

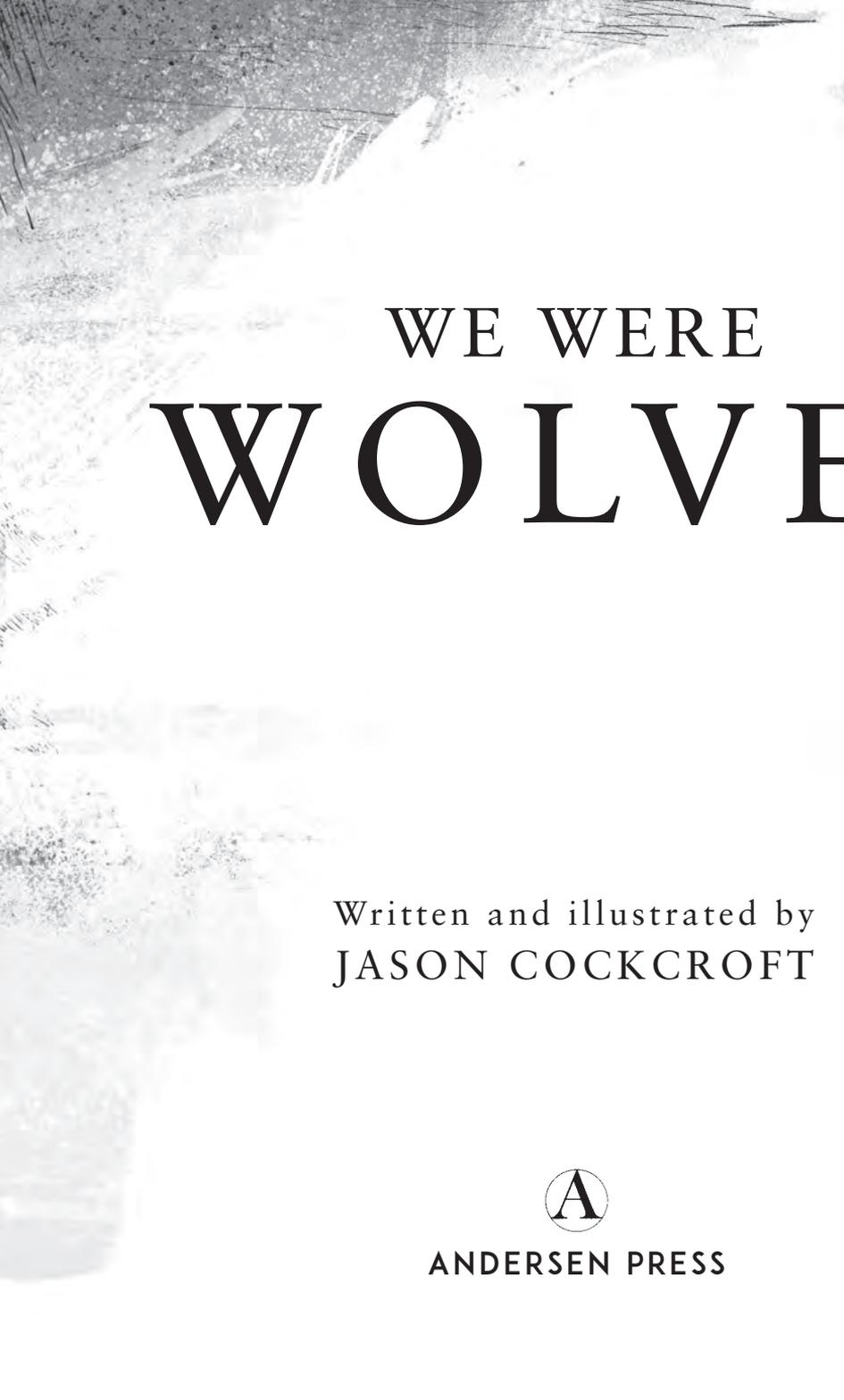
WE WERE
WOLVES

JASON COCKCROFT

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Written and illustrated by
JASON COCKCROFT



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*This book is dedicated to
Alan Cockcroft,
my father.*





There is no other story.

A man, after he has brushed off the dust
and chips of life, will have left only the hard,
clean questions: was it good or was it evil?

East of Eden, John Steinbeck



SO WHAT DO you want to know?

I suppose you're expecting to hear about how I killed my dad and got away with it, and how when they found me I was nearly half dead myself, on account that he'd tried to do away with me. Except that's not what happened, of course. Not that anyone cares now. Because lies have faster legs than the truth, like Mam says. So all I can do is tell it like it happened and as I saw it, because it's our story, me and John. And now he's gone for good, so who else will tell the tale if not me?





PART ONE







ONE

IT BEGAN WITH the dog.

John always said that it was a bad idea to get too close to anything that needed you, and I suppose when the dog arrived I had a choice, and I chose wrong, that's all. I should have listened to John, but he was in prison by then, and I was alone and needed something that was just mine for once.

John was my dad's name. He never liked me calling him Dad and didn't call me son, not even when I was young and he was away in the desert making sure we were all safe, and we'd only get to talk on the phone once or twice a month. Him and Mam weren't together then, but they hadn't told anyone and certainly not me. People didn't know until he came home and started living in the woods instead of in our house. Which is when Mam started to worry. At first, he just had a sleeping bag and the few tools he needed, and it could have been a hobby, a bit of fun. But later there was the caravan, and later still, I moved in with him, and it wasn't fun any more.

I liked the caravan. In winter it smelled of mould and peat and oil from the heater, and in summer it smelled of sunlight and hot glass and wild garlic. We were next to the stream and after March the garlic choked the banks with white flowers so that the air was thick with it,

sweet and heavy like nothing I'd smelled before. I didn't know anything about garlic or burdock before I lived with him, couldn't point to a nettle, even. What I knew was streetlights and pavements and locked doors and no plants and no trees. There wasn't any green on the estate. But in the woods, you learned quick, for no better reason than you had to. Sometimes it felt like a different world, away from the real things that happened, which is what John wanted, I think.

The caravan was small. It didn't have carpet or furniture, but it had a narrow room with a bed in it and a fold-out cot in the front part, a stand-up kitchen but no electricity, a toilet but no plumbing. We did our business in the woods, and took water from the stream.





