

1984

The dent in the veneered table was where Cecelia kept most of her thoughts. She often wondered where they all went as she rubbed the dark lacquered chink of wood. The veneer had been missing for so long on that tiny splinter, it was almost as though it had always been like that. But, of course, it hadn't. She had a vague idea how it had come to be in the first place, some broken crockery and jagged words. But she was fascinated by the way the pale lined, checked pattern had been interrupted and she liked to rub at this spot when she was thinking. It very often brought back memories of other times she'd sat at the table in the echoic kitchen. Radio Two would be playing in the back- ground as she did her homework whilst her mother, Yvonne, cooked the family dinner. It would be warm, bright and filled with the smell of food, which always made her feel homely in the big cold house with just her twin brother, Sebastian, and their mother. The best of times was when it was just the three of them. The thought of her mother landed like a heavy stone in the sandy pit of her stomach.

Today was different. Today she sat at the table opposite Sebastian.

There were no lights on, or food smells to arouse their senses and no Radio Two tinkling in the background. The

Aga was ghostly, having not been stoked up, and was a shadow of its normal robustness as it tried to push out a minimal amount of heat. Cecelia could hear the wind swirling down the chimney and whooshing into the flue. Without their mother there, every- thing was grey. The house was always like that when she was gone and it reminded her of the magic colouring books she'd had a few years ago, the kind you painted with water to make the colours appear. That's how she saw her mother, the magic liquid to colour her dim grey world. But today there was a heavy melancholic mist swirling with the wind outside and through the cracks of the windows and the mortar between the bricks and into the house. She'd known this day would come, although she'd hoped it wouldn't.

'She's left us,' Sebastian blurted across the table.

Cecelia paused in rubbing the veneer and watched his words skid towards her.

'Shut up. She hasn't left.' 'Where is she then?'

'I don't know, probably just held up somewhere . . .'

'I know she's gone because Roger told me. She's not coming back.' He leant forward, resting his arms on the table, interlinking his fingers, first one way, then the other. He was nervous, hiding something – she could tell.

Cecelia stared at him for a few moments but didn't answer. The dark marks under his eyes told her he was feeling a lot more hurt than he was letting on. She could tell that he also knew what had really happened to their mother. She continued rubbing the nick in the veneer and concentrated on wishing that their father, Roger, was the one who was dead instead.

Cecelia and Sebastian were close, although they bickered most of the time and sometimes Cecelia was loath to remember the bond they shared, especially on days like this. They had been one once and now they were two and, although their characters appeared to be different, deep down they were quite the same. Her little mice, their mother called them.

The trouble was she knew he was right about one thing and her irritability was laced with defensiveness. She knew it, as she sat with her brother, waiting for Roger to come in and talk to them both. Their mother wasn't coming back. Not because she'd walked out and left them, but because she was dead. She knew it like she knew she had to go to bed at seven thirty on a school night, had PE and maths on Thursdays and only had fish for dinner on Mondays.

Getting up from her chair, the words Sebastian had blurted out fell from her lap like crumbs.

Sebastian stopped the continuous movement of his fingers. 'Where are you going? Roger said we had to wait here.'

'I'm going upstairs.'

'You'll just make him angry if you leave,' he said, making her want to pinch the back of his arm. 'Stay. Please, Cece.'

Ignoring him she pulled open the kitchen door which led to the hall, hesitating briefly as a blast of cold, musty air hit her full in the face. She shivered and took the steps two at a time.

It was so cold in the rest of the house that when she ran her hand along the Anaglypta-covered walls, they felt wet. She walked the long corridor to her bedroom imagining, as she always did, the green-leafed swirling carpet engulfing her through the floorboards. She didn't go into her parents' bedroom to check if her mother was there; she knew she wasn't. And even though she knew she was dead, she was also quite sure that her side of the wardrobe would be empty. Roger would have made sure it looked like Yvonne had left again.

Once she'd escaped the carpet river Cecelia opened the door to her bedroom, the only place in the house she was allowed some colour. The walls were now plastered with posters of Duran Duran, A-Ha and Tears for Fears, her favourite bands. Sometimes, if she squeezed her eyes shut hard enough, she could imagine she was in another house, far away from the fens. She had dreamt once that she lived in a huge modern house, like the ones her school friends resided in on newly built estates. Well-heated and dry with proper rectangular, fenced-in gardens, the local town within walking distance so she could have a social life like every- one else. Then she'd woken up, looked out of the window across the flat patchwork quilt that made up their fields, part of their farmland – which fed and clothed them as Roger liked so often to remind them – and had felt sad for the rest of the day.

A sticky, warm layer of fear rested in the pit of her stomach, as the enormity of what had happened began to reveal itself as a reality. Even though she had Sebastian, she couldn't help feeling she was alone somehow. Something her mother had promised would never happen.

She stood for a minute looking at the pretty, soft green bedroom, with its white melamine furniture – ghosts from the past, reminders from her childhood. This had always comforted her before, but things weren't the same anymore. The intricate gold filigree around the handles and doors seemed dull and lacklustre. The tiny embroidered rose buds that littered the duvet cover appeared to have wilted. And the fluffy cream carpet was flat and unappealing; all of it felt sad and lifeless, unable to cheer her as it once had.

To the left side of her bedroom next to the window was a tiny door leading to a loft space that her father always forbade them to go into. But regardless of his stern lectures, she would often go in there and balance on the purlin, using the beams for support, and Sebastian would join her. It was mainly when their parents were arguing, which was most of the time. It was dark but always warmer than the rest of the house because it was above the kitchen, which had been added to the house in the fifties. As dark and dusty as it was, Cecelia felt safe and comfortable in there. She would sometimes take a cushion and book with her, and balance on the purlin like a gymnast on a beam; one leg stretched out, the other swinging. Roger had recently painted the door shut, more out of a desire for them to obey him than worry that it was dangerous for them to go in there. Bored with their defiance, he had pretended the wood needed protecting but Cecelia had known it was to stop them going through the door.

