman's hostility was due to her suspecting Rora had only turned up to cash in on the spoils of death.

'It's very difficult to put a time limit on it,' she said. 'It could be a few days, but it could be as long as a few weeks. It depends

on the course of the illness and on what the patient hangs on for.’

‘What do you mean – hangs on for?’ asked Rora.

‘Well, some folks just give up, and others cling to the prospect of a certain day, like the birth of a grandchild, or sometimes they wait until someone close to them can be with them before they go.’

She looked meaningfully at Rora.

‘Oh, he’s not been hanging on for me,’ said Rora. ‘He doesn’t even want me here.’

‘You’d know better than me,’ she said shortly, and with a last energetic swipe at the kitchen surfaces she went out of the room.

Pauline’s departure for the day left Rora at a loss. Hannah had come round earlier with her two daughters to take Ursula out for a few hours, and Rora was unwilling to go and see her father until he asked for her. It seemed nothing had changed between them; they still butted up against each other’s stubbornness the way they always had.

She wondered again at her decision to come home. She knew that being here was only going to open her up to fresh hurt. She could already feel the beginnings of the ache, as if a long-frozen limb was becoming warm again, bringing with it the dull throb of life. She thought about the fact that Carl was back and what, if anything, she should do about it. He hadn’t tried to find her, so she assumed he didn’t want to. What if she bumped into him? What would she say? When she thought about meeting him again, all the old feelings of guilt rose up in her, as strong and as desperate as ever. Over the years Rora had become an expert on feeling only as much as she allowed herself to. Her work frequently absorbed her, requiring as it did total immersion in

whatever subject she was researching, but that was as close as she ever came to losing herself. In all other areas of her life she held back, only doing the bare minimum needed to make herself appear like a regular person with ordinary preoccupations. She had never lost her reluctance to stand out. She attended certain tried and tested social gatherings with people she knew and who asked little of her. As soon as a crisis hit and someone required more than an evening drinking wine and talking thinly about work and yoga and whatever book or film was doing the rounds, she would hastily retreat. She avoided emotion in others as assiduously as she avoided it in herself.

As she moved around the house she had the sensation, despite the familiarity of her surroundings, that she was an interloper. She found that she was consciously softening the sound of her feet on the floor and was opening and closing doors tentatively, as if she knew she shouldn't really be there and was nervous of being discovered. In the front reception room the light came through the slats in the shutters like knife blades. She opened them and secured them against the wall and the room seemed to come suddenly alive. She tried to unfasten the window but the thing was stuck fast. It was still breathlessly hot. She knew she should be glad for such weather by the sea, but this heat was oppressive, choking.

The sofa and chairs were shrouded in sheets and she tugged one of them off, releasing a cloud of dust. The chandelier, obscured with dirt, was laced between its branches by swathes of cobwebs. The mirror over the fireplace was mottled around the edges. She caught sight of her face in its reflection and thought she looked pale, as if the house had leached the colour from her skin and hair. This room would have to wait, she told herself.

She needed to attend to Ursula's room first and make it clean. She felt better now that she could see a purpose for herself. She paused for a moment in the hallway and let the colours from the glass in the door play over her hands and her arms. These same yellows and greens had passed over her when she was a child, and they moved on her now in the same way they always had, oblivious to the changes in her.

She took a basin of hot water up to Isobel's old bedroom, where Ursula had laid out her possessions neatly on the bed. The objects in plastic pinks and purples looked out of place amid the faded glories of Isobel's clutter. She cleaned the tops of the paintings, each wipe transferring a thick skin of dirt onto the cloth. She dusted the golden curves of the Cupids on the clock whose dimpled crevices were lined with grey, and wiped the glass case containing the taxidermy owl, so that its eyes glinted at her as they had done when she was a child. She sponged the furred insides of the lampshades and rubbed the brass finials at the ends of the bed. She went downstairs again and found some crusty lavender polish in the kitchen cupboard and restored the chest of drawers and the wardrobe to their old sheen. She took up the silk rug and carried it into the garden and shook it out, wondering if the particles she released still contained vestiges of her grandmother.

Satisfied that the room was now clean enough, she began to explore the rest of the house. The two further bedrooms on the first floor were shrouded as downstairs had been. On the second floor, she took care not to step on the creaking board outside the room that her parents had shared and in which Frank now lay in defiant silence. The room next door to his was full of boxes of books and papers and abandoned bits of furniture propped up

against the wall. She looked at the flight of steps that led up to the attic bedroom. She knew then that this was where she had been heading all along.

She felt the same trembling of her limbs and constriction in her throat that she had experienced in the taxi. It seemed that the passage of the years had done nothing to lessen her feelings of fear and helplessness. She hesitated, then forced herself to walk up the narrow steps – the treads curved and slippery where feet had worn them smooth. She was too old to be spooked by ghosts, and if she didn't go there now, the room would wait for her, like a job unfinished, a letter unopened. She spoke aloud to herself.

'It's just a room, Rora. Just an empty room.'

She tried the handle of the door, but it was locked. She felt along the top of the doorframe for the key she knew was always kept there, but it was missing. She turned away with a kind of relief. It seemed she wasn't going to have to go back after all. The past was going to stay where it was, sealed up like a corked bottle or a bunch of old lavender stitched into linen.

Although she was tired and would have been glad to rest until Ursula came home, she couldn't settle and so she resumed her cleaning frenzy in the kitchen. As she slopped water and wiped surfaces she knew that this desire for order was a reaction to coming home. Each twist of the mop head as she squeezed it against the bucket seemed to bring her greater ease. She got down on her knees and scraped at the cracks between the wood of the parquet floor until she was sore and stiff with the effort. She plunged her hands into bleach and hot water so that they became rough and red. It felt like a kind of purging and a kind of penitence.



The pantry was full of canned and dried goods that were past their sell-by date. She pulled the bin across the kitchen floor and started throwing away rusting tins of chickpeas and bags of flour that were older than Ursula. She dragged the whole lot round to the wheelie bin in the passageway. In the dining room she rubbed polish into the battered oak table and then began sorting out the drawers in the Welsh dresser, which were full of random debris. Stuck in the crack down the side of one of the drawers, she found a single earring. She prised it out and held it flat in the palm of her hand. The raindrop-shaped garnet set on a small silver hoop was instantly familiar to her. Her mother had worn these earrings almost every day of her life, even leaving them on overnight, so that in the morning she sometimes had the shape of a teardrop embedded in her neck. Closing her eyes, Rora could still see her mother's ears, pale and flat against her dark head, the crimson droplets looking almost black. She checked in all the drawers to see if she could find the other one, but it wasn't there.

Standing in front of the mirror in the hall, Rora took out the silver stud she was wearing and replaced it with her mother's earring. She wondered what her mother would think if she could see her now. Would she forgive her for what happened then and afterwards and for all the ways she hadn't properly lived, vivid and wholehearted, as she should have? It seemed as if her life had been made up of more holes than solid ground, and now it felt like it might give way at any moment. She thought again of her glimpse of Carl through the window of the taxi and how just the sight of him had sent her reeling helplessly back. He had known her in the years before all the promise had been rubbed out.