It would take me five long strides to reach the stream from the door of the caravan, and three for John. But once I swear I saw him with my own eyes jump clean out of the bedroom window, straight in, just to show off. Like a man leaping for his life from a fire, but smiling as he went, which is how I like to remember him.

I'd only ever known our house, of course, and the caravan wasn't like the house, and it wasn't clean. And when it was cold it was like sleeping in a sardine can that had been kept in a fridge overnight. One week it snowed so much the roof buckled with the weight, but I liked the noise the raindrops made on the tin-sheet repair after. We were never told whose caravan it was, but we weren't the first because John found lots of papers and things stuffed in bags under the kitchen sink that he said were written in Polish, and Polish was one of the languages he knew a bit of.

'Itinerant workers,' he'd say, nodding. 'Pickers and diggers for Mr Derby. Good soldiers, too, the Poles,' he told me. 'Almost as good as Gurkhas.'

Like I say, I had no problems with the caravan, but people who weren't there tell me now that that's when it all started going wrong, with the caravan and the landowner called Mr Derby. And they say maybe if he'd only left us alone then things might not have ended like they did. But they don't know that all the things that happened and all the things that will ever happen were put in place long before the council letters were pinned to the caravan door and the men in suits came to the woods.

What happened was set out before I was born even, and before John and my mam met, and before the war, too. Before the beasts that had laid quiet under that wood for thousands of years finally climbed up out of the soil. It was all set like a sleeping stone in the earth beneath our feet long before any of us were here, like the bones of bears and wolves and wild bulls that are there if you dig deep enough.

‘Things happen despite us, not because of us,’ is what John would say, ‘and it’s pointless fighting it. There are better fights to be had,’ he’d tell me, squeezing my hand and looking at me, real warm, like he thought just seeing his smile would let me know what he meant. Which it didn’t, not always.

He’d been arrested for burglary, but pleaded trespass, which meant he was banged up anyway, on account of his record. That was the story, but John always said, ‘If the coppers want to, they could have you locked up for as long as they want, and that’s why you have to make sure you always have someone on your side with clout.’ Clout meaning power, meaning money, meaning back-up.

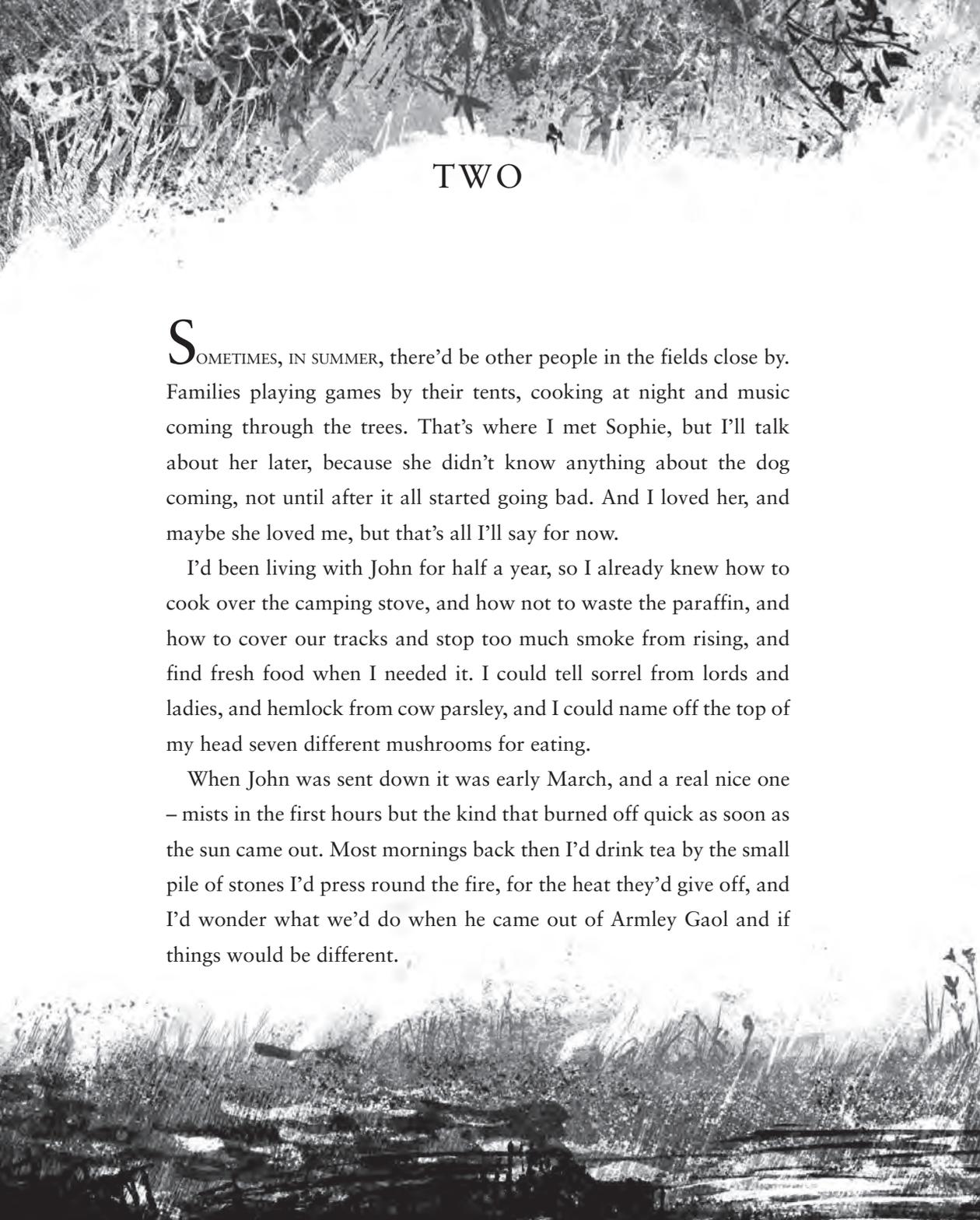
John knew villains, see. Men with flash cars who’d come and park up on the other side of the stream, and them and John would do business while I walked through the trees and tried not to listen too hard in case I heard something I didn’t like.

Some of them he got on with and some he didn’t, but he always told me, ‘Never turn down a chat with a bloke about a job, because you don’t know if it’ll bring you Gold and Stars.’ Gold and Stars were always big with him, cluttering his head, like they were real rather

than just ideas – because of the things he'd heard out in that desert, I suppose, and the things he'd seen. Men turned to red dust in a gunflash, and flames that spewed up from the black sand, straight like fountains. Up to the sky, black and orange and burning.