Unbeknown to Roger, on a particularly bad day of arguments, Cecelia had found her confiscated penknife and chiselled the door open. He'd not caught them in there yet.

Yanking open the stiff door, the smell of gloss still present in the cold draught where the paint had leaked through the cracks, she crawled inside the dark space. Pulling herself along the purlin, she balanced carefully as she drew one leg up to her chest, leaving the other to dangle in mid-air. Rolling up her school trouser leg she rested her mouth on her knee. Her smooth skin cooled her lips, her hard bone making her feel solid once again. She waited for some time, listening to the birds tweeting and scrabbling on the roof. She shivered – the loft space wasn't as warm as it normally was because the Aga down below in the kitchen hadn't been stoked. The damp, musty smell of the loft was prominent today without the usual cooking smells to mask it. Sometimes, when Roger was busy on the farm, Sebastian would hide in the loft with her. They'd take in freshly baked biscuits or pieces of cake straight from the oven and would sit chatting for hours. Sometimes their mother would creep in and tell them ghost stories, the excitement of knowing they shouldn't be in there making it all the more thrilling. These memories – never to be repeated – pained her now.

Thoughts of her mother caused tears to sting Cecelia's eyes, but her mind ran them like a projector she couldn't switch off. She bent forward, pulling her knee closer to her chest, trying to crush the images. They would no longer play board games before bed or watch films together. Then she thought about her and Sebastian's fifteenth birthdays, which were in two months' time.

Yvonne had promised she wouldn't miss their special day. She wouldn't let anything happen that would mean they couldn't be together, however bad it was. It had only been recently she'd told Cecelia that if she was to leave, they would be going with her. Cecelia had made her promise, an oath she knew Yvonne would never break, but now everything had changed.

The door to the kitchen slammed downstairs, vibrating the wooden structure Cecelia was perched on. Her father was home. Listening to the drone of his voice she gathered he was asking Sebastian where she was. Quickly, she slid back along the purlin, practice having made her nimble and, once she'd reached the door, she carefully turned herself round and climbed through the hole. Shutting the door tight behind her, she sat on the bed waiting for him to come up the stairs and into her room, her sore heart pounding in her chest. There was no way she was going downstairs to listen to the rehearsed words about how their mother didn't want to be a part of the family anymore and had left them for a new life. Cecelia knew they weren't true.

After quite some time waiting for Roger to appear, she took her shoes off, got under the blankets and cried herself to sleep.

Disorientated, she awoke to her bedside lamp being switched on and at first, through the haze of sleep, she expected to see Yvonne standing there, forgetting the events of earlier. To her great disappointment it was Roger. Her eyes were slightly sticky from crying and it took her a while to focus.

'I'm prepared to ignore the fact you disobeyed me. What with Yvonne leaving us. Again.' He paused for emphasis as he always did, looking at her, prompting her to go along with his lies. 'Look at me, Cece. Are you listening? There'll be no dinner tonight, understand?'

Cecelia nodded in agreement, knowing this was mainly because her mother wasn't around to cook anything, so it suited him to starve them. She wasn't hungry anyway and she was tired. Too tired to

correct him and too tired to care about food – it was the least of her worries. There was a tiny spark in her mind telling her to shout at him, tell him she hated him, but she had become mute, something which often happened to Cecelia when she was upset. But she did hate him. She hated him for insisting they call their mother Yvonne – because in his mind, ‘children who had reached double figures were too old to address their parents with infantile names’. Cecelia had no problem calling her father Roger but never referred to her mother as anything other than mother. She hated Roger as much as she loved Yvonne.

She stared at him now, more hatred pricking at her skin as he lectured her about what a disappointment she was and how he didn’t want ‘his girl’ going down the wrong path.

He leaned towards her face and touched her cheek, but she flinched and turned away. ‘We both know what happened. If you hadn’t interfered, your mother would be here now. I don’t have a licence for that gun, so keep your bloody mouth shut,’ he hissed. ‘Just do what I tell you and no one will get into any trouble.’

She couldn’t bear to look at his large, bald shiny forehead decorated with sweaty wisps of blond hair, the colour of which she’d inherited from him. His long nose and elongated face were his and his alone. She and Sebastian had inherited his dark blue eyes and hair colour, but their soft, small features belonged to their mother.

Leaning further forward he attempted to kiss her goodnight, something he didn’t normally do, and she recoiled, wondering why he always smelt ever so slightly greasy. It made her feel sick and she tried to push the suffocating sensation away. As so often happened when Cecelia’s voice failed her, she lashed out physically and caught her father in the face with her tightly screwed up hands. He restrained her immediately, pinning both her skinny wrists above her head with one of his giant hands. With his other hand he covered her mouth, making it hard for her to breathe. He pressed her head into the pillow, hurting her lips and teeth and then released her as if nothing had happened. ‘Don’t forget to read that letter . . . it’s important you move on from this as quickly as possible. Accept what I’ve told you; it’ll be easier for you to come to terms with, easier than pining for someone you can’t have. She’s

not coming back this time. My mother was the same. I can still remember her walking out of this very house and not even turning back when she got to the gate.'

Trying to get away from you, Cecelia thought, but didn't, couldn't say. She concentrated on her chipped nail varnish, pre-tending she didn't care, desperate for him to leave. She couldn't believe he was trying to force feed her these lies, convincing himself it was the truth, when they both knew exactly what had happened that day.

'I've put it on your bedside table. Your brother has read his.' Puzzled, she sat up and looked around.

Once Roger had gone, she peered at the letter he'd left propped up against her night light. She'd ignored much of what he'd said and only vaguely remembered him mentioning it was from their mother.

She picked up the small brown envelope and read the typing on the front. It said simply Cecelia. She turned it over to see what was on the other side but there was nothing there other than an over-licked seal which was obviously Roger's handiwork.