But I knew the difference.

When they took him down in the court in Leeds, he shouted over to me that he'd be gone no more than a month. So I nodded, and I walked to the bus station with the rucksack the lawyer man had given me on the street, and I got the bus back to our place in the woods, and I never thought to doubt what he said, because John was always right when it came to the coppers and the courts. And it wasn't the first time he'd been banged up, anyway, was it? On account of the other time, back before the caravan and the woods, back when I still thought we'd be a family. Me, him and Mam. So I wasn't too worried, see. I never looked in the rucksack, either, because I knew I'd find the gun there. And I didn't want anything to do with that, because guns meant Pain and Blood and Death, and as far as I was concerned John had seen enough of that already for both of us. But there are some things you can't avoid, no matter how hard you try, and I suppose men of guns always end in a bad way, and that's how it was for him, only I didn't know that then.

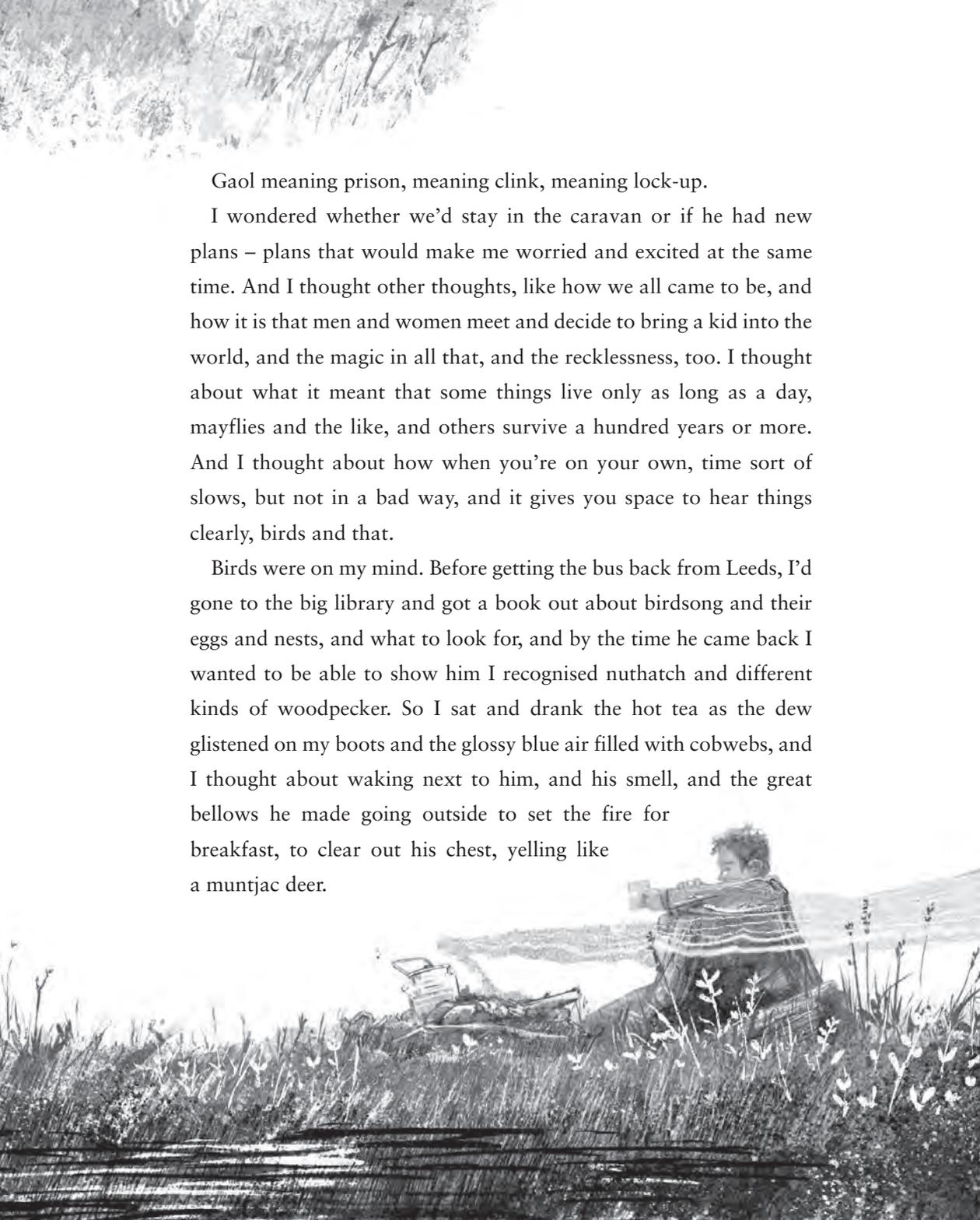


TWO

SOMETIMES, IN SUMMER, there'd be other people in the fields close by. Families playing games by their tents, cooking at night and music coming through the trees. That's where I met Sophie, but I'll talk about her later, because she didn't know anything about the dog coming, not until after it all started going bad. And I loved her, and maybe she loved me, but that's all I'll say for now.

I'd been living with John for half a year, so I already knew how to cook over the camping stove, and how not to waste the paraffin, and how to cover our tracks and stop too much smoke from rising, and find fresh food when I needed it. I could tell sorrel from lords and ladies, and hemlock from cow parsley, and I could name off the top of my head seven different mushrooms for eating.

When John was sent down it was early March, and a real nice one – mists in the first hours but the kind that burned off quick as soon as the sun came out. Most mornings back then I'd drink tea by the small pile of stones I'd press round the fire, for the heat they'd give off, and I'd wonder what we'd do when he came out of Armley Gaol and if things would be different.



Gaol meaning prison, meaning clink, meaning lock-up.

I wondered whether we'd stay in the caravan or if he had new plans – plans that would make me worried and excited at the same time. And I thought other thoughts, like how we all came to be, and how it is that men and women meet and decide to bring a kid into the world, and the magic in all that, and the recklessness, too. I thought about what it meant that some things live only as long as a day, mayflies and the like, and others survive a hundred years or more. And I thought about how when you're on your own, time sort of slows, but not in a bad way, and it gives you space to hear things clearly, birds and that.

Birds were on my mind. Before getting the bus back from Leeds, I'd gone to the big library and got a book out about birdsong and their eggs and nests, and what to look for, and by the time he came back I wanted to be able to show him I recognised nuthatch and different kinds of woodpecker. So I sat and drank the hot tea as the dew glistened on my boots and the glossy blue air filled with cobwebs, and I thought about waking next to him, and his smell, and the great bellows he made going outside to set the fire for breakfast, to clear out his chest, yelling like a muntjac deer.

While I was thinking about all this on that first afternoon alone, the dog appeared, all yellow and still, like the ground itself had spat her out, like she'd been under the earth in the roots and dirt and stones, asleep all this time and content, and only waiting for the right time to show herself to me.

Which I think, looking back, was the truth.

She was a yellow dog with short fur and a black nose and eyes that had a silvery shine when you looked close. They stared back at you and past you at the same time, which I didn't mind at all.



‘Here, girl.’

She looked at me and past me, and turned.

‘Come on, don’t be shy.’

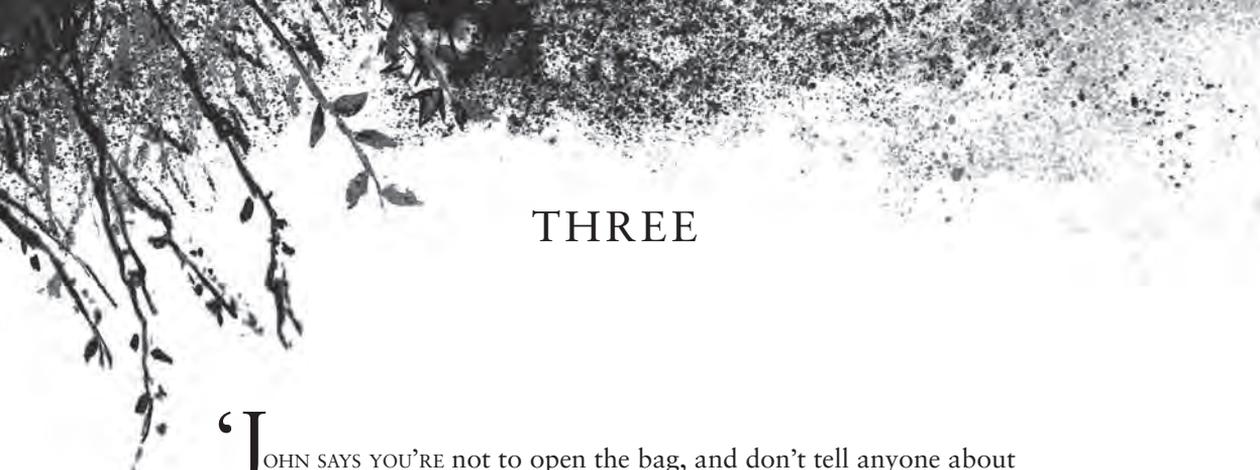
There was a long, narrow clearing by the caravan where we’d strip the nettles right down, John and me. Low enough so the new growth was clean and tender, instead of woody. New leaves made the best nettle tea, John said. Anyway, the dog wandered down the outside of the nettle paddock, nosed me, curious and sort of sleepy-eyed, as though having woken from a long dream. Then, seeing that I was no threat, she went back up the trail on the opposite side, through the died-back sorrel and chervil, before doing it all over again. Each time she made her round and lifted her head to look at me, it was as though she was seeing me for the first time. Gentle and helpless, and trusting.

After an hour, the dog lay down near the fire and I went over to see if she had a collar.

A small brassy disc had the name ‘Molly’ engraved on it.

I went to the van and got a coil of blue baling twine and tied it around the dog’s neck, and tried training her to sit. But she hated the twine and shook her head so hard, trying to get it loose, that I was worried she’d hurt herself. So I gave up on tying her, and after that I never did use the twine again. Anyway, she already knew how to sit.





THREE

‘**J**OHN SAYS YOU’RE not to open the bag, and don’t tell anyone about it. Do you understand? He’ll collect it when he’s back. He wants to know if you’re looking after yourself.’

This was the lawyer man on the phone the next day. He told me to call him Alan, but I never did call him anything. I didn’t know him and didn’t really want to. There were a lot of fellas I didn’t want to know, more every day, I thought. I wondered where they all came from and why, because the world certainly didn’t seem to have a lack of them these days.

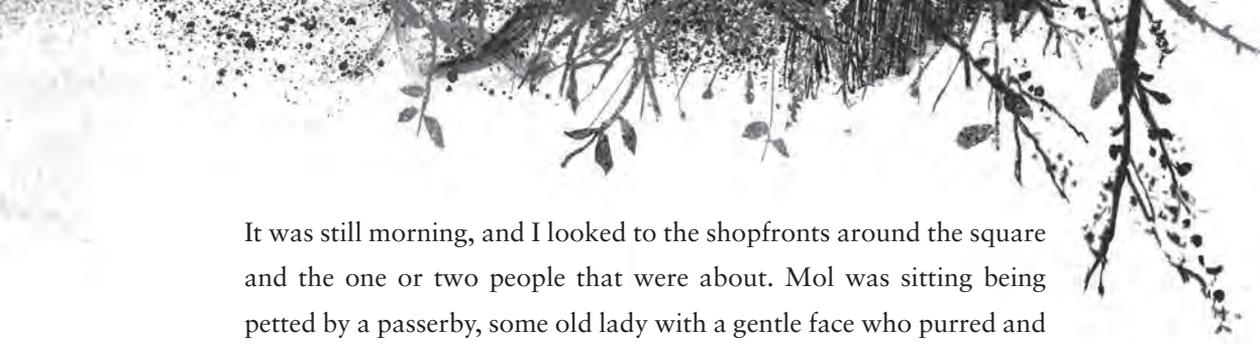
‘When’s he coming back, did he say?’

‘You’re to stay at the caravan, and try not to show yourself too often. If you need anything, you’re to call me.’

‘Course,’ I said. Because, I thought, where else would I go?

He must have heard the thought through the telephone wire somehow, because he said: ‘There’s the matter of your mother. Have you heard from her?’

John had a mobile that he used sometimes for work, but he didn’t really do with phones, so I’d had to walk into town to use the payphone near the shops, dialling the number on the business card the Leeds lawyer had given me outside the courts, along with the rucksack.