Opening the tiny drawer to her bedside table she placed the unopened letter inside. She wasn't going to read something she knew to be a lie. She knew her mother couldn't have written this letter. She reached underneath postcards, beads and hair bands until she found the small soapstone hippo her mother had bought her for winning a medal at gymnastics club. In one of her many tempers, Cecelia had picked it up and thrown it at the wall, breaking its elongated snout. She could still see the crack where Yvonne had glued it back together. There were minute chips of it missing but she still loved it even though it was damaged.

Bizarrely, Roger had punished her that day for contradicting him and not Sebastian for putting his fist through a pane of glass on the utility door when Cecelia had shut him out. In a temper she'd broken one of her favourite things, regretting it later. There were a lot of moments she regretted.

She'd been made to stand with no shoes or socks on in one of the old World War Two hangars that were situated in the farm-yard. However, much Yvonne protested, Roger would always have his own

way. He'd repeat over and over about what his father had done to him and how it had made him the man he was today. On better days, Cecelia and Sebastian would mimic him behind his back, desperately gulping down laughter in case they were caught.

She hated this particular punishment the most: pitch dark, bitterly cold and filled with eerie whisperings from people past. These were Roger's winter recriminations, the cold being the core of the pain. The summer ones, Cecelia found easier, although they had become more traumatic, but she knew he wouldn't do anything that he could possibly be caught for. His latest reprisal had been making her sit on an old stool in the field while he fired his

.22 rifle at rabbits behind her, laughing each time she flinched. Skinning and gutting the rabbits would follow but she'd grown used to this, hardened to farm life.

But the winter punishments involved physical pain. Sebastian would meet Cecelia in her bedroom afterwards and hold her tightly to warm her up while she cried, knowing himself how bad the punishments were.

Occasionally they would be punished at the same time – it never felt as bad when Sebastian was by her side – but in the main Cecelia was alone. Her mother would then stand her in the bathtub, pretending everything was normal, as she ran tepid water to try and gradually warm Cecelia's feet and legs which would be covered in purple and orange blotches. Then slowly, so she didn't get chilblains, Yvonne would add more and more hot water. The relief was both painful and comforting. She never got used to these kinds of punishments and always cried, which upset her mother even more.

Closing the drawer, determined not to open the letter from Roger, Cecelia got a small amount of comfort from secretly defying him, even in this small way. She'd just let him think she'd accepted his version of events, but she knew he'd written two letters, one to her and the other to Sebastian, pretending to be their mother. It wouldn't have surprised her if he'd written one to himself to make it look even more convincing. Yvonne had never had much need to address anything to them in a letter unless they went to stay with family or friends during the summer holidays. But Cecelia remembered very well that her and Sebastian's birthday cards were always addressed to my darling or my



sweetheart. Whereas the front of this envelope just read, Cecelia. And Yvonne never used a typewriter – everything was always handwritten. Anyone who knew her and saw the letters would know they hadn't been written by her.

Opening the drawer and picking up the letter again, Cecelia hesitated, considering whether or not to read it. The sinking feeling of knowing the truth poured into her stomach and defiance prevailing, she put the letter back into the drawer. Her previous determination strengthened like drying concrete and she picked up the soapstone hippo, rubbing its smooth side for comfort. It was the only tiny bit of control she had over her father, as minute as it was, and she didn't want to open the letter and ruin that. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing her eyes had read over his pretend words.

Standing the hippo on her table, she turned out the lamp and lay there in the stark silence. Her mind quickly drifted to the previous night when she'd been lying there with her head on her mother's chest, listening to a story from when she had been a teenager. Yvonne had just had a bath and sweat from the hot water still ran down her chest and the agate pendant she never took off was covered in steam. It was the necklace that Cecelia had always held as a child when her mother was telling her a story, a comfort, a stamp that was so familiar it represented Yvonne in all her completeness. It had fascinated Cecelia for as long as she could remember; one half of the stone was mottled dark green with a small portion of it striped pale sea blue.

It had also been the previous night when Yvonne had told Cecelia she'd been saving some money and almost had enough for them all to leave White Horse Farm and to get away from Roger. Cecelia had told Sebastian later that night, when he'd sat on her bed before lights out, but he told her, as he always did, that Yvonne was just trying to appease her, to cover the guilt she felt for staying. But the words contained conviction, something she hadn't heard from her mother before and she held on to them. Those empty words had made her angry the following day, nasty spiteful letters that had snapped and bitten at her ankles.

Sebastian read the letter his father had given him – a minimal amount of words on some notepaper. He folded it once, twice, turned it in his fingers and repeated the process until he couldn't continue anymore. Then he squeezed the tiny lump of compressed paper in-between his thumb and middle finger, the events from earlier that day stuffed between every crease. Passing it to his left hand he repeated the ritual, squeezing it with what he deemed to be the same level of strength. Enough to ease the anxiety within him that always rose when he felt something wasn't equal and balanced out in the way he wanted.

Pictures from earlier that day flickered across his vision like a projector film, each time becoming increasingly jumbled. He couldn't remember who he'd seen with the gun first, his mother or his father. Roger's words penetrated his head, fading any memories he had about what he'd seen. It was irrelevant now. Somehow, he'd managed to tell Cecelia what Roger had told him to repeat over and over again: Yvonne has left, she's not coming back.

Sebastian couldn't tell her the truth; she wouldn't be able to hide it and they would most definitely be put into foster care and separated if anyone found out. If he'd gone to school as normal that day instead of staying behind to help Roger on the farm, he wouldn't have known anything about it. Sounds that he could still hear clearly now echoed in his ears. Noises that had brought him running into the house and into the kitchen. Roger had come up behind him and gently placed his large hands over his eyes and mouth, carefully removing him from the room. The last thing he'd seen was his mother's legs and feet from under the kitchen table. For a split second he'd had a comical moment where it had reminded him of the scene from *The Wizard of Oz*, and as Roger tried to erase the memories from his mind with his soothing words it was as if his mother's feet began to wilt and shrivel away. You didn't see anything, you didn't see anything, you didn't see anything, his father whispered into his ear over and over again. All he found himself thinking about as he shook with fear in his father's arms was the

ridiculous observation that his mother's legs weren't lying at a level angle to the table. He wanted desperately to go in there and move her – his anxiety, the draught he called it, had risen in his gut, swirling like the wind coming across the fields. He'd experienced this strange sensation the first time his father had punished him for something he hadn't done. He was so indignant about the entire episode, so overwhelmed with angry tears that he thought his temper would rise out of his mouth and swallow him whole.