It was still morning, and I looked to the shopfronts around the square and the one or two people that were about. Mol was sitting being petted by a passerby, some old lady with a gentle face who purred and coddled and called Mol ‘darling’, and seemed nice.

‘No,’ I said. ‘Not for a while. Why?’

‘Well, you might want to tell her you’re OK. We don’t want social services sniffing around the caravan, do we? Not while you’re on your own. Maybe you should think about going back to school.’

‘Did John say that?’

‘About your mother? No, but it’s sensible, isn’t it? Maybe she’ll give you some money.’

‘Don’t need any. I’m all right.’

‘Nevertheless, I’ll visit you in a couple of days, see that things are as they should be. In the meantime, tell no one your father’s away. And no looking in the bag, you understand? Keep your head down and don’t cause any trouble. And listen, if a man called Toomey comes around, don’t talk to him. He’s a Bad Man. Oh,’ he added then, sounding sort of embarrassed, ‘and John says, watch out for bears, whatever that means. But I suppose you’ll know.’

‘Beautiful dog, isn’t she?’ said the old woman, when I put down the phone. She was cupping Mol’s face in her hands. ‘What is she?’

I still had the lawyer’s words rattling loud in my head, but I looked at Mol’s pale fur and her grey eyes. ‘A retriever maybe? She’s a good girl,’ I told the lady, not knowing what else to say. I wanted to be away, in case someone I knew recognised me. My school wasn’t far away,

just half a mile from the shops, and even though I hadn't been there for ages now, someone would still recognise me if they saw me, and I didn't want to be seen. Because no way was I going back there, no matter what the Leeds lawyer said. No matter, school was over for me.

'If you like her, you can have her,' I said to the old woman, trying to make a joke. I felt nervous. That thing the lawyer had said about someone called Toomey made me think I shouldn't be out and about if I didn't need to be.

I didn't like the name, because it made me think of graveyards and dank stone and death. Had John mentioned him before? He'd told me most of the blokes' names but this one didn't mean anything to me.

Toomey.

'No, darling, I can tell she loves you. You keep her,' the old woman said, going along with the joke and nodding to Mol. 'Sweet old girl,' she added, which made me feel sort of sad, because I hadn't even noticed Mol was old. I'd never had a dog before, and she was new to me so I thought she must be new all round. Stupid, really.

'Thank you,' was all I could say, walking away. I'd wanted to make another call, but I felt exposed in the shopping square, so I made off. Mol followed me, and when I looked back a minute later the old woman was still there, but she wasn't smiling any more. Maybe she'd noticed the dirt on my clothes, and the tears in the sleeves of my coat, because she looked sort of worried and about to say something, glancing around for someone to tell, before thinking better of it.

FOUR

ILL COME TONIGHT, if John's away.' This was Mam an hour later, after I'd walked down the bypass and found the payphone by the bus stop. 'We could go to the pub and have something hot to eat, if you like. John won't mind. How'd he do in court?'

'Good,' I lied. 'He's to go back in a month's time.'

'So, about tea tonight—'

'No, I'm fine. I just wanted to say hello, that's all. He'll be back at ten,' I said, with another lie – they'd been piling up since she'd answered the call. John was away on business, that was it. Wetherby, buying or selling, I didn't know which. Simple lies were the best, that much I did know – easy to believe. But I hadn't bargained on how I'd feel hearing her voice, and now it was making my guts turn and ache. Because of the nerves there.

'Are you safe?'

'I – I'm fine, yeah.' Guilt, twisting, was it? Or maybe I just missed her like buggery.

My mam, her name's Joanne – Jo to people who know her – but she's Mam to me. The summer he was back from overseas – John, I mean – Mam had been dead nervous. 'Happy nerves,' she'd told me when I asked. But they were nerves that shook through her every day

from first in the morning to the last fag at night in the garden, holding herself thin against the rake of the sunshine and thinking things I couldn't fathom. 'What do you suppose he'd like to eat?' she'd ask, staring to the sky. 'We should sort the backroom out, make it like an office for him, to get away from us when he needs to. You know, quiet.' And the next day when we were at the shops: 'What do you think of this one?' with her trying on dresses, pulling them from the racks in shops and this searing love in her face that shone like a real bright light and made her seem drunk to me. So maybe they were still together, after all, or at least she thought so, hoped so. Because that's how she behaved, like a lass in love. 'No big fuss,' she'd say, 'but a celebration. Let's show him we've missed him, eh?'

Every day was like that, her happy and worried and planning, and me going along with it, happy to make her happy. But the thing is, I hadn't missed him, not really. Maybe I'd been too young when he went, and the times he'd spent at home were so rare and filled with a sort of chaos. Happy chaos, like Mam's happy nerves. And her and him going off like sweethearts, like kids, and me watching. And maybe I was jealous, maybe I was, but we'd been fine together, her and me, or so I'd thought.

'Maybe you'll come see me soon. I'm free on Saturday, or Sunday I'll be in the shop.' Mam, she worked in the newsagent's, then at the nursing home the rest of the time. 'Hello?'

'Hello. Yeah,' I said, 'maybe.'

It was me that had called, but now I was talking to her, I wanted

out of it. I could hear the nerves there again, but these weren't happy nerves, but something else. Something sadder, and all because of me, I thought, which is a bloody hard thought to hold onto, I can tell you.

'Course,' I said. 'I'm fine. I better get off, but you're all right, aren't you?'

*I mean, there's no trouble?
No blokes coming round?
No men who smell like
graveyards standing at
your door wanting in?* is
what I wanted to ask.
But couldn't. And barely
after we'd started, it was
over again. 'Bye, Mam.'
And done.





Thing about Mam is there's no one better than her, and so why would I up and leave for a stinking van in the woods? There was school, of course, that I hated and that hated me. And there was the change in us all that year he was back, but mainly there was John. She knew it as well as me, the truth of it, I mean. She knew what he needed and what he couldn't stand. When he was bad, when he was lashed with pain and anger, he'd let no one near him but me. It would be me he'd let hold him, me he'd apologise to. Me, and not her, which must have broke her heart, I suppose. What heart there was left unbroken.

I was her son more than his, and so I took on what she'd taken on, whether I liked it or not.

'He's like a pet that wants free,' she'd tell me sometimes, before he came, back when it was her and me and the house was home. Before guns and Toomey and seven kinds of eating mushroom. Back when she had dreams. Sometimes she'd wrap her arms around me at night before bed, like she needed to have something – anything – in her arms or she'd go mad. Her behind me, chin on my shoulder, voice in my ear. 'He can't stand fussing, but let him go wild and he'd starve to death.' It would be a joke between us, because he could hardly make toast, so how was he surviving in the desert? And good job they had a mess there, eh? Mess meaning kitchen, meaning cooks, meaning proper food. Not chaos. The joke was a way of not thinking about the war, of us forgetting.

The happy nerves got worse, closer we got. Then John's flight landed, and it was party time. Mam and me had put out a big sign in the front garden, blue school poster paint on an old pink bedsheet: *WELCOME BACK*. We'd got the neighbours round, and white plastic furniture and a barbecue and balloons. Music playing on a stereo through the open windows of the frontroom, and me and Mam dancing on the grass in our bare feet. Old music – Bob Marley and Bowie and The Jam. Stuff he liked. By midday he still hadn't shown up. Mam got a text to say he had things he needed to sort out, old colleagues to see, desert mates.

Sorry, he'd said. Soon, though. Love to the lad.

The burgers and hotdogs got eaten, and the music played on, but me, I was waiting for him, waiting for his silhouette at the end of the street. Dreading it and wanting it at the same time, because by then I'd caught the bug, the excitement and the happy nerves. Mam pulled me back to the party, and later that night when we were packing everything up, she was saying that it was all fine, all of it. He just wanted to check in with his buddies. 'It all takes time,' she said. 'It's a big thing, coming home. We need to be patient.'

The bears and stags John would talk about later weren't even a thing back then. This was before the dreams of wolves underground, before they woke me up clawing at the dirt. My mind was just on school and TV and Mam, and part of me hoped he wouldn't be back at all. Part of me prayed for it, no matter how stupid that seems. Because it's not that I even believe in God. But you pray for all sorts

when you're scared. Mam was first in them, me praying for God to keep her safe and make her happy. I'd say these things under my breath at night, while I could hear Mam downstairs, clearing up or setting things in the kitchen for the morning. I prayed that I could make her happy somehow, prayed to be strong. I prayed and I looked out at the stars above the streetlights and I prayed for everything to stay the same, too.

And maybe, I tell myself, maybe I should have prayed harder, or maybe God knows when you don't really believe in Him, sees through the lie, because if He was any sort of god, He would, wouldn't He? Either way, things did change. That's nature. And before I knew it, it was just John and me in the woods. And Mam, she was at home and waiting for us. And that's how it stayed for a while.

Woods were always his home, I think. Not a house. Sometimes it felt like he'd been born in the ferns, with moss as his bed. He'd often talk about how he'd lived alone for months in a forest in Europe, before he came back, before we even knew he was coming home. He was out the army then, working contract work. Anyway, in this forest, he said, they still had prehistoric creatures, bears larger than any bear you've seen and bison the size of houses. 'Not like the American bison,' he'd say, smiling and shaking his head like the idea itself was stupid. 'These were taller, with longer horns.'

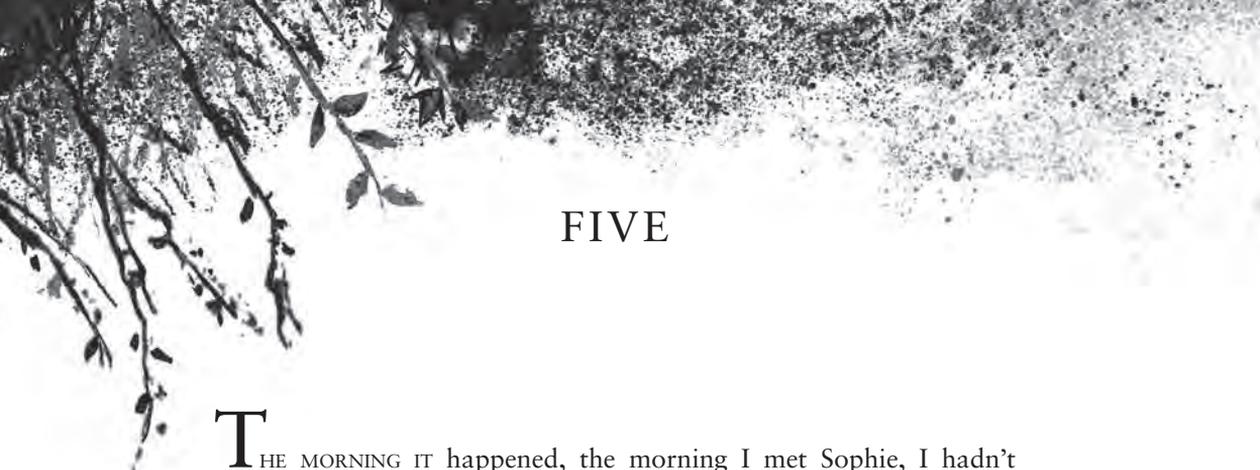
I didn't believe him, but he had a photograph, which I still have now. It's blurry, the photo, and the bison is half hidden by the trees, but it is pretty big, and black and ancient-looking. He'd show me the

photo every now and then when he'd talk about what things were like before everything went to shit, as he'd call it. I'm not sure if he meant the world or his life.

He'd never let me hold the photograph or touch it when he was alive. Some things were sort of sacred to him, like the photo of his grandfather, and the bison and the letters from Mam he kept bundled together that we found after, when it was over.

That March when it all ended, though, he'd slap his hand against the sunlit ground that was still damp from winter, and say, 'And there are the same creatures under here. There were bears and wolves and stags as tall as oak in this country, too. We had all sorts of animals. This is an ancient land, older than anyone knows. This bloke, William Blake, knew that. He painted pictures and wrote poems, did Blake, and he saw what was coming and what had been. And they'll come back, you'll see. They're not gone for ever. The world is just sleeping, and those beasts are asleep with it, but one day they'll climb out of the forest and things will get back to how it should be. You'll see,' he'd say, like it wouldn't be long. 'You'll see.'





FIVE

THE MORNING IT happened, the morning I met Sophie, I hadn't bothered looking at the time. But when I woke it must have been real early because when I went out to pee it was still night-dark, so I could see the little light right off in the distance where there shouldn't have been a light. I thought it might be a star at first, or a planet. Which was funny, thinking back.