Before Sebastian could do anything, Roger ordered him upstairs to get changed for school and fetch his school bag, before sending him on his way, telling him all the time to act normally and that things weren't what they looked like. Upon his return, earlier than Cecelia because she had detention, Roger had told him the story he was to tell her later, pretending that Sebastian hadn't seen anything.

There was one thing Roger couldn't erase and that was the foreboding atmosphere that had settled over the farmhouse during the course of the day; a cold and empty, almost tangible air had descended and Sebastian felt more unsteady than he ever had in all his years. Unsure. Unsafe. Yvonne had more of a presence on the farm than Sebastian had realised.

Checking the gun cabinet again on his way to the kitchen, Sebastian looked behind him, Roger's words so clear in his mind. If anyone asks about the gunshot noises, we were shooting rabbits, the stern words Roger had spat at him upon his return from school still marked on his face.

Placing the kettle on the stove, he tentatively sat on one of the kitchen chairs and stared at the space where his mother had been lying. So easily he could let go, the sickness in his chest threatening to bubble over into his throat, spewing the truth onto the floor. He couldn't do it, couldn't do this, whatever it was they were going to do. Carry on as normal he supposed. That wasn't going to work but he also knew that if Roger sensed any defiance, neither he nor Cecelia would get away from the farm alive.

He picked up an old cloth hanging on the back of the chair and began to wipe at a dark spot that was bothering him on the Aga. He pushed harder, wondering if it had been there before; whatever it was had been baked on by the heat from earlier that day. The stain became the focus of his concentration

as he ferociously rubbed it, equally with his left hand as well as his right, keeping the balance, maintaining the nature of his symmetry. He was trying to erase the pictures in his head, but it made little difference to the way he felt.

The whistling of the kettle brought Sebastian back into the room, to the place he didn't want to be.

The following night, Cecelia scoffed down the slices of buttered malt loaf Sebastian had brought her. She'd been sleepwalking since she was small, but it was the first time in almost a year. If Sebastian heard her moving about in the night, he would get up and quietly follow, keeping her safe until she eventually woke up. She would shake afterwards, desperately needing food to raise her sugar levels, the exertion of energy making her hungry. A doctor had once told her parents that the involuntary muteness could possibly originate from her sleepwalking episodes; dreams so vivid they rendered her speechless. She always knew she was having nightmares but could never recall the details. Roger thought it was a load of old rubbish and continually voiced the opinion that she was able to talk when she felt like it and was just attention seeking.

'I thought you were heading across the fields when you stepped outside the back door,' Sebastian said, rubbing Cecelia's legs as he tried to warm her. 'I never thought you'd go into the old grain store.'

Cecelia shrugged, her silence still blanketing her voice. She didn't even try to speak – she knew when her voice was there and when it wasn't, although she could never explain why.

They were perched on some old bales of straw, a large torch propped on top of some old machinery to give them light. There were very few punishments endured in the grain store and they both quite liked it there as it seemed to have a different atmosphere to the rest of the farm. Cecelia was fascinated by the huge grain mountain in the middle and always had an urge to dive into the centre of it, which made Sebastian laugh. Of course, they never touched the grain; the punishment for doing so wouldn't be worth it.

'I wondered if your nightmare might have jolted your voice into action, like it would have the opposite effect for

a change, seeing as you were already mute?’

Cecelia shook her head and listened to him talking gently, as he always did when she’d been sleepwalking – it soothed the panic she often felt afterwards.

Looking at his face in the half-light she noticed how much he’d changed in the last few weeks – there was a maturity appearing and she’d only just become aware of it. She thought she’d die without him, even more so now in their current circumstances. Being close to Yvonne was one thing but her relationship with her twin brother was something else altogether. They shared so much, a lot more than other siblings, and had done since they were born. Yvonne would often tell them how they could never be apart, not for a moment, and if they were one or the other would start screaming. Their bond had grown even more over the years and she knew it was forever, no matter what happened. ‘You must have been dreaming about this place to walk all the way across the yard, past the hangar. Why don’t you try going to sleep thinking about somewhere really nice, far away, and I’ll follow you there?’ It was supposed to be a joke but the childish tone made it sound so sad Cecelia reached across and clasped Sebastian’s hand, reassuring him with her eyes.

‘I know it will be OK, we’ve got each other, right?’ Sebastian said, squeezing her hand in return. Cecelia felt the usual warm tendrils curl up from her stomach, reaching to her heart. They were feelings she was aware might not be normal for a brother and sister to have.

Breaking the moment, Cecelia pulled his fingers to her mouth and kissed them hard, letting him know how much he meant to her, how loved he was, despite all that had happened.

There was something in the kisses Cecelia planted on Sebastian's fingers, a knowing, a guilt almost; as though she was stamping words into his hand that she couldn't say, even if she had been able to speak. It was a strange feeling, so odd because she'd never kept anything from him before, as far as he was aware. He began to wonder if she knew what he was hiding, what he'd seen on the farm the previous day, but he couldn't work out how she could possibly know.

'Is everything all right, Mouse?'

Cecelia nodded and put her finger to her lips. She was staring past him, towards the door, her hearing far more acute than his – possibly heightened as she'd lost her voice. A couple of seconds later the noise of the large door scraping on the concrete startled them. Roger stood there with a rifle in his hand. It always amazed Sebastian how quiet he was when he wanted to be, lurking everywhere, unseen most of the time.

'What's going on in here?'

‘Cecelia was sleepwalking. I followed her to make sure she was all right.’ Sebastian immediately dashed to his sister’s defence.

‘I don’t need you to talk for her. She can tell me herself.’ Roger stepped closer to Cecelia, his face distorted in the dawn light from outside and the torch, which was shining away from him.

Sebastian looked at the rifle and then at Cecelia as she opened and closed her mouth, the words evaporating in her throat.

‘I heard talking in here, so I know she can speak. Come on, what have you got to say for yourself?’

‘It was me, I was talking, not Cece.’

‘Shut up, boy. I know what I heard.’ Roger turned the rifle he was holding, nudging Cecelia’s legs with the butt. ‘Come on, speak up.’

Sebastian wanted to grab his father but memories of his mother laying under the kitchen table snapped into his mind, leaving him fearful of what Roger might do to them both. The twins had always been able to gauge his moods, know his limits. However bad things were, there was an imaginary line Roger would never cross, or so they had thought until yesterday.

This moment, right now, was turning nasty and he had no way of knowing how to diffuse it. Cecelia was helpless and her silence was making matters worse and he knew that soon she’d get angry and things would escalate.

‘I can’t hear you!’ Roger said, almost lyrically, as he shoved Cecelia again, causing her to pull her knees up, tucking herself into a ball.

‘Only talking when you feel like it? Sleepwalking? Bollocks! You got away with it before, when Yvonne was here, but not now. If you don’t speak up, I’ll send you and your brother straight into those fields and you can spend the day potato riddling.’

Sebastian looked at Cecelia and she at him as they waited for the punishment to unfold.

‘In the cold . . . until you’ve finished . . . in your night clothes . . . if it takes you until tomorrow, so be it.’



There was a shake, a weakness in Roger's voice that Sebastian knew Cecelia had detected too. This was a minor punishment compared to what they normally had to suffer. Most of the fields had been harvested by the labourers employed on the farm and they knew that between them it wouldn't take long to finish the small field that was left. If it meant a day off school to spend with each other, Sebastian didn't care.

'Just because your mother's not here, don't think I'm going to be lenient with either of you.' Roger stepped closer to Cecelia, pushing his face into hers. Sebastian held his breath – he knew what was coming, a last attempt to force some noise from his sister.

Roger grabbed Cecelia's hair and pulled her head back. She opened her mouth but still no sound escaped. Sebastian stood up, getting ready to defend his sister before her temper got the better of her, but her eyes were now pools of water and she put up her hand, signalling him not to. If they were to get away with no punishment other than potato riddling for the day, this time they needed to let Roger finish asserting the power he thought he had over them.

One day, Sebastian thought to himself, he would find an opportunity to take that rifle his father was so attached to and blast him across the farm with it. He would never let anyone else touch his Cecelia, not ever.

About a week later, Cecelia arrived home from school to find Roger sitting at the table with two women she didn't recognise. 'Here's my girl!' He beckoned her over with his long arms as though she was five years old, and she reluctantly moved towards him, slinging her bag on the floor, trying to be casual but frantically going over Roger's words in her head.

'Say hello, Cecelia. These ladies are from social services. They've come to see how you and your brother are.' He squeezed her tightly, willing her to speak, to be OK, as he always did in front of visitors.

Both ladies smiled, waiting for Cecelia's response. 'Don't be rude, Cecelia. Say hello.'

There was silence. Even if Cecelia had wanted to speak, she still couldn't. She had never been mute for this length of time before and it was as though someone had crept into her room the first night her mother had disappeared and stolen her voice box. The awkward silence ensued as Roger squeezed Cecelia even harder, willing her to behave, begging her with his presence to say something. At one point, Cecelia thought he was going to pull her onto his lap – he always acted weird in front of strangers. He was weird, she thought to herself.

'Cat's got her tongue since Yvonne left. Trauma of it, I should expect.' Roger winked, adding conviction to what he was saying. The two women nodded as they made more notes. Roger began to ramble nervously, filling the space where he'd wanted Cecelia to speak. She stared at the table and watched the little words wander aimlessly around. Some of them slid into the split in the veneer and settled there ready for her to ponder later.

A sharp pinch on the side of her arm brought her back into the room. Roger thought he was safe to administer a little pain to his mute daughter, but her flinch hadn't gone unnoticed by one of the women.

'Have you taken Cecelia or Sebastian to see their GP since all this happened?'

'I didn't see the need . . . They've got me and who knows, she might come back. There's no telling with Yvonne.'

'So, she's done this before?' The woman who noticed Cecelia flinch spoke up for the first time.

'Oh yes, many times. We never know when she might go off on one of her jaunts, do we, Cecelia?'

Roger attempted to tickle her, a false smile wavering on his lips.

Cecelia turned to look at him, astounded at the lies dripping from his mouth like warm grease. They slid down his sweaty, dirt-stained shirt and landed on the kitchen floor with a plop. Their mother had only left a couple of times before and it was never for long, but Cecelia's mouth just opened and closed like a small fish gasping for oxygen. It was probably better that she couldn't speak.

Their reactions were observed, causing another awkward silence to descend on the small group. Movement from the corner of Cecelia's eye caused her to look up from the table. It was Sebastian looking at them all through the glass in the door. Ever so briefly, she caught a glimpse of what she thought was hope in his face as he looked at first one woman and then the other. She knew he'd thought one of them was their mother and a heavy sadness pulled at her shoulders as she remembered what happened that day last week. It was the first secret she'd ever kept from her brother.

For all his complaining about how depressing their mother was, she knew most of it was to keep Roger happy. Sebastian adored Yvonne, but tried to keep Roger placid so that neither he nor Cecelia would suffer as much. Roger was very up and down with Sebastian – sometimes he'd love him, but other times he'd hate him – but Sebastian just went along with the moods.

Roger had tried to instigate the same see-saw relationship with Cecelia, but she never treated him any differently, whatever his mood. He'd gradually relented in his game of picking her up and discarding her, knowing she wouldn't submit like her brother. Sebastian often reminded Cecelia of the farm dogs, desperate to please Roger however badly they were treated. His sycophantic ways made her feel quite nauseous as she knew how he really felt. Cecelia always found it difficult to control her temper and would lash out at her father; for every slap he inflicted, she gave him one back until he restrained her.