I didn't know then, of course, that it was Sophie out there. How could I?

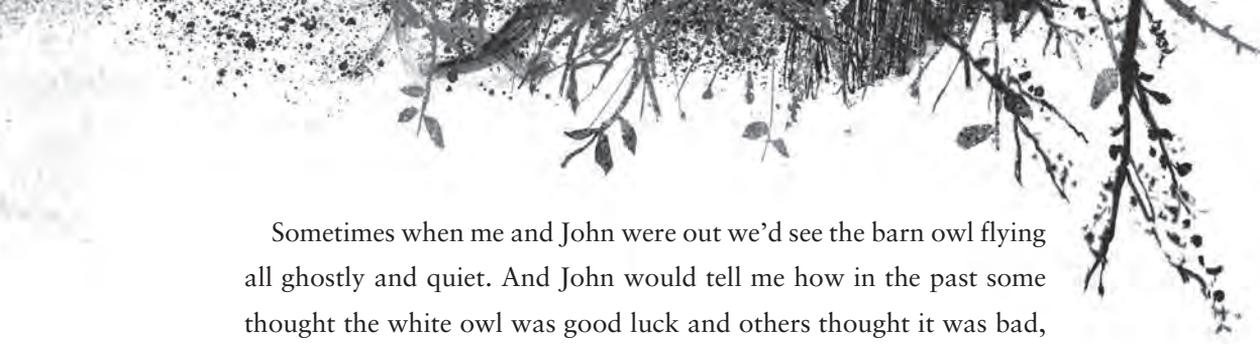
The dreams had woken me, of course. They'd been coming every night now, dreams of animals in the night, amongst the trees. They weren't always scary, but sometimes I'd wake up thinking something was in the van with me, just standing there looking at me. Yellow eyes in the black, sharp as glass.

This was the morning after the Leeds lawyer had been the first time, come to check things over and hand me fifty quid in tens in a brown envelope. 'John's money,' he made sure to tell me, 'not mine. Should last you till he's back. Has Toomey been here?'

I told him no one had, which was true enough.

'Call me if he does.'

I knew the fields at night.



Sometimes when me and John were out we'd see the barn owl flying all ghostly and quiet. And John would tell me how in the past some thought the white owl was good luck and others thought it was bad, and if you were sick and the owl flew past your window, you knew that soon you'd die. He'd point out the trails in the flattened grass where the roe deer would go, and sometimes we'd see a badger and its pups on the east-facing slope of the quarry where the mechanical diggers never went. We'd walk a lot at night, because John was rubbish at sleeping. Sometimes he'd take me across to the train tracks, and we'd follow the line to the edge of town where the mansions were, the ones with swimming pools and garages that were bigger than houses, and houses bigger than schools. Football players would live here, and businessmen. You could watch them from the cuttings if you wanted, because rich people keep their lights on all night, even in the garages and swimming pools. We'd look through the big windows, to the shimmer of blue water cast against the whitewashed walls, and we'd laugh sometimes at the barmy things people get up to. But later John would become fired up and talk all the way home about how they've got it stitched up, and no matter how poor a country gets the rich don't get touched. 'And where's the trick in that? What's the secret, because it isn't coincidence,' he'd say. He had this idea that rich people were the real anarchists, that they liked chaos on their terms, because there's profit in chaos. It all tied in with how things Were instead of how they Seemed. 'If you know what to bet on, a smart man can make a lot of money out of people getting poor,' he



said. 'It's like a war. Them that know stand on the sidelines, betting big on the outcome, and them that don't, they're the ones that get killed or have their legs blown off or go mad, and if they're lucky they get a medal for it to show their kids after.'

Every time we went to the big houses it would just get him angry, so I never got why he wanted to keep going all the time. It was only when he was arrested that I found out that he'd been scouting for places to rob. That's what the coppers told me anyway, and John never said he never, so it had to be true. Despite the stuff he'd say about good men and doing right. He was a hypocrite, then, which was funny, because John hated hypocrites. Which goes to show that men don't make sense, none of them. That's what I think.

'Who are you?'

The voice in the dark made me jump. I still had pictures of bad men who smelled of graves in my head. I didn't even get that it was a girl's voice straight away, that's how scared I was. The torchlight in my face didn't help, either.

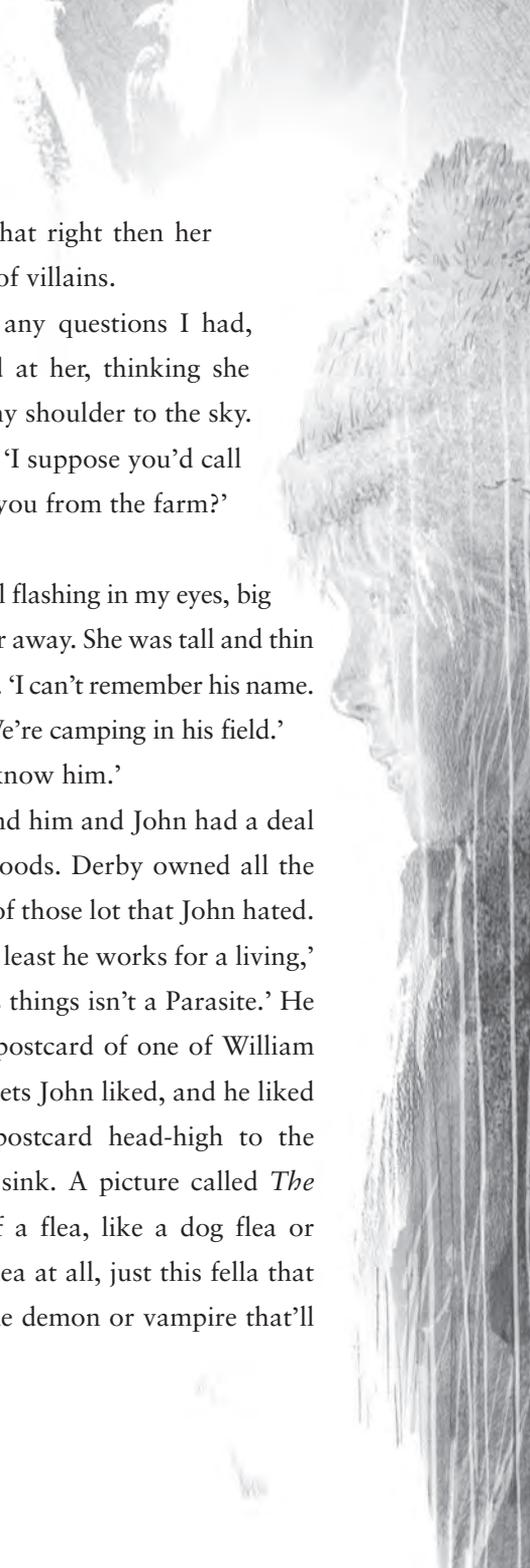
'Get that thing off me.'