'Who are they?' Sebastian nodded towards the two women as he walked in and dropped his school bag on the floor beside Cecelia's.

Roger chuckled nervously. 'Don't be rude, Sebastian. They're from social services. They've come to see what's going on with Yvonne . . . your mother. Nothing to worry about, son.'

The two women were visibly baffled at the reference to the twins' mother by her Christian name, but Roger had only noticed enough to correct himself.

'We're all right with our dad, aren't we, Mouse?' Sebastian looked at Cecelia pointedly, pleading with her to agree.

Cecelia stood frozen to the spot, unable to speak but knowing if she didn't make some positive gesture towards the women, there would be a backlash after they'd gone. She nodded enthusiastically, her heart tugging at her to stop. Being taken away could mean being separated from Sebastian, and neither of them wanted that, however bad everything was at home.

'Well, I think we have enough information to be going on with now. We'll call back in a few weeks.'

There was a brief silence as Roger started to speak, but then thought better of it.

'You know where we are, you can come anytime . . . Can I ask who sent you? What I mean is, how did you know Yvonne had left?'

'Somebody from the school told us,' one of the women sternly replied. 'But we aren't at liberty to reveal who.'

They thanked Roger and left. Cecelia had followed them to the door, hovering, willing herself to speak so she could reassure them that everything was normal, but nothing came out and nobody noticed her struggle except Sebastian.

As soon as they were out of the door, Roger grabbed Cecelia by the back of her arm and pinched her skin so hard she winced, tears immediately springing to her eyes as she tried to pull herself free from his grip. She begged herself not to retaliate. Roger relied on Cecelia losing her temper to justify his punishments.

'Been tittle-tattling to the teachers again! You're such a little bitch, just like your mother!'

Cecelia opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. 'She didn't, Dad . . . Roger, she can't speak . . .'

Roger held up his hand to silence Sebastian, pulled out a kitchen chair and sat down. Cecelia desperately needed the toilet, but she was too scared to move.

'What's all this about, Cece? Did you tell one of the teachers something at school?' His voice was calm, overly nice, patronising and she knew she was in trouble. She opened her mouth to defend herself but still there was no sound. Her eyes were stinging with tears and she was desperately willing herself not to cry because she knew that would be followed by her wetting herself, a childish act for

someone of her age, but something she'd not been able to grow out of with the fear that Roger instilled in her. 'You need to tell me what happened or I'm going to have to issue you with a punishment. I know it's been difficult with everything that's happened with Yvonne, but you can't be allowed to get away with this behaviour, Cecelia.' 'I did it, Roger. One of the teachers asked if Mum could make it to parents' evening and I told them she'd left . . .' Sebastian was stammering, making the lie obvious. 'Just like you told us to if anyone asked.'

Cecelia glared at Sebastian, tears now tipping over the rims of her eyes. She wanted to shout out, protect her brother but she knew her muteness was still blanketing her.

'Have you been talking at school?'

Cecelia nodded her head. She wasn't going to see Sebastian suffer – it pained her more than her own suffering and his punishments were worse because he was a boy. Before she realised what she was doing, defiance and anger caused her foot to come out and she kicked her father straight in the shin. She bit her bottom lip and stared him square in the face. He barely moved at the impact.

'What did you do that for?!' Sebastian shouted at her. 'Come with me.' Roger held out his hand for her to take.

She stood still, fixed to the spot. She was suddenly hit with the realisation that this time her mother wasn't there to defend her or to offer some sort of comfort later on and it was all her fault. Fear stuck like glue to the bottoms of her feet. The care her mother had always given her after Roger's punishments had been something to focus on while she endured whatever he lined up for her. Sebastian wouldn't be allowed anywhere near her after a punishment without Yvonne around. The thought caused an empty, icy coldness to seep through the pores of her skin.

Sebastian was watching as Roger stared at Cecelia. She fixed her eyes on the floor, not wanting to see her brother's look of despair. A warm sensation began to make its way down the tops of her legs, then she heard the slight trickle of water from her tights onto the unforgiving linoleum-covered floor, cutting through the silence in the stark room.

She looked up to see Roger's expression turn to repulsion. The stillness of the room was suddenly fast forwarded, and Cecelia was grabbed by the arm and dragged through the back door and out into the cold, damp, dusky October night.

'No!' Sebastian ran forward and grabbed his father's arm, but Roger shook him off.

'Don't get involved, boy, you know what will happen.'

Cecelia tripped over the steps as he pulled her after him, scuffing her new shoes. She couldn't help thinking how disappointed her mother would be. And then she remembered and the thought sent a jolt through her insides.

The wetness on her tights had already turned cold and her skin pricked with goosebumps as the frosty late afternoon air hit her. She was tearful and exhausted and the thought of having to endure this punishment without her mother was all too much to bear. She sobbed and stumbled as Roger pulled her along, striding forcefully across the yard, his lengthy steps too large for her little frame. She opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out.

The large hangar loomed up ahead. She could hear the doors scraping across the concrete before they'd even been opened, the echoic sound trapped in her memory. In her panic she tried to turn her head and bite Roger's arm, but this just caused him to stop mid-stride and shake her like a dog with a rabbit.

She caught her breath when he dragged her beyond the barn and towards the fields. The wind howled across the farm and Cecelia's heart sunk even lower in her chest, feeling as though it might disappear altogether.

She tried to twist her arm free from his tight grip, but he only squeezed harder. They reached the edge of the field near to the first ditch and he swung her round to face him. It was almost dark and she could barely see him. He looked like the cloaked figure she always saw in her dreams. Tears streamed down her chapped face as she begged him with her eyes not to punish her. 'You are disgusting. Take your shoes off and hand them to me.'

Cecelia tried to catch her breath and calm down; she'd cried so much she was gasping. Bile reached her throat and she desperately tried to swallow it, knowing her punishment would be even greater if she was sick as well.

'Come on. Don't make a fuss, just do it.'

Bending forward she took off her shoes, making sure she undid each one instead of slipping them off as she usually did when he wasn't watching.

'Get in.' Roger pushed her towards the ditch.

Cecelia stared at the narrow dyke that was filled with silty orange water, the wind whipping her hair and stinging her eyes. 'You chose your punishment, Cecelia. You want to be dirty and wet then you can stand in the ditch until I tell you to get out.' It was dark, she hated the dark and even though she despised Roger, she desperately wanted to beg him not to leave her there alone. Yvonne wouldn't have allowed this – the hangar, yes, but not this. She at least had had some influence over Roger, however small.

Defeated, she moved towards the narrow ditch and crouched down to the ground, not quite sure of how she would get in. Although it was deep, the water thankfully looked shallow.

She felt a thump on her side and for a few moments it was as though someone had turned the world upside down, as she fell into the muddy pit. She stood up unsteadily, realising Roger had kicked her in.

'Head up, back straight. I'll come and get you when I think you're ready.'

Cecelia stood up, shakily. With gritted teeth she felt her fists clenching and unclenching by her sides, as though they didn't belong to her.

The dull ache caused by the cold water had started immediately and was gradually making its way up her calves. She opened her mouth to speak but the small cavern was empty and still. Her heart pounded as she moved her feet slowly up and down in the shockingly cold water. Her sodden tights were barely offering her any extra protection or warmth. As soon as Roger was out of sight, she sat on the embankment and lifted her now heavy legs from the water. The cold air seemed to bite at her toes and she was unsure which was better, to stand in the freezing water or hold her feet out of it.



Determined to concentrate on something else, she stared into the dusky night sky and watched the stars appear like little fireflies. It momentarily helped her take her mind off the pain in her legs. She frequently glanced across at the farm- house, knowing Roger would turn on the porch light when he was on his way back. If he ever returned. This thought circled her ever-numbing brain and she began to wonder what she would do, where she could go if he didn't. She sighed heavily and watched her breath float out into the cold air, reassuring her that she was still alive. She moved her arms further into the sockets of her sweater, desperately trying to keep warm. Goosebumps covered her body. She wished she'd listened to her mother's constant nagging about wearing a thermal vest. Her legs and feet were so cold that they ached, so she tried to move around, but they were becoming too numb and heavy to lift – she couldn't have run away if she'd wanted to. She gave up trying to move around and, getting her arms back into her sweater, she edged her way up the dyke. She managed to carefully and slowly put each numb foot either side of the small ditch. Eventually, she manoeuvred herself round to sitting, the smell of urine and murky stagnant water filling her nostrils. Pulling her arms back into her clothes, she grabbed whatever time she could to get warm.

Concentrating on the magical starry dome that encased the world, she began to wonder if there was anyone else enduring what she was at that very moment in time. Another young girl who looked like her, whose life was similar – she'd read a story about parallel worlds, she knew it was possible. Then she remembered her friend Arabella. Her dad was a bastard – they compared stories sometimes – but he did other things to her that thankfully Roger had never done to Cecelia. Yvonne was always telling Cecelia there was someone somewhere worse off than her or going through the same thing, and that she must be thankful for what she had and focus on the happy times.

She always said this with her tiny little Bible pressed hard between her fingers like a vice. It was all bollocks as far as Cecelia was concerned – she always wondered where her mother's god was when Roger was on top form. She'd found her asleep on the bathroom floor on more than one occasion, curled up, fully clothed and shivering where she'd been made to sleep all night. The Bible lay next to her and when Cecelia asked why she continued to read it as, given her circumstances, it clearly wasn't

helping, she replied that we all have our cross to bear. Like Sebastian, Cecelia had begun to lose patience with Yvonne's pathetic attempts at assertiveness and it had begun to make her angrier and angrier.

A star so bright it reminded Cecelia of a Christmas light shone towards her. The little constellation twinkled, making her feel like she was the only one who could see it.

She closed her eyes and made a wish.

'What are you doing?'

Cecelia, startled, quickly sunk her feet back into the water, as she looked up to see the outline of Roger's figure in the dusky bleakness. She was blinded by the torch he was shining in her face. She'd taken her eye off the porch door and he'd appeared, the sound of his movements hidden by the gusting wind. Her heart hammered in her chest, her mouth was numb with cold and her words were stuck in her mind where there seemed to be a strike, unable to reach her mouth. She daredn't move as he shone the torch on the rest of her body, and she knew she'd be in trouble for having her arms tucked in her clothes. 'Come on, out you get!' Roger barked.

Cecelia could barely move she was so cold. The relief and fear that he'd returned was swirling around in her stomach like an unappetising soup. She was beginning to root into the thick mud like a shrub.

Roger's long legs straddled the narrow ditch. He grabbed her and she stumbled forward onto her front, unable to put her hands out to save herself. The side of her face and her shoulder took the brunt of the fall and she bit her lip in the process. Salty tears tumbled down her face as she silently cried at the pain that was turning into a smouldering ache across her already sore heart.

Roger laughed, grabbed the back of her damp sweater and dragged her onto the field.

'Cold, are we?'

They walked back to the house, Cecelia desperately trying to keep up with his stride. She felt like a bound hostage with her arms tucked in her school shirt and sweater.

They neared one of the hangars that always made her shudder. To her surprise, on this occasion he dragged her straight into the house. The relief that rose inside her was so overwhelming she sobbed

again and more tears leaked into the dirty graze on her face. Maybe, just maybe, she thought, he was going to leave her punishment at that. Then it dawned on her that Yvonne might be waiting inside for her and that was why he was bringing her in. Could it be that enduring a punishment had magically reversed the last week and brought Yvonne back to life? Her tears briefly subsided as she was steered into the kitchen and she searched the room, expectant and hopeful. But of course, Yvonne wasn't there. And, as quickly as she'd been shoved into the kitchen, she was briskly marched upstairs to the bathroom. He was going to warm her in the tub, she thought, but not in the gentle way her mother did.