'Oh, sorry – wait.' The light bounced against the ground, flickered as she fumbled with the switch. 'Here,' she said, as the torch blinked off. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you.'

'I'm not frightened,' I said, but my voice told the story, I couldn't help it. 'You don't just shove a light in someone's face.'

'Sorry,' she said again.

'What are you doing in the woods anyway?' I said, trying to sound



more angry than scared. I didn't know that right then her head was as full of stars as mine was full of villains.

'Jupiter,' she said, like that answered any questions I had, rather than just being nonsense. I stared at her, thinking she might be barmy, while she pointed over my shoulder to the sky. And when I still didn't catch on, she said, 'I suppose you'd call it stargazing. You know, the planets. Are you from the farm?'

'What farm?'

The balls of light from the torch were still flashing in my eyes, big as sparrows, but I could see her now, not far away. She was tall and thin and her hair was tied up under a woolly hat. 'I can't remember his name. Mr Derry or something. He's the farmer. We're camping in his field.'

'Derby,' I said, correcting her. 'Yeah, I know him.'

Derby was a fat man with a red face, and him and John had a deal about the caravan and us living in the woods. Derby owned all the farmland around here, but he wasn't one of those lot that John hated. Not that John liked him, he didn't. 'But at least he works for a living,' John said. 'A bloke who farms and grows things isn't a Parasite.' He was big on Parasites, John. He had this postcard of one of William Blake's paintings. Blake was one of the poets John liked, and he liked his pictures, too, and he pinned this postcard head-high to the corkboard on the cupboard next to the sink. A picture called *The Flea*. So you'd think it'd be a picture of a flea, like a dog flea or something, wouldn't you? But it's not a flea at all, just this fella that looks like he's out of a monster film, some demon or vampire that'll

eat you if he finds you. You'll know it when you see it, and you won't forget it, I can tell you. It's a real horror show. To John, the world had too many fleas, too many Parasites feeding off us, trying to make us hate, pitting us against ourselves. It was Parasites that sent him to war, he said, and them that'll start the next one and blame foreigners or Muslims or Jews or anybody but themselves.

'Do you live here?' This was the girl again. I could see her breath as she spoke, dim clouds lit up by that tiny light in the distance that wasn't there usually. She noticed I was looking at it, and turned and said, 'We're at the edge of the field. That's our campervan. We've hired it.' She nodded to the light, a blue lamp on the far side of the field, so far it winked in the night like a star.

'Beautiful, isn't it?' she said. 'The night, I mean.' She'd turned her face to the sky, and watching her I felt the ground tilt a bit beneath my feet. A chill went over me, and I never usually felt the cold.

'Right,' I said.

She was like that for what felt like a minute, and me not breathing, just watching her. And then without another word she crouched down and gave Mol a stroke on her nose. 'I'm Sophie,' she said.

I didn't know if she was telling me or the dog.

'I'm back there in the trees,' I said. 'We've got a caravan. We live there.'

She nodded without getting up or looking at me, and I just stood, sort of feeling at a loose end while she and Mol got to know each other. 'So, you from Leeds?' I asked.

‘No, Wales.’

‘Wales? You don’t have an accent or anything.’ Her voice was posh, she could have come from anywhere. I’d never been to Wales, but once John had had an idea to live there. He said there was a place, just small, where you could live off-grid. No internet, no mobile phone signal, nothing but quiet and nature and being left alone to live your life. ‘Do you have internet?’ I asked.

‘At the campervan?’ the girl – Sophie – said, looking up at me, confused.

‘No, in Wales.’ I felt stupid as soon as I said it, because it’s a stupid thing to ask, I get that. But it’s one of those daft things you come out with when you’ve got nothing to say, and anyway it was too late to take it back now. ‘It’s just John said there’s a place in Wales where you can live with no one knowing.’

‘Oh,’ she said, uncertain, looking at Mol, then back at me.

I shuffled my feet a bit, wishing I was dead.

But Sophie just kept stroking Mol’s head, and then she said: ‘Well, we’re moving to live here soon. Not far. That’s why we came, because Dad thought we should get to know the place. It’s what we’re doing for the next week or so – touring about.’

‘So, you’re skiving off school, like me,’ I said, because I knew half term had long passed, and Easter was still way off.

‘Sort of,’ Sophie answered, smiling. ‘We told the school, though. Dad’s changing jobs and, well, my folks are going through some things right now. It’s complicated, you know? Money problems.’

I nodded. I knew complicated all right.

Sophie got to her feet and stared at me. Her eyes were colourless in the low morning light, but there were pale sparks in them, grey and flickering. ‘Who’s John?’ she said.

‘He’s my dad.’

Neither of us said anything for a bit then. We stood there and watched our breath cloud in the air between us, and listened to the morning birds that had begun to sing round about – blackbirds first, and then wrens, robins, thrushes coming later, when the first light appears. There’s an order to it all, and I wanted to tell her that. I wanted to tell her how some birds get up before the others, and it changed depending on the month, but no matter when it was, the blackbird was always first because he always had a lot to say, and liked the sound of his own voice.

I could just about see the rest of her face now. It was pretty. She was about my age, I thought. Same height, or maybe a bit taller.

‘Well, I should go,’ Sophie said. ‘We’re hiking today, but I’ll be back later, before supper, if you’re around.’

Maybe I nodded. I can’t remember now. But I didn’t reply, I know that much. I just watched her walk away, not knowing what had just happened or whether it meant nothing or something. And then when she was at the edge of the field, the winking blue light drawing her side like a piece of chalk, she stopped and turned and waved, but real casual, like she’d almost forgotten I was there.

And I waved back.