'Strip down to your bra and pants.'

She did as she was told, albeit slowly, her muscles tight with fear and cold, teeth chattering noisily, horrors of Arabella's stories resounding in her ears. She watched the steaming water thunder into the old enamel bath, willing him to turn on the cold tap.

'Get in. Come on! You want to warm up, don't you? I'm not having those busy bodies saying I've neglected you.'

The water from the tap was hot but not scalding and under normal circumstances Yvonne would run her a bath solely on that. But, when you were almost perished, it felt like burning embers. Her tiny, damp, bluish coloured feet, flecked with bits of dirt from the ditch, were slowly placed into the water. She bit her bottom lip so hard with the pain that she made it bleed. The metallic sharpness felt comforting to her, a release in her mute world. She closed her eyes as she waited for the sharp, stabbing pains in her legs and feet to subside. If she got through this without too much fuss, Roger would leave her alone for the rest of the evening.

Eventually, her legs and feet began to warm painlessly, and she longed to plunge the rest of her icy cold body into the water. But Roger was watching her, seeing the proceedings through to the bitter end. There was no heating in the bathroom and she could see her breath escaping through her chattering teeth now that the steam from the bath had subsided.

‘Get out and dry yourself. It’s time for you to get ready for bed.’ He left the room and she heard his footsteps pound the corridor. His tone had sounded dark and she knew from experience that his initial elation at punishing her had worn off. He was bored and Cecelia was relieved.

Letting out a large breath of air she watched the steam drift through the atmosphere, knowing she was still alive. A tug in her stomach rose to her chest, pulling her heart into her throat as it dawned on her again that her mother wasn’t there. Cecelia and Sebastian, alone in their small world.

A light tapping on the bathroom door made her look up and she held her breath again as she waited to see who was there. Sebastian tiptoed in, put his finger to his lips, a signal to her that he wouldn’t speak since they both knew that if Roger caught them, he would be in even more trouble than she was. Silently he walked towards her, a hot cup of Bovril steaming in his hands. A huge well of despair rose in Cecelia’s chest and she began to sob. Sebastian placed the mug on the top of the toilet seat and pulled her into his arms.

‘It’s OK, Mouse.’ He kissed the top of her damp hair. ‘It’s going to be all right.’

The feel of his hands always warmed her, reassured her, but it was a superficial safeness – she always had that edgy feeling it wasn’t going to be all right. Nothing was ever going to be all right.

For quite some time after, Cecelia waited in bed for Roger to come and check on her, but he didn’t. She dozed for a while, and when she heard the click of his bedroom door she knew she was safe. She quietly and carefully tiptoed across her room and opened the door to the small loft space. Even though she was tired and weary, it was something she had to do. Sitting on the purlin in the draughty little attic dispersed something within her. Just a few minutes, she told herself. She stepped neatly into the dark cavern, pausing every few seconds to listen for Roger. Satisfied that he had settled she pulled herself along the wooden beam. She bent her leg and lifted her pyjama trouser leg above her knee. She liked the feel of her mouth on her tight skin. It comforted her and reminded her of Yvonne, although she didn’t know why.

Steadying her breath, she tried to get used to the dark, cold atmosphere that was absorbing her; flashbacks of her time in the ditch causing her heart to beat faster. This was the only place she didn't mind the blackness. She stared into the abyss, her peripheral view picking up shapes and light. Her eyes widened as she tried to see the end of the long narrow loft space, something she often did. Even the light from the open loft door didn't stretch to the end. As she looked away again her vision caught the out-line of a shape, but when she looked straight on, she couldn't see anything. Turning her head away again she could definitely see a large rectangular shape resting on the beam. She edged along the purlin but knew from experience that going too far would mean she wouldn't hear if Roger came in. She stopped wriggling and stared into the empty darkness. There it was again as she twisted her head to look behind her. She paused and stared back into the darkness, wanting to go on and look but frightened of Roger stirring. Curiosity getting the better of her, she wiggled her bottom forward. Allowing her eyes to adjust to the deeper darkness, she suddenly had a better look at what the shape was. It was a green suitcase that she'd never noticed there before, but that seemed sort of familiar to her. It was out of reach so, cold and tired, she decided to go back to her bedroom and explore the loft the following night when she would be armed with a torch.

The sudden sound of a door closing in the distance made her heart pound even more than it already had been. She edged backwards like a cornered animal. In her haste, she almost lost her balance as she turned, and a small whimper escaped her lips. The only sound she'd uttered in two weeks.

Without waiting to hear if Roger was coming, she scrambled through the door, shut it firmly behind her and jumped into bed, pulling the covers up over her head. She lay there desperately trying to calm her rapid breathing and panicked heart. It was only when she had calmed that she noticed how sore her chapped legs and feet were.

After a short while she pulled the duvet from her head and as she did, so she heard the unmistakable click of her father's bedroom door. She wondered if he'd come into her room unheard.

Cecelia lay there staring into the darkness as it moved across the room, smothering her with its cold, viscous breath. Her heart- beat responded as panic began to rise in her chest and spilled from her eyes, as she thought about her mother once more.

Yvonne's face floated in the inky blackness and Cecelia reached out her hand to grasp it, knowing all too well it was a figment of her imagination. She turned over in the bed and concentrated on the blotchy Anaglypta wallpaper, picking out imaginary shapes of elves and fairies as Yvonne had taught her to do when she was a small child and afraid of the dark. A few moments later the green suitcase swirled around in her subconscious as she slept fitfully, wondering why it was there. She dreamt she was balancing on the purlin like a gymnast on a beam. As she pirouetted, she turned to see Yvonne floating in the loft space, her face pale and panic stricken. Then the purlin snapped, sending Cecelia and the case plummeting through the murky depths of blackness. She woke with a start, heart thundering in her chest, to find Roger standing over her, his face lit up by the moon shining through the window, mouth set in a straight line and his blue eyes dark and emotionless.

‘What’s up, Mouse